COMEDY, CINEMA AUDIENCES AND ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SPHERES:
SCREWBALL AND DISPARATE IN POSTWAR SPAIN

Diana Roxana Jorza

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Adviser: Ángel G. Loureiro

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Dissertation Abstract

The current thesis centers on a largely unknown cinematic corpus, made up of screwball and disparate film comedies, many of which have often been discarded as “reactionary” or “escapist” in a monolithically assessed postwar Spanish cinema. Normally coupled with the exaltation of politically committed movies that were analyzed through auteurist lenses, this traditional leftist indictment of a would-be “evasionist” humor seems to be based on an unavowed belief in the existence of a morally and politically “decorous” genre to treat certain topics within a specific sociocultural context, which ensures the verisimilitude and corresponding cultural canonization of that particular discursive type. As this thesis attempts to show, this vision appears to disregard not only the aesthetic complexity and politicizing potential of a ludic, ideologically uncommitted humor, but also the margins of freedom that still existed in a harsh authoritarian society like Spain in the first two decades after the Civil War. Extensive research thus shows that dictatorships like the Francoist regime not only foster disciplinary values but also unwillingly trigger an oblique politicized reading of cultural artifacts by resistant, skeptical audiences. Harboring an undeniable critical attitude, postwar Spanish spectators seem to have also transformed their distrustful film interpretations in various forms of resistance, both silent and shared, which significantly reshaped their subjectivities.

The comedic lack of decorum must be linked, nevertheless, not only to the destabilizing comic effects on single individuals, but also on the problematic counter-educational impact of humor on society at large, a concern that is inextricably bound with issues of normative citizenship and disciplinary power. Focusing on screwball and disparate, which flourished between 1939 and 1965, this thesis attempts to ascertain their collective formative influence in
the contemporaneous public sphere, as part of a larger process of articulation of alternative subjectivities and communities in the context of everyday life.

In consonance with recent historicized revisionist approaches to cinema, the interdisciplinary, transnational genre analysis of this dissertation also seeks to reconstruct the historically specific aesthetic choices and meanings of the postwar Spanish comedy, which are interpreted in a complex interplay with competing genres and contemporaneous forms of popular humor. The current analysis thus tries to reposition these films not only in respect to the political, economic, and social evolution of the postwar context but also to their peculiar conditions of production and reception.
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would have been very impoverished. I am especially indebted to him for drawing my attention to the concept of political and ethical decorum, without which the idea of an aesthetic indecorum, as was the case of the film comedies under investigation, cannot be fully understood and critically assessed. I would also like to warmly thank him for all his critical comments, his encouragement, unfailing enthusiasm, sparkling wit and intellectual generosity that have recurrently helped this current project to advance in often difficult times.

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Introduction: Ethics, politics and the indecorous genre

In spite of its popularity and commercial success as a film genre, or precisely because of this marketability, comedy has consistently been one of the least prestigious or award-winning forms. This lack of cultural distinction has been traditionally accompanied by critical neglect, stemming from a more widespread lack of respectability of popular and commercial mass culture, to which film comedy has been habitually ascribed. Whereas this scholarly disregard has started to be remedied by recent revisionist film history and genre accounts in the United States and Great Britain (e.g., King, Jenkins, Brunovska Karnick, Neale, Krutnik, Rowe, Musser, Olsin Lent etc.), it is still conspicuous in the case of Spanish cinema and especially regarding the comedies produced in the two decades after the Civil War, as this period of harsh authoritarian politics has been routinely seen as monolithically determining all contemporaneous social and cultural manifestations.\(^1\)

Viewed especially through the stereotyping lenses of the 1970s anti-Francoist intellectual struggle, in a decade decisively marked by an Althusserian mistrust in popular cinema and mass culture, postwar Spanish cinema in general and the comedy of these years in particular have been dismissively discarded as a serious object of investigation due to their alleged “reactionary”, “escapist”, and/ or “commercial” bent.\(^2\) Although institutionalized in Spain in the 1970s, this entrenched leftist interpretation was actually rooted in the 1950s oppositional culture to Francoism, which maintained that early postwar comedies were deprived of any authentic

\(^{1}\) Steven Marsh’ excellent overview, which has recently appeared in the Companion to Spanish Cinema edited by Jo Labanyi and Tatjana Pavlovic, is among the very few analyses of Spanish comedy that is closer to this new revisionist trend. As to this date I could not consult the final printed version of this article nor the entire anthology, its promising, innovative contents cannot be assessed within the general framework of this Introduction.

\(^{2}\) The Althusserian approach to mass culture in general and to film studies in particular was, however, a cultural trend that was quite widespread in the Western academia of the age as well. A useful review of the 1970s theoretical legacies in film studies can be found in the 1990s revisionist accounts contained in Reinventing Film Studies.
aesthetic and political value, being manifestations of a dubious humor that was politically sanctioned or even shrewdly promoted by Franco’s regime. As each chapter will offer thorough details about the critical reception of the analyzed comedies, this introduction will solely mention some brief paradigmatic lines that dominated the postwar Spanish film historiography, highlighting only the most salient authority figures that helped consolidate the main trends. The current brief recapitulation of Spanish film criticism is greatly indebted to Imanol Zumalde Arregi’s compelling review, “Asignatura pendiente. Pequeño breviario de la historiografía del cine español” and to Luis Alonso García’s “Anomalías históricas y perversiones historiográficas”, two essential studies that need to be consulted for a broader panoramic view of the political and critical trends that shaped the reception of Spanish cinema (in Spain).

Before proceeding to examine the crucial legacy of the 1970s, it is important to identify, however, the main hermeneutic and political adversaries of these “relatos malvados” or “cruel”, as aptly named in Luis Antonio García’s lucid historiographical revision. The main enemy of these “relatos cruel” of the 1970s seems to have been the previous Spanish film history and historiography, embodied by Juan Antonio Cabero, Fernando Méndez-Leite, and Fernando Vizcaíno Casas, whose intellectual merit and canonizing attempts were vehemently denied in the 1970s because of their conservative political affiliation. The vilification of such right-wing film historians actually took the form of a double repudiation, where the political dismissal took a clear, though unconfessed, precedence over the critical dimension: the aesthetic repudiation of the films, scriptwriters and directors that Cabero, Casas and Méndez-Leite considered valuable (many of whom will be reevaluated in this thesis) was directly determined by the moral and ideological rejection of the hegemonic Francoist politics at the time such movies were produced. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how a similar reception phenomenon
occurred in the contemporaneous field of theatrical historiography, which was also marked by Althusserian paradigms in the 1970s. The critic who most contributed at the institutionalization of the dismissive label of “escapist”, which was attributed to the early postwar comedies, was José Monleón. In his 1971 book, *Treinta años de teatro de derecha*, whose main thesis he takes over in his 1994 conference, published in 2001, “Teatro cómico y teatro de humor en la posguerra civil española”, he significantly admits that his passionate 1970s hermeneutics, maintained in its ideological premises much later, was, to a great extent, an act of political and “critical rebellion” against the gradual canonization of some particular plays as “humor theater” and as an example of the intellectual high quality of the postwar Spanish stage. Monleón’s paradigmatic opposition to such conservative institutionalization of the 1960s will be extensively discussed, however, in the second chapter of this dissertation.

In the case of the postwar Spanish movie reception, the gradual consolidation of the binary classification “escapist”/“(Neo)realist” that began in the 1950s is virtually inseparable from the dismissal of almost all movies produced in the 1940s, especially comedies, for their “evasionism” and alleged “propagandistic” bent. This consequential process of reception can be linked to the interpretive lopsidedness of the liberal Catholics that wrote for *Film Ideal*, especially José María García Escudero, and of the “dissident”, leftist intellectuals who reviewed contemporaneous movies and plays from a socially committed stance in the pages of Índice de Arte y Letras. One of the most influential contributors to this politicized cultural canonization was José María García Escudero, whose institutional power (as Director General de Cinematografía y Teatro) and inextricable links to the rise of the “New Spanish Cinema” ascribed a long lasting impact to his book, *La historia en cien palabras del cine español*, in which he defines all cinema prior to 1954 as “coward” and “escapist”, particularly the comedy, which is
generalized as theatrical and as solely consisting of “el smoking y lo cursi”. His sweeping labels of the postwar Spanish cinema, on the one hand, and, on the other, his passionate idealization of a committed social realism, modeled after the Italian neorealism, were further consolidated in the context of the 1955 Conversaciones Cinematográficas Nacionales in Salamanca, a national event that represents a fundamental landmark legitimizing (Neo)realist cinema as the only valuable discourse of artistic and political opposition.

The enhanced ideological polarization in the political and the cultural fields of postwar Spain, within a context of a right-wing totalitarian regime, can undeniably clarify why the anti-Francoist intellectual opposition of the 1950s, which was consolidated in the 1970s, assigned a powerful symbolic capital to dissident Marxist intellectuals. Their critical prestige rose even more after the end of Francoism and was strengthened, in some cases, by the academic institutionalization of some dissident intellectuals, as was the illustrative case of Román Gubern in the field of film criticism and history. His generalizations of the entire Spanish cinema of the 1940s as a kind of Lukácsian “reflex” of an alleged “monolitismo ideológico del discurso franquista”, an assessment that he maintained even after the 1990s (*Historia del cine español* 178), makes him condescendingly assess all the movies produced in this period as “escapist” (“Mirando hacia otro lado” 57), particularly when they are comedies and, as was often the case, when such postwar comedies are screen adaptations of previously existing plays or novels written by conservative authors. Such aesthetic, moral and political criticism is also visible in the recurrence of words such as “banquillo” (e.g., Antonio Castro *El cine español en el banquillo*) or “cadalso” (Román Gubern and Domènec Font *Un cine para el cadalso*) in the

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1. An analogous trajectory is visible in the case of Diego Galán, who still maintains his 1970s ethical and political indictments of early postwar Spanish cinema. In his chapter on the 1940s Spanish film, published in the late 1990s, he considers this period as “la más extravagante, enloquecida, curiosa y patética de su propia historia.” and almost all Spanish cinema, “casi desde sus orígenes y hasta hace pocos años, ha sido uno de los más atrasados, torpes y faltos de interés del cine occidental.” (“El cine español de los años cuarenta” 113)
1970s, indiscriminately applied to most Spanish cinema produced during Franco’s regime, particularly in the first decades after the Civil War. Such Marxist critics occasionally qualified their overarching statements by positing that this kind of socially and politically “uncommitted” humor might have been, at best, the only possible one in those bleak autarkic circumstances, where a kind of omnipotent censorship would have completely determined all aesthetic choices publicly available. As this thesis attempts to show, this oppressive image disregards not only the aesthetic complexity and politicizing potential of a ludic, ideologically uncommitted humor, but also the margins of freedom that still existed in a harsh authoritarian society like Francoist Spain.

The belligerent political tone of the 1970s and its associated interpretive clichés have unfortunately continued to thrive on both sides of the Atlantic even in the 1990s and beyond, particularly through the vision of a Spanish cinema as a Lukácsian “reflex” of a monolithically envisioned regime. Some essential revisions in the Spanish film historiography did, nevertheless, emerged in the 1980s—some of the most important ones will be mentioned here in so far as they have directly contributed to the gradual reassessment of the postwar Spanish cinema in general and, in particular, of the comedies that constitute the focus of this dissertation.

Of particular importance in the 1980s were Emeterio Díez Puertas’ *Historia social del cine español*, Santiago Pozo Arenas’ *La industria del cine en España*, and Félix Fanés’ pioneering research on CIFESA. This last work is worth highlighting in so far as it felicitously subverted the equation “Spanish cinema = cinema produced under Francoism = CIFESA = cinema of Francoist national exaltation” (Zumalde Arregi 446). Other important studies of this decade are several monographic works, often coordinated by Julio Pérez Perucha, which are devoted to several postwar Spanish filmmakers (e.g., Luis Marquina, Edgar Neville, Fernando Fernán Gómez) and tend to be the published proceedings of symposia and conferences dedicated
to various important figures of the postwar Spanish cinema (e.g., directors, actors, producers, scriptwriters etc.).

The monographic tendency continues in the 1990s, one of the most fertile periods in the historiography of Spanish cinema, which was coincidental with the establishment of the Spanish Associations of Film Historians (AEHC). This official constitution can be linked not only to various important symposia, published proceedings, or revisionist studies that this association has promoted and sponsored (e.g., *Antología crítica del cine español*, *Huellas de luz. Películas para un centenario*), but also to the gradual professional consolidation of the field of Spanish film history and criticism, which became more closely associated with the Spanish academia. Many of these film historians, especially Carlos F. Heredero, Julio Pérez Perucha, Santos Zunzunegui and José Luis Castro de Paz, felicitously renovated the field by attacking the prior binary division of the postwar Spanish movies (e.g., as “good” or “bad”, “dissident” or “escapist”, “progressive” or “reactionary”), an entrenched trend that did not coexist with cinematographic analysis. The revisionist critical interventions of the 1990s become thus oppositionally self-defined as a formal research of the postwar Spanish cinema (i.e., “la puesta en forma”) through semiotic and psychoanalytical approaches, which are in tune with the 1960s and the 1970s theoretical legacies of such critics’ formative years. While this methodological shift of the 1990s overcame the obsessive politicized fixation on an “escapist”/“dissident” polarization, the exclusive attention to the formal aspects tends to be unfortunately inseparable from a conspicuous nationalist undercurrent, which draws an exceptionalist account of Spanish cinema, whose distinctive, *castizo* forms have allegedly been only superficially influenced by international movements. This effort of national cultural reinscription is unsurprisingly based on auteurism (which is evident in the rise of monographic studies and the scarcity of genre studies).
and on a genealogical attempt of nostalgic recuperation of a composite cultural tradition, which can be connected to an intellectual-artistic canon (e.g., the picaresque tradition, a romanticized *costumbrismo*, Goya etc.) and to a politically idealized historical period in terms of progressive, democratic politics of leftist orientation, that of the Spanish Second Republic.¹

Before further proceeding, it is important to underline that the contentious attempt to circumscribe the appeal of Spanish comedy to completely autochthonous cultural forms is not paired with an interdisciplinary, transnational research on comedic genres, despite their production importance and documented popularity. The vehement defense of a national Spanish cinema of “pure” *castizo* roots is thus set against the apparently alienating, homogenizing foreign influences and, in particular, against the would-be repetitive, commercial, and shallow menace of foreign film genres, especially those related to Hollywood. This perception can be genealogically related to *Cine español, cine de subgéneros*, a typical 1970s Althusserian study of popular Spanish (i.e., “genre”) cinema and mass culture.² There is otherwise very scarce research on Spanish cinema that mentions the dearth of film genre investigation and seeks to remedy this lack (e.g., Annabel Martín’s *Gramática de la felicidad*, the anthologies *Contemporary Spanish Cinema and Genre* or *Spanish Popular Cinema*). Leaving aside Annabel Martín’s pioneering work on postwar Spanish melodrama from a Gramscian perspective and Eva Woods Peiró’s essential research of folkloric musicals though similar lenses, even the few existing studies tend

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¹ Starting with the 1990s, there have also emerged some groundbreaking analyses of the postwar Spanish cinema belonging to Annabel Martín, Eva Woods Peiró, Steven Marsh, and, especially, Jo Labanyi, as we shall briefly see in what follows and throughout this dissertation. These studies, which can also be connected to a broader view of potential progressive politics in Spain in the aftermath of the Civil War, developed in the British and the American academia and can be related to the consequential rise of Spanish cultural studies.

² The authors of this study (i.e., Juan M. Company, Vicente Vergara, Juan de Mata Moncho, José Vanaclocha) were grouped under the name *Equipo “Cartelería Turia”* from Valencia. Their excoriating indictment of some popular minor genres, called “subgéneros”, associated with a “subnormal”(-ized) mass, manipulated by the main Francoist institutions, could, of course, be also linked to Manuel Vázquez Montalbán’s 1970 “Manifiesto subnormal”. Juan M. Company has, however, overcome this narrow critical-political framework, as evident in his revisionist 1997 assessment of early postwar Spanish cinema, *Formas y perversiones del compromiso: El cine español de los años cuarenta.*
to focus mostly on the contemporary, not on the early postwar period, being bound with inevitable questions of mass culture, commercial success and popularity.¹

An essential advancement to the study of postwar Spanish comedy was, however, enabled by Steven Marsh’s analysis of comedy as a popular genre under Francoism, using Gramsci’s seminal concepts of “hegemony”, “consent” and “the national popular”, through which he politicizes Bakhtin’s notions of “carnival” and of “heteroglossia”/ “dialogical”, on the one hand, and, on the other, de Certeau’s celebration of the non-discursive practices of resistance of popular culture. It is also worth mentioning here Stuart Green’s skillful, mostly narratological, examination of the postwar theatrical production of “the other generation of 1927” through the “mediatization” of contemporaneous cinema. Given Marsh’s and Green’s complex investigation and their direct, significant relevance to the purpose of the current research, their studies will be discussed in more detail within the second chapter of this thesis.

Confronted with a lack of research on the postwar comedy from an interdisciplinary genre perspective, the chosen framework of this thesis lies at the intersection between, on the one hand, an aesthetic-narratological approach, or what film theorist and historian Rick Altman first endorsed as “a semantic/ syntactic approach” to genres, and, on the other, a historicized perspective on genres and their hybridity, later defined by the same Rick Altman in Film/ Genre as “a pragmatic view” on genres as sites of conflict and negotiation among different but interactive audiences. If the former approach can be initially enabling to delineate the corpus of analyzed comedies, the latter angle attempts to enrich this initial generic take with issues of reception, industrial and socio-political conditionings, etc. We should see Altman’s enlargement and problematization of the former structuralist concept of genre within the revisionist turn in

¹ The opening brought about by Spanish cultural studies, usually linked to a Gramscian perspective on mass culture, lies beyond the limited scope of this dissertation, a reason for which this Introduction will only briefly mention the names of some leading researchers of particular importance for the present thesis.
film studies in the 1990s, which also undermined the traditional assessment of classical Hollywood narrative, based on a “masterpiece tradition”. This recent turn in genre analysis is also consonant with what Pierre Bourdieu, following Foucault, remarked, namely, that genres are historically and culturally specific discursive channels that both (de)limit and enable discourse, on the one hand depending upon existing local canons of expression, perception, and appreciation, and, on the other, eventually changing their producers’ and consumers’ conceptual framework. The multiple generic perspectives employed in this investigation thus provide both a conceptually rooted space of discussion, distanced from auteurism, and a historicized assessment of the material fields of production and circulation of the popular genres that are reclaimed for a serious critical appraisal.

In consonance with this historicized revisionist approach to cinema, as evident in recent critical anthologies like *Reinventing Film Studies* and *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, the selected movie corpus of this thesis consists of a broad array of comedies, sometimes in a problematic relationship with an ideal canon, as will become evident particularly in the second chapter. A thorough, historicized investigation of the elements of standardization and difference that are present in these comedies can thus enable us to better see some specific aesthetic choices in a complex interplay with competing genres and contemporaneous forms of popular humor, responding not only to the peculiar conditions of production and reception of the time but also to the political, economic, and social changes of the postwar context. Of particular importance for this dissertation was also a preliminary thorough review of numerous postwar film reviews and periodicals.¹ This examination of printed press discourses enabled a better assessment of the official box-office count was introduced in Spain only starting with 1965, a year that marks the end of the period under consideration in this thesis, the current investigation can only indirectly and incompletely assess the popularity of the specific comedies under investigation, relying not only on contemporaneous reviews and editorials, but also on fragmentary data about the number of weeks the examined comedies were shown in the cinema theaters,
contemporaneous reception of the comedies and humor under analysis and of their subsequent impact within the contemporaneous fabric. Furthermore, the joint consideration of the advertising posters of the analyzed comedies responds to a similar attempt of historical reconstruction of the hypothetical context of distribution and reception of these comic discourses. This contemporaneous framework of reference would have been incomplete, however, without a complementary review of other postwar forms of comedy and humor. Of notable concern in this respect is the humor of the iconic magazine La Codorniz, whose postwar evolution and reception seems to parallel that of the genealogically related disparate comedies, under analysis in the second chapter of this thesis. As it will become evident later, the understanding of the verbal and visual strategies of this humor magazine is indebted to Marta Sánchez Castro’s and especially to José Antonio Llera’s pragmatic analyses.

A careful examination of the reception history of postwar Spanish comedy and cinema seems to show that the traditional leftist condescension or indictment of a would-be “evasionist” humor is greatly indebted to the unavowed belief in the existence of a morally and politically “decorous” genre to treat certain topics within a specific sociocultural context, which ensures the verisimilitude and corresponding cultural canonization of that particular discursive type.¹ The “decorous” generic frame that is implicitly advanced by these detractors of “escapism” seems thus to be inextricably linked to a realist aesthetics and a politically committed Marxist stance, a conjunction that is best embodied by Neorealism in the realm of cinema and a loosely

¹an information occasionally available in different periodical venues of the time (i.e., in the magazines Dígame for the first years after 1940, in Cámara between 1944 and 1946, then in Anuarios de Cine Español after 1946), but which does not say much about the actual financial return of each movie. Also helpful were various interviews with the directors, scriptwriters, producers or actors that were related to these comedies as well as some autobiographies that would also touch upon these reception issues.

¹This observation relies on Germán Labrador’s cogent discussion of “decorum” as a moral, aesthetic and political category that sanctions or invalidates the relation between a certain genre and a particular narrative material (“Productos genéricos” TS). He also introduces the related concept of verisimilitude, understood as “los distintos efectos de realidad que producen distintas ecuaciones entre géneros y materias, es decir, el orden de realidad y el horizonte de expectativas que sostiene una determinada normativización del decoro, un determinado género.”
understood social realism in the sphere of literature. The lengthy and thorny issue of such
cultural canonization will not be further discussed here, given that it is amply analyzed in a prior
study (Jorza 2010) and in the course of this thesis, especially in the second chapter. It remains
necessary to briefly consider now, however, the concept of “decorum”, which is essential to any
discussion of comedy and humor.

As Neale and Krutnik aptly summarized in their study of comedy, this genre is defined by
a double deviation, “both from socio-cultural norms, and from the rules that govern other genres
and aesthetic regimes”, requiring “both social and aesthetic indecorum” (3). This necessary
deviance from social and aesthetic propriety actually ensures the expected comic effect, which is
always based, in some way or another, on the awareness of an incongruity in respect to the
socially and aesthetically dominant conventions of decorum and verisimilitude. It is useful to
mention here that, while there is no universally valid theory of humor and comedy, there have
been three basic, complementary approaches to humor, which, following John Morreall’s and
Simon Critchley’s useful syntheses, could be summed up as the superiority theory, the relief
theory, and the incongruity theory.¹ The understanding of humor in this thesis is mostly indebted
to this last, incongruity theory, which is further connected to Mary Douglas’ cultural
anthropological analysis of jokes (and of humor, in general) as “anti-rites” in respect to the
socially legitimate symbols of a particular historical time and place: by deriding and playing with
the ritual practices of a given society, the resulting incongruity and defamiliarization that humor,

¹ The superiority theory, according to which laughter arises from feeling superior to other people (e.g., ethnic
humor), is best known in relation to Thomas Hobbes (i.e., in the eighth chapter of Human Nature), but was present
also in Plato’s “Philebus” and in Aristotle’s Poetics, On Rhetoric and Nichomachean Ethics. The relief theory,
which sees laughter as a pleasurable release of accumulated energy, can be originally related to Herbert Spencer
and his “Physiology of Laughter”, but is best known in relation to Freud and his 1905 book on jokes. The incongruity
theory, which views humor as an incongruity between what is known or expected and what actually takes place, can
first be found in Aristotle’s Rhetoric as well, where is conceptualized as “a twist” to the established expectations.
The incongruity theory is perhaps most well-known, however, in relation to Kant and his Critique of Judgment, to
Schopenhauer’s World as Will and Representation, and to Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript.
as “anti-rite” (102), brings about can show the “contingency and arbitrariness” of the hegemonic social discourses (96). The inevitable distancing, trivialization and relative emotional anesthesia that humor brings about can thus problematize any inflexible moral and political commitment, an aspect that is worthwhile to take into consideration when evaluating the particular circumstances of traditional leftist reception of the postwar Spanish cinema, with its underlying belief in a certain ethical, political, and thus also aesthetic sense of “deco rum”.

In any case, Douglas’, Morreall’s and Critchley’s studies on humor are just some of many numerous ones that convincingly argue that there is no politically neutral humor, an essential characteristic that is noteworthy in the case of totalitarian regimes, in which film comedies play a particularly important political function, even if not deprived of ambiguity. Comic indecorum is unsurprisingly suspicious in authoritarian societies, in which the institutionalized transgression of comedy (and of humor in general) is feared for its ambiguity and for its corrosive, relativizing epistemological and ethical potential, a political mistrust that can be retraced to Plato’s dismissive attitude towards comedy in The Republic. His excoriating remarks on this genre’s lack of decorum must be linked not only to the destabilizing comic effects on single individuals, but on the problematic counter-educational impact of humor on society at large, a concern that is inextricably bound with the issues of normative citizenship and disciplinary power. The larger scope of this thesis, centered on two postwar comedic genres, identified as screwball and disparate, actually attempts to go beyond the individual politicizing impact of such comedies, seeking to ascertain their collective formative influence in the contemporaneous public sphere, as part of a larger process of articulation of alternative subjectivities and communities.

While the implicit conceptual backbone of this dissertation is heavily indebted to Foucault’s view of subjectification in relation to a shaping disciplinary power, as skillfully
deployed in *Histoire de la sexualité*, the essential assumption of an alternative public sphere is taken from Miriam Hansen’s groundbreaking repositioning of Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt’s study, *The Public Sphere and Experience*.\(^1\) Negt’s and Kluge’s ideas will actually be introduced through her informed interpretation, relying on her already existing application to the sphere of cinema audiences. Her historicized theorization of an alternative public sphere shaped by Hollywood silent cinema should be seen within the general revisionist take on film studies in general and within a more and more widespread interest in film and theatre spectatorship. Furthermore, the focus on audiences has fruitfully enabled the study of cinema and theatre as deeply entrenched in the sociocultural discourses and practices of everyday life and, as such, of cinema and theatre as essential fabrics in the reshaping of subjectivities and communities.\(^2\) In the sphere of Spanish cultural studies, this approach informs two recent pioneering projects that have been essential for the research findings of the present dissertation, as we shall see in more detail in the two following chapters. These two seminal contributions are Jo Labanyi’s coordinated ethnographic investigation of the 1940s and 1950s Spanish cinema audiences (i.e., *The Mediation of Everyday Life: An Oral History of Cinema-Going in 1940s and 1950s Spain*), on the one hand, and, on the other, María Francisca Vilches de Frutos’ and Dru Dougherty’s

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1 Miriam Hansen authored the foreword to the English-language publication of *The Public Sphere and Experience* in 1993. Negt’s and Kluge’s ideas decisively modeled her own cogent discussion of silent Hollywood spectatorship (e.g., *Babel and Babylon*, “Early Silent Cinema” etc.). This conceptual framework is also decisively present in a number of other brilliant essays she wrote, such as “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism”, “Alexander Kluge, Cinema and the Public Sphere: The Construction Site of Counter-History”, or "America, Paris, The Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity".

2 Leaving aside Miriam Hansen’s already mentioned book on early twentieth-century spectatorship (i.e., *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*), there is also Annette Kuhn’s 2002 account of British spectatorship of the 1930s (i.e., *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory*), the latter inspiring Jo Labanyi’s ethnographic project on postwar cultural spectatorship through oral accounts. In the same perspective, see also the research on cinema and everyday life in Nazi Germany, such as Patrice Petro’s 1998 “Nazi Cinema at the Intersection of the Classical and the Popular” or the historical, ethnographic focus on “everyday Fascism” starting with the 1990s in, for instance, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (i.e., *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*), Christopher Browning (i.e., *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*), and Saul Friedlander’s edited volume (i.e., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*).
reception studies of the prewar Madrid stage, between 1900 y 1936 (i.e., La escena madrileña entre 1918 y 1926: Análisis y documentación and La escena madrileña entre 1926 y 1936: Un lustro de transición).

The theorization of an alternative public sphere that Negt and Kluge put forth is not only an oppositional construct to the hegemonic public sphere, which is the inevitably constitutive outside through which the alternative public sphere is strategically and positionally defined. Despite its preferred, convenient use in the singular, Negt’s and Kluge’s instrumental concept is actually an aggregated one, comprising a myriad of alternative public spheres as overlapping sites of discursive contestation and negotiation and hence of individual and collective identification. Their main operative value is primarily based on a positive, inclusive connotation, as they stand for an everyday social horizon of experience that tends to be excluded from the dominant public sphere that is institutionalized and exclusive. As such, this conceptualization is also an attempt not only to offer a broader view of the public sphere, which is not segregated from the real context of living, but also to answer the socioeconomic and political limitations of Habermas’ perspective (i.e., in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere), which actually describes the constitution of the masculine, bourgeois capitalist public sphere.¹ On the other hand, Negt’s and Kluge’s account also provides a salutary way out of the dead-end pessimism of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s Dialectics of Enlightenment, another fundamental text for the 1970s skeptical, elitist view of mass culture as a homogenizing means of control and manipulation.² What these representatives of “the other Frankfurt School” laudably attempt to do

¹ One of the most important critics of Habermas’ exclusive image of the public sphere is Nancy Fraser, who also introduces the idea of concurrent public spheres, termed “counterpublics” in “Rethinking the Public Sphere”.
² Trained in sociology, Oskar Negt, in his turn, worked as Habermas’ assistant, while Alexander Kluge was Adorno’s friend and disciple, a hierarchical situation that might explain, to some (Bourdieu-based) extent, Negt’s and Kluge’s later positionings in the field through a significant revision of Habermas’ and Adorno’s conceptualizations of public spheres.
with this leftist revision of traditional Marxism is to provide room for actual, diverse sociohistorical experiences, in all their inclusiveness, openness, reflexivity, heterogeneity and conflict (Hansen, “Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres” 189).

Beyond the inclusive, multifaceted image of experience (i.e., *Erfahrung*) that Negt and Kluge put forth in their discussion of the alternative public sphere, what should be highlighted here is the essential importance of their perspective of this experience as critical and reflective, on the one hand, and, on the other, as able to make “connections—between traditionally segregated domains of public and private, politics and everyday life, reality and fantasy, production and desire” (”Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres” 205). Bearing this dynamic networking in mind, it is useful to mention another feature that Miriam Hansen judiciously emphasizes in Negt’s and Kluge’s account and that refers to a generally disregarded operating rule of mass culture, which must have also shaped the postwar Spanish movie industry. They thus laudably argue that the industrial-commercial venue is the inescapable condition of possibility of any circulation of meaning, whether one considers conservative or more ambivalent and subversive values and role models: actual reception and interpretation depends on the “ambiguous, unstable, and contradictory make-up” of the industrial-commercial field and of the differing types of public (204). The public sphere’s openness and alternative potential is indeed actualized through the industrial-commercial venue, a very important aspect worth keeping in mind as it further problematizes any monolithic account of film spectatorship, even in the oppressive aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. The industrial-commercial realm actually contributes to the production and release of diversified cultural objects as it inherently strives to

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1 This “other Frankfurt School” is associated with a peculiar idea of experience (i.e., *Erfahrung*), which encompasses both unmediated sensations (i.e., empirical experience) and a mediation through reflection, and is represented by Kracauer, who was the first to advance this perception of *Erfahrung*, being later enlarged by Benjamin, Adorno, Negt, and Kluge (Hansen *Babel and Babylon* 12-13).
balance between the political necessity of “cultural respectability and legitimacy” and the economic need to provide “a maximum of inclusion” for many different audiences or consumers (200-01). If the former demand draws the industrial-commercial milieu to the hegemonic public sphere, the latter opens the market both in terms of consumers, coming from mixed social constituencies (some of which might not have even been considered as a public before) and in terms of the varied everyday practices that become available as cultural products on the market.

It is important to mention here that Emeterio Díez Puertas (i.e., Historia social del cine en España), Santiago Pozo Arenas (i.e., La industria social del cine en España), and Valeria Camporesi (i.e., Para grandes y chicos: Un cine para los españoles) are some of the very few researchers of Spanish film studies who pointed to the necessity of tackling the postwar Spanish cinema through its industrial-commercial venue, expounding the dangers of an idealizing, politicized and culturally canonized auteurism. Díez Puertas thus ironically dwells on the inescapable contradictions of the anti-Francoist intellectuals linked to the New Spanish Cinema in the 1960s: “[q]uieren derrocar el régimen, pero viven del dinero que proporciona un sistema de protección que ha nacido para mantener el régimen.” (Historia social del cine en España 71)

Furthermore, Santiago Pozo Arenas indicts the elitist leftist vision according to which “el cine era primordialmente un fenómeno cultural y artístico antes que industrial o económico.” (141), a perspective that he roots in the 1955 Conversations of Salamanca and in García Escudero’s cinema policies, which institutionalized the binary opposition between “calidad” and “comercialidad”. Pozo Arenas thus analyzes the gradual internal dismantling of the Spanish film industry, its double loss (i.e., of both investments and public), which he links to the increasing power of multinational companies in the Spain of the 1960s, a phenomenon that he illuminatingly sets against the otherwise excellent economic conditions of the 1960s national
cinema, the enthusiastic mass film audiences, the existing local cinema professionals, the national star system, and the numerous foreign movie productions in Spain (213). In its turn, Valeria Camporesi’s innovative study draws upon the changing rationales of the rhetoric of state intervention in the field of postwar Spanish cinema and upon the contradictory economic, cultural and political injunctions that are inherent in the changing canon of a national Spanish cinema.

The postwar Spanish cinema production did not constitute, indeed, an exception in respect to the ambivalent workings of the industrial-commercial venue, hovering between obvious lucrative reasons and an understandable desire for sociopolitical and cultural respectability in respect to the hegemonic public sphere. CIFESA and other film companies of the age were thus interested in the commercial success of their productions, being quite distanced from any blind adherence to the hegemonic exhortations regarding a would-be Spanish “model” cinema. This ambiguous self-positioning of the local film industry resulted in many low-cost, profitable movies, some of which will be analyzed in this thesis, which were very popular with a wide variety of postwar audiences. At the same time, the same cinema shrewdly would also produce few high-cost, state-sponsored films that would prove its seeming political allegiance to the trumpeted slogans of the age (yet not even these movies offered a completely unproblematic narrative either). In other cases, the postwar Spanish cinema chose to safely adapt some already existing literary works, belonging to respectable classics or some conservative contemporaneous figures, a production choice relying on censorship lenience towards writers considered politically compliant. Some of these screen adaptations, as we shall see especially in the second chapter, will ironically put forth, however, some of the most corrosive critiques to the contemporaneous
society and political situations under the treacherous guise of the original writer’s conservative allegiance to the Francoist regime.

The vast majority of counterhegemonic reading of postwar Spanish cinema has been traditionally ascribed, nevertheless, only to politically committed “auteur” or “art” movies’, (e.g., bearing the cultural distinction of Bardem’s or Saura’s directorial signatures), a construction of an academic and national canon that focused only on few privileged films (usually by dissident intellectuals) at the expense of all other cinematic productions of the time. These other “low culture” movies, most of which are barely known by most Spanish film historians and critics, have been considered propagandistic and reactionary, or, especially in the case of post-war comedies, as inane and stultifying mass entertainment, indirectly advancing the political agenda of the Francoist regime. Various Spanish state officials and institutions through which disciplinary discourses were articulated after the Civil War did implicitly acknowledge, however, the transformative public potential of these “low culture” comedies of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s: both their legislative attempts on the cinema industry (e.g., censorship and protectionist laws) and countless media interventions against the “corrupting” influence of such “indecorous” cinema were actual (counter)responses to cinema’s increasing power as an alternative public sphere.¹ The power of postwar Spanish comedies to mediate everyday social and cultural practices and, as such, to shape both subjectivities and communities was undeniably indebted to cinema’s status as main entertainment venue in Francoist Spain until the early 1960s, when melodrama and comedy were the most popular film genres of that period. This thesis actually claims that screwball and disparate, two critically ignored comedic genres that

¹ In “Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?”, Miriam Hansen illuminatingly shows how the enhanced critical, oppositional potential of the German alternative public sphere (which she relates to early silent cinema) was also a response to the hegemonic attempts of censorship and moral reforms that sought to control the public exhibition and reception of entertainment.
flourished in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War (i.e., between roughly 1939 and 1965), effectively contributed to the visibility and naturalization of new, resistant role models in the Spanish public sphere of the time.

If we bear in mind the complex perspective of the alternative public sphere, we can better understand how its dynamic, not fully predictable performance and its manifold associations with both the hegemonic public sphere and the industrial-commercial field can become particularly relevant in authoritarian regimes like Franco’s in postwar Spain, an oppressive period that exacerbated the critical, oppositional tendency of the alternative public sphere to the extent of occasional paranoid hermeneutics.¹ In this respect and before entering the actual survey of the two chapters of this thesis, it should be specified here, in so far as the general methodological framework of this dissertation is concerned, that this propensity towards a distrustful reception should be understood in consonance with one of the underlying analytical lenses of this thesis, which is not cinematographic but epistemological, seeking to inquire what kind of knowledge is produced through the specific postwar comedies under investigation (i.e., screwball and disparate) and also what kind of subjectivities and citizens this knowledge shapes.

Spanish screwball comedy, which is extensively analyzed in the first chapter, is a yet ignored cinematic genre, despite its undeniable importance between 1939 and 1946: twenty eight such comedies were made during this time, a number that represents almost half of the total number of films that CIFESA, the main producing company of the age, normally produced during these years (Pozo Arenas 54). While several studies mentioned the importance of comedy in the first half of the 1940s (e.g., Gubern, Ortiz, Marsh, Castro de Paz), none acknowledges an

¹ In another cogent essay (i.e., “Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere”), Miriam Hansen contrastively analyzes how the silent German cinema had an even more radical democratizing potential as an alternative public sphere than the contemporaneous American one, a discrepancy that she links to the more hierarchical, less inclusive sociopolitical and cultural situation of Germany at the time, in comparison to the United States.
existing corpus of screwball comedies and much less analyzes its discursive peculiarities, which hybridizes Hollywood screwball comedy (a mixture, in its turn, of various comic traditions), the popular novela rosa, the cosmopolitan Spanish revue, the alta comedias and astrakán as well as the género chico. The Spanish postwar refashioning of the screwball genre unsurprisingly put forth more disciplinary role models and closures, which could not obliterate, however, the subversive value of the alternative values, characters and actions comically castigated. Frequently labeled “americanadas” and “intrascendentes” in the hegemonic public sphere of the time, these Spanish screwball comedies were accurately perceived as a disquieting source of youth “corruption” in language, fashion, and manners and as a corrosive, trivializing critique of romance, marriage, family and life in general. A source of particular concern, ascribed to a feared “American way of life”, was the perceived female rebellion against traditional domesticity, coupled with her politically problematic insistence on self-government. The first chapter actually assesses seventeen surviving screwball comedies, grouped along gender lines (i.e., taking into consideration if they are centered upon men or upon women), an angle that differentially inflicts the authoritarian tendency of the Spanish screwball. The corpus of these comedies is taxonomically divided in three distinct subtypes, two dealing with commitment comedy (i.e., focused on the establishment of the central couple and ending in marriage or promise of marriage) and one dealing with reaffirmation comedy (i.e., focused on the re-establishment of the main couple, initially separated, and ending in marital reconciliation). It is interesting to remark here that the number of screwball movies focused on comically disciplined women understandably exceeds the number of films centered upon wayward men that are eventually castigated and reformed.
Another postwar comedic genre, labeled *disparate* (for reasons that will be extensively discussed later), constitutes the focus of the second chapter of this thesis and, as in the case of the Spanish screwball, it is a genre that has never been assessed as a distinct generic corpus, a critical absence that this dissertation seeks to remedy. The Spanish *disparate* spans almost two decades and contributes to a post-Civil War continuity with a vanguard, “nonsensical” type of humor of the 1920s, which becomes gradually darker and more materialist towards the 1960s. It should be specified here that the screwball and the *disparate* genres actually share several elements (e.g., an eccentric, fast-talking heroine, zany, playful dialogs, an unconventional romance in a leisurely setting etc.), a coincidence that must be indebted to a common cinematic influence (i.e., Hollywood screwball), in its turn shaped by slapstick and comedian comedy, the burlesque and the vaudeville traditions, the flapper comedy, the theatrical comedy of manners, the anarchistic comedy etc. Their common traits and roots notwithstanding, these two postwar Spanish genres clearly display a different syntactic treatment of these elements: while the screwball uses the shared components for the consolidation of the main romance (whether of commitment or reaffirmation), all *disparate* comedies seem to place it in a secondary position, a significant displacement very often tinged with misogynistic ridicule, an issue that will be thoroughly discussed in the second chapter.

The postwar cinematic *disparate* is essentially related to “the other generation of 27” (made up of Miguel Mihura, José López Rubio, Edgar Neville, Enrique Jardiel Poncela and Tono), a 1983 foundational label belonging to José López Rubio and his inaugural discourse in front of the Spanish Royal Academy. The 1920s and the 1930s were the formative years of these complex artists, whose trajectories were decisively shaped by the early twentieth-century vanguard movements, the new flourishing mass market for entertainment, the crisis of the
Spanish stage, the rising film industry in Spain, and their participation, except Mihura’s, in the Hollywood movie production during the transition to sound. All five artists were actively involved in theater before the Civil War, but became well established on the Spanish stage under Franco’s regime. They were also connected to the 1920s vanguard renovation of the Spanish humor through their novels, plays, and short narratives as well as through their collaboration with such popular prewar magazines as Buen Humor and Gutiérrez. After 1941, they were all associated with the popular postwar comic magazine La Codorniz, initially directed by Miguel Mihura, which had an essential alternative educational impact on the Spanish younger population of postwar Spain.

Some of the playful comedies examined in the second chapter are linked to Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, one of the five humorists’ confessed “masters”, who was inseparable from their existential and professional route (except for theater, in which Fernández Flórez was not involved). He coincided with the younger humorists in many prewar and postwar magazines (e.g., Buen Humor, Gutiérrez, La Codorniz, Cámara, ABC) and he also participated in the Spanish film industry before and after the Civil War, where his narratives enjoyed an impressive number of screen adaptations and he even directly collaborated with Edgar Neville and with Miguel Mihura.

Since the 1990s, the humorists associated with the disparate comedy have started to become critically reclaimed, an institutionalizing trend that occurred after José López Rubio’s 1983 inaugural speech. This recent interest in their figures and cultural production from a historicized perspective refreshingly attempts to counter the entrenched leftist indictment of their work in the 1970s, which should be understood within that moral and political sense of decorum that was already mentioned before. Their comedies were thus inevitably “indecorous” from an
ideologically and ethically committed perspective, being associated with the humorists’ hasty endorsement of the Nationalist side during the Civil War and by their ambiguous, self-defensive collaboration with the new regime. Their actual postwar artistic and political (self-)positioning remains quite slippery, however: they were deemed too “intellectual” and hedonist for the dominant political circles, and, at the same time, they were considered too “bourgeois” and cynical for the leftist intellectuals who started to possess a significant symbolic capital in the cultural field after the 1950s. Using Bourdieu’s seminal concept of distinction and his complex, dynamic understanding of the cultural field and of its uneasy relations with the socio-political and the economic realms, the second chapter will first attempt to untangle the most important institutionalized trends in the critical reception of the six humorists after the Civil War, a survey that is primarily meant to shed some light on the changing positioning of their figures and of their work in the Spanish cultural field. This critical reassessment is then followed by a genealogical excursion into the humorists’ own conception of humor, theater and cinema and into their ambiguous social and cultural positioning before and after the Civil War. This review necessarily precedes the ample discussion of the actual disparate comedies that can be related to their ambivalent figures. These movies are analyzed according to a functional, tripartite thematic division and within the broader framework of their consequential counter-educational impact in the Spanish alternative public sphere of the time, a consideration that is inseparable from that propensity towards an incredulous reception that was already mentioned before.

After the brief survey of the two chapters of this dissertation, it is important to point out, in connection to the contemporaneous impact of these comedies, that countless personal experiences and extensive research has shown that harsh totalitarian regime like the Francoist one does not only foster disciplinary values, but also unwillingly triggers oblique, politicized
readings of cultural artifacts by skeptical, resistant audiences. The existence of such seemingly distrustful interpretations in the contemporaneous alternative public sphere is strongly substantiated, in the case of postwar Spanish cinema, by Román Gubern’s earlier accounts of censorship, by Esther Gómez Sierra’s investigation of lower-classes film audiences of “cines de barrio”, and by Jo Labanyi’s ethnographic project of cinema spectatorship of the 1940s and 1950s. Their anecdotal evidence sheds light on how ordinary citizens of the time appeared not only aware of the widespread action of censorship and propaganda, but they also seemed prone to assign contemporaneous censors a much more thorough and consistent ideological cleansing, ascribing hyperbolical traces of alleged “immorality” and political critique to what they consumed in public. Harboring an undeniable critical attitude, these audiences seemed to have thus transformed their oblique film interpretations in various forms of resistance, both silent and shared, which significantly reshaped their subjectivities.

At the same time, the comedies under analysis were also considered morally and politically “indecorous” in respect to the contemporaneous conservative establishment, as one can gauge from the movie reviews and censorship reports of the time. Their very lack of (hegemonic) “decorum” at that time was, nonetheless, their strongest appeal to the younger generations of the immediate postwar years, which were especially attracted to their playful humor and to the alternative role models they put forth, which were modeled, to a large extent, after popular Hollywood cinema. Foreign, especially American, movies, on the one hand, and, on the other, postwar comedies like folkloric comedies, skillfully analyzed by Eva Woods Peiró, or the screwball and disparate under investigation in this project, were actually among those cultural products that tended to be read through skeptical lenses, against the rallying cries of the hegemonic sphere, and credited with even more alternative, subversive potential than their
producers might have ever intended. It is useful to remember here Goffman’s compelling notion of “cultural frame”, which shows how social existence is an ongoing “negotiation” about which cultural frame should encompass and thus ascribe meaning to various events and actions. One of the main contentions of this dissertation is that the postwar screwball and disparate comedies, with their ludic cultural frame on the quotidian, clearly contributed to a change not only or not necessarily in the actual content of everyday experience but, more importantly, in the larger epistemological framework in which this content was interpreted and appropriated and in which social behavior was given meaning and thus potentially altered in the long run. The “sanctity” of established institutions (especially marriage and family) was gradually eroded through repeated exposure to such alternative perspectives, which, despite conservative endings, carried out their operation of reframing mainly through mockery and inversion of the dominant public role models and language, sanctioning and naturalizing different views on dominant institutions. These refreshing angles became gradually more radical and materialist towards the beginning of the 1960s, which witnessed the rise and flourishing of a powerful strain of dark humor.

It is very easy to trivialize this defamiliarizing effect from the standpoint of a later, more permissive sociopolitical ambience, in respect to which the earlier type of humor might have appeared both outdated and politically domesticated, that is, “evasionist”. The consideration of postwar humor and comedy in this thesis prioritizes a perspective that does not ignore the increased politicized value of this apparently benign humor in a harsh authoritarian context, which seemed to catalyze suspicious interpretations. The following chapters will thus seek to highlight the essential critical-epistemological function of the examined comedic genres, which, especially in the case of disparate, was carried out through an absurdist reframing and questioning of the linguistic, aesthetic and social conventions of the time. This gnoseological
issue is inseparable from the question of what made people laugh and why at a particular time and in a particular society, an important question that is present in most contemporary revisionist studies of film comedy (e.g., Jenkins, Rowe, King, Brunovska Karnick, Olsin Lent, Musser etc.) and which will be examined in both chapters. A thorough review of the peculiar humor of the postwar disparate comedies inevitably pointed to La Codorniz, for instance, the main humor magazine that emerged after the Civil War and that soon became an unquestionable mass phenomenon. Its humor, particularly in its initial playful, nonsensical forms, decisively shaped the public’s tastes and horizon of expectations, generating numerous urban legends, which testify to a similar combination of distrustful reading, acute awareness of censorship and propaganda and, at the same time, a proud assertion of an oppositional interpretation. As we shall see in more detail in the second chapter, this magazine even initiated a teasing game with the existing censorship, using the public spaces of cafes or radio shows, which ensured a rapid dissemination from mouth to mouth that relied precisely on paranoid politicized interpretations that are typical in oppressive regimes.

The conspiratorial atmosphere that surrounded La Codorniz and the examined comedies as well as their attributed humor in the alternative public sphere of the time seems to have had an important cohesive function in the establishment of non-hegemonic networks of communication and community-formation, which must have overlapped with those fostered by coplas singing, by ritual cinema-going (Gómez Sierra, “‘Palaces of Seeds’” 95), by retelling popular film plots in a family or informal setting (Labanyi, “The Mediation of Everyday Life” 106), or by various other forms of everyday, informal sociability that were associated with different products of contemporaneous popular culture. All these mutually informing discursive venues undeniably forged complex, interdiscursive competencies and feedback mechanisms of interpretation and
appreciation—the humor popularized by *La Codorniz*, for instance, decisively shaped the spectators’ (including the censors’) horizon of expectations, which facilitated the counter-cultural investment of the genealogically related *disparate* comedies. Furthermore, jointly considered, all these products and venues can also offer a privileged vantage point into the contemporaneous Spanish cultural history, shedding light upon the changing sociocultural, economic and political processes. A complementary analysis of all these aspects can also show an important postwar mode of oppositional self-identification through humor as well as an additional, lateral communication channel and means of solidarity between different groups. The broader interest of this thesis thus verges on how these interrelated manifestations of humor were instrumental in the creation and consolidation of an alternative public sphere or of what the film and cultural critic Rick Altman names “constellated” or “genre communities” (*Film/ Genre* 160-61). Such communities tend to be united by specific consumption habits, that is, by similar styles, language, conduct, cultural products (e.g., screwball and *disparate* comedies), and shared experiences, which can easily become even more cohesive in a totalitarian regime like the Francoist one, where oppositional groups have a much stronger sense of self-definition—both together as a group and against other groups.
Chapter I. Love and discipline:

Alternative role models in the Spanish screwball comedy

Screwball comedy is a yet ignored cinematic genre in Spanish cultural studies, even if it seems to have been quite important in Spain between 1939 and 1946, judging by the considerable number of movies (i.e., almost twenty eight) of that age that can be ascribed to this discursive type. This number represents almost half of the total number of films that CIFESA, the main producing company for this genre, would normally produce at the time during these years (Pozo Arenas 54). While it is true that several studies mentioned the importance of comedy in the first half of the 1940s (e.g., Román Gubern, Áurea Ortiz, Steven Marsh, José Luis Castro de Paz), none acknowledges an existing corpus of screwball comedies and much less analyzes its discursive peculiarities, which stem from a fertile hybridization of Hollywood screwball comedy (a mixture, in its turn, of various comic traditions) with the cosmopolitan Spanish revue, the popular novela rosa, a versatile theatrical comedy (e.g., alta comedia, astrakán etc.), and género chico (at a time when the sainete was already in decline on the Spanish stages). Several Spanish film historians (especially Santos Zunzunegui and Julio Pérez Perucha) have laudably insisted on the general imprint of the castizo theatrical discourses on the Spanish cinema of the age, yet their passionate arguments have often taken a somewhat nationalist tinge, seeking to dismiss the weight of any foreign discourses on the Spanish cinema, a battle of national cultural legitimacy to which this and the subsequent chapter will return in more detail.

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1 Some mention, in passing, occasional borrowings from various screwball directors’ general stylistical elements (e.g., happy endings “in Capra’s style”, sophisticated dialogs “in Lubitsch’s style”, female characters as in Howard Hawks’ movies etc.), yet this implicit auteurist approach precludes a focus on the actual screwball genre elements and relations (i.e., a semantic/ syntactic/ pragmatic genre analysis, in Rick Altman’s view) and, when a generic reference is occasionally made, it tends to be in general terms (e.g., “sophisticated comedy”, “comedy of manners” etc.).
Both the contentious attempts to circumscribe the appeal of Spanish comedy in general to sheer autochthonous cultural forms and the surprising lack of research on Spanish screwball comedy, despite its production importance and documented popularity, seem to be consistent with a more general condescension and, at best, disinterest in the kind of interdisciplinary genre analysis mentioned in the Introduction of this dissertation.

In some cases (e.g., Román Gubern, Áurea Ortiz, Diego Galán), the dismissive attitude towards genre analysis is coupled with a leftist indictment of the alleged reactionary and escapist tendencies of the Spanish postwar comedy, seen as oscillating in between a commercial reproduction of the disdained Hollywood “entertainment genres” (mainly comedy and melodrama) and an ideological mouthpiece of a monolithically envisioned Spanish cinema and regime. As such, postwar comedies are explicitly or implicitly opposed to the loftily construed standard of prewar (i.e., Republican) and postwar “art” or “auteur” films.¹ Such construction of an academic and national canon focused only on few privileged films (usually by dissident intellectuals) at the expense of all other cinematic productions of the time. These other “low culture” movies, most of which are barely known by most Spanish film historians and critics, have been considered propagandistic and reactionary, or, especially in the case of post-war comedies, as inane and stultifying mass entertainment, indirectly advancing the political agenda of the Francoist regime. As previously noted in the Introduction, this critical attitude is rooted in the 1950s dissident leftist circles and was consolidated in the anti-Francoist intellectual struggles of the 1970s, marked by Althusserian approaches to cinema and mass culture, a cultural trend that was quite widespread in the Western academia of the age as well.

¹ These auteur/ art movies would bear the cultural distinction of Bardem’s or Saura’s directorial signatures, for instance, and would allegedly emerge only with Spanish Neorealism.
Fortunately, since the 1990s there have been many revisionist accounts of Spanish cinema (e.g., Jo Labanyi, Steven Marsh, José Luis Castro de Paz, Annabel Martín, Eva María Woods Peiró, Santos Zunzunegui, Julio Pérez Perucha), felicitously paralleling María Francisca Vilches de Frutos’ and Dru Dougherty’s reception studies of the prewar Madrid stage (an ongoing research project discussed in *La escena madrileña entre 1900 y 1936*). As mentioned before, these historicized analyses are contemporaneous to a more general revisionist, historicized take on film studies in general, and also to a more and more widespread interest in film and theatre spectatorship. The focus on audiences has fruitfully enabled the study of cinema and theatre as deeply entrenched in the sociocultural discourses and practices of everyday life and, as such, of cinema and theatre as essential fabrics in the creation of subjectivities and communities.

The above-mentioned revisionist accounts of Spanish cinema are greatly indebted to some 1980s pioneering monographic works, in most cases coordinated by Julio Pérez Perucha and devoted to several postwar Spanish directors (e.g., Luis Marquina, Edgar Neville). Even if the 1990s revisionist studies insightfully strove to move beyond previous simplistic ideological interpretations of the filmic and cultural production of the early Francoist period, actual interdisciplinary genre analyses are scarce and, if any, they are devoted to melodrama (i.e., Annabel Martín). Most investigations are Gramscian, in the case of scholars formed in the British and American school of cultural studies (e.g., Jo Labanyi, Annabel Martín, Steven Marsh, Steven Marsh,

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1 The studies coordinated by Julio Pérez Perucha were, in most cases, the proceedings of the symposia organized to pay tribute to unjustly forgotten Spanish postwar directors. These symposia would take place during the Festivals of Mediterranean Cinema in Valencia.
Eva María Woods), or semiotic, with psychoanalytical touches, in the case of Spanish film historians (e.g., José Luis Castro de Paz, Santos Zunzunegui, Julio Pérez Perucha).¹

As far as the actual Spanish cinematic production after the Civil War is concerned, it mainly consisted of comedies (e.g., screwball, folkloric) and melodramas (especially rural, folkloric and religious), being very similar to the prewar Republican output, even if the generally conservative elements of postwar movies, especially in the end, understandably seemed more oppressive than before the Civil War (Fanés 154-55). As Jo Labanyi lucidly remarks, referring to the findings of her coordinated project on an oral history of postwar cinema-going, “cinema provided a cultural continuity between pre-war and post-war periods” (“Romancing the Early Franco Regime” 66), and not a dramatic rupture, as many entrenched idealized beliefs of the Spanish Republic would have it. Judging by the brief abstracts and general references that have been consulted (e.g., in Guía del cine español, Catálogo del cine español: Films de ficción 1931-1940, “La novela cinematográfica” or Antología crítica del cine español), there are significant screwball elements, for instance, also in some comedies produced before or at the very beginning of the Civil War (e.g., Diez días millonaria, La linda Beatriz, Julieta y Romeo), many of which were unfortunately partially or completely destroyed or lost during the conflict.² In spite of such isolated examples, the Spanish screwball comedy seems to have unsurprisingly flourished after the Civil War, especially between 1942 and 1944, for reasons that will be later analyzed in more

¹ Of particular interest for the study of Spanish film comedy after the Civil War is Steven Marsh’s pioneering study, Popular Spanish Film Under Franco: Comedy and the Weakening of the State, already mentioned in the Introduction. This book does not deal, however, with any screwball comedy, only with some of the comedies that will be analyzed in the second chapter, hence the absence of its assessment in the succinct critical revision of bibliography on Spanish screwball comedy.

² It is very tempting to include such comedies in the corpus of screwball comedies, yet, for those I could not personally see or not in a satisfactory length, I can, of course, only venture the hypothesis that they should be included — they are part of the estimated total number of screwball comedies that was initially mentioned. The analysis of the first chapter includes only integral movies that I actually saw, the only debatable exception being Un ladrón de guante blanco, whose version in the Filmoteca Nacional from Madrid has some brief missing parts. However, those parts were neither long nor divergent enough (judging by the references to this film in Antología crítica del cine español) to preclude its analysis and inclusion in the corpus of Spanish screwball comedies.
detail. Several elements of the screwball discourse (e.g., fast-talking women, witty dialogs, zany courtship or marriage) have also hybridized another peculiar contemporaneous Spanish comedy, that of disparate, which will be dwelt upon in the second chapter. While these two types of comedy have many common characteristics and even have overlapping years of production in some cases, their syntax is different. The main difference between them seems to lie in the role ascribed to romance in structuring the movie plot: while screwball focuses on romance (of commitment or reaffirmation, as we shall soon see), the disparate always places the love story in the background, in a secondary position, not as the converging axis of all film elements.

In order to better understand the specific sociocultural reinscription of screwball comedy in Spain, we must first focus on the distinctive features of the originating Hollywood screwball discourse and on the many intricate cultural issues it raises.

**Hollywood screwball, gender politics and the reinvention of romance**

Screwball comedy, often considered a subgenre of romantic comedy, appears and flourishes in the United States between 1934 and 1943, leaving traces of its peculiar humorous register even on later comedies. Even if many directors and producers employ the screwball genre during this period, it has become institutionalized mainly in association with Frank Capra (It Happened One Night (1934, 1934), Meet John Doe (1941, 1948), Mr. Smith Goes to

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1 The ending of the Second World War is generally considered to mark the closure of the Hollywood screwball genre and the subsequent appearance of a different, more conservative take on romance, marriage, family, and gender roles. The screwball elements that occasionally appear in comedies from the second half of the 1940s tend to be ascribed, through a somewhat auteurist perspective, to a stylistical continuity predicated on the presence of directors previously associated with the heyday of screwball comedy (i.e., Capra, Hawks and Lubitsch). A different sociohistorical context and, consequently, changed reception circumstances would seem to point, however, to mere vestiges incorporated into an overall different field of meaning. As Rick Altman would argue, a given semantic element may recall a particular syntax (e.g., screwball) and subsequent genre expectations, with which it was traditionally associated in other films, but these involuntary generic associations cannot warrant a conflation of historically distinct genres.
Washington (1939, 1949), You Can’t Take It with You (1938, 1940), Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936, 1940), the first movie being considered the inaugurating film of the screwball series),

Howard Hawks (Bringing Up Baby (1938, 1941), Ball of Fire (1941, 1944), His Girl Friday (1940, 1943, 1944), Twentieth Century (1934), and Ernst Lubitsch (Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife (1938, 1942), That Uncertain Feeling (1941), Heaven Can Wait (1943, 1951).

Judging by contemporaneous movie reviews in Spanish film magazines such as Primer Plano, Dígame, Cámara o Radiocinema, these distinct Hollywood comedies were successfully shown in Spain as well, even if most of them were released with an understandable delay. They were actually so popular that the storylines of some of them (e.g., Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife) also appeared in the bestselling “Biblioteca de cine Rialto”, initiated in 1942 and associated with the movies produced or distributed by the company CIFESA (Díez Puertas Historia social del cine en España 342-44). The phenomenon of “novelas cinematográficas” in both prewar and postwar Spain indirectly testifies to the popularity of the screwball discourse (both Hollywood and autochthonous) and it also represents an important source of information for the plots of both the Hollywood films screened in Spain and for the Spanish movies that are completely or only partially lost at the moment. Of particular interest is, of course, the latter aspect, in so far as missing Spanish screwball comedies are concerned: a review of these special collections can help us formulate more accurate hypotheses about the wider corpus of Spanish screwball

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1 Wes Gehring is among the critics who considers all above-mentioned Capra movies (except It Happened One Night) populist comedies and not screwball (see Populism and the Capra Legacy and the analysis of populist comedy in The World of Comedy – Five Takes on Funny). Even if there are numerous populist elements in these films, their main structure (centered on the establishment of the main couple), type of humor and of heroine ascribe these comedies to the screwball register, which will be further analyzed.

2 Whenever there are two years in parenthesis after the title of a movie, the first one refers to its release in the United States and the last one to its release in Spain. In the case of His Girl Friday, 1943 was its release year in Barcelona and 1944 in Madrid. While there is no release date available for Spain in the case of Twentieth Century, the International Movie Database website gives a translation title for Spain, La comedia de la vida. It is interesting to see that the screwball comedies Meet John Doe and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, which are also considered populist comedies, only emerged in Spain towards the end of the 1940s, when the screwball cycle was already extinct, which might explain while there is no populist strand in the Spanish screwball comedy.
comedies and of their local cinematic antecedents, a task that exceeds, however, the limited framework of this thesis.

Returning to the debate mentioned in the previous paragraph, as to whether screwball is a genre or a subgenre, the current research project considers it an independent, well-defined genre, set in a specific sociohistorical context, which has managed to make the public aware of a particular generic structure, an awareness that parallels a set of concrete audience expectations, which are part of the process of forging the meaning and its sociocultural importance. Following Rick Altman’s compelling theorization of genre formation, mentioned in the Introduction, screwball seems to have gone from an initial “add-on”, “adjectival” category (i.e., adding, among other things, a specific, “zany” element of humor to the traditional genre of romantic comedy)\(^1\) to a new “stand-alone substantival” status, which is meaningfully used on its own, without a different noun on which it could depend (i.e., one can now easily refer to this genre only as ‘screwball’, without having to add the generic noun ‘comedy’). On the other hand, before proceeding to a review of this important Hollywood comic genre, it is important to point out here that numerous scholars (e.g., Gehring, Schatz, Henderson, Harvey) have had serious difficulties in defining screwball, despite acknowledging it as a recognizable Hollywood product of the classical era.

According to Kristine Brunovska Karnick (125-26), even if most of its defining elements were already common from popular fiction, vaudeville, or earlier romantic films, the term “screwball” was apparently codified only in the mid-1930s, being already in wide usage in 1936. Initially, it was a journalist’s term to refer to the “rampaging heroine” of *My Man Godfrey* and it eventually came to refer to a fast-paced and witty comic style, associated with the American

\(^1\) Previously inflected by the flapper and remarriage comedy of the 1920s, for instance, from which screwball develops some important elements, to which this chapter will soon come back.
leisure class and with “a paradoxical kind of liberation, with romantic exaltation of a very down-
to-earth kind.” (Harvey xi-xii) Wes Gehring (Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy 9) also mentions
some of the origins of the label “screwball”, associated, in his opinion, with “to have a screw
loose” or “to become screwy” (i.e., drunk). Prior to its application in the cinematic domain,
“screwball” was employed in baseball, referring to “an oddball player” and/ or “any pitched ball
that moves in an unusual or unexpected way”, that is, to an erratic, strange and unpredictable
behavior, which seems to dominate this kind of comedy. Oxford English Dictionary relegates its
first entry of “screwball” to cricket or baseball, where it is associated with a ball “bowled or
pitched with a reverse spin against the natural curve”, and its second entry to a “fast, irreverent”
American comedy of the 1930s, with “eccentric” characters”. In addition, “screwball” is (still)
considered to belong to the American slang and, as such, it refers to somebody or something
“eccentric or whimsically eccentric”, “odd”, “zany”, a secondary meaning that entered American
English around 1933, according to the 2010 Online Etymology Dictionary.¹

The Hollywood screwball emerges in the bleak context of the Great Depression, whose
imprint is not immediately apparent in the generally lavish, carefree setting of these comedies,
combining typically slapstick situations and character traits with the growth or reconstruction of
a seemingly unconventional romance for that age: the man is often passive and dominated by an
eccentric woman, who boldly initiates and leads the courtship process, often triangular. The fast
and witty dialog, full of erotically charged verbal and physical skirmishes, is an undeniable
identity mark of screwball and seems to be a substitute, to a certain extent, for more obvious
displays of sexual tension, strictly prohibited in the Hollywood productions after 1934 and the

¹ It is actually interesting to note that there was an attested widespread slang usage of “screwball” referring to
persons or actions around 1933, which is the period that also marked the emergence of screwball comedy with It
Happened One Night, released at the beginning of 1934 in the USA (and, for the record, soon afterwards in Spain, in
Barcelona, that is, in October of the same year).
introduction of the so-called Hays Code. Several in-depth studies of screwball comedy (e.g., Ed Sikov, Andrew Sarris, Jane M. Greene, Andrea Campbell) actually link the emergence of screwball not only to the rise of the sound motion pictures and the subsequent newly discovered pleasure of speech, but also to the censorship system regulating all Hollywood productions of the time. A brief overview of the existing literature on Hollywood’s response to censorship at that time can shed a better light also on the intricate relations and negotiations between postwar censorship and the Spanish film industry, which will be later discussed.

While censorship was rigorously codified since 1934, it was an important presence in the American film industry before as well (e.g., the compulsory submission of scripts to approval since 1931). 1934 merely marks the creation of an official censorship agency inside the industrial structure of the studios, the Production Code Administration (PCA), popularly known as the Hays Code, named after Will H. Hays, the chief censor of the time. The main function of this code was to revise scripts and make suggestions for changes in order to avoid the potential protests of external censorship groups, of considerable political power, such as the Catholic Legion of Decency, which had their own system of film classification, depending on the moral content. One could thus easily argue that the introduction of the self-regulating PCA was a shrewd response of the Hollywood industry to the many media scandals and moral boycotts surrounding its previous movies—self-regulation was indeed a more lucrative option in the long run, obviously preferred to potential government regulation and aggressive boycotts of film screenings. Careful analyses of the suggestions appearing in the PCA reports, which sometimes led to multiple script versions, interestingly show how various members of the movie industry fruitfully cooperated to encounter subtle, creative solutions, which enabled them to release minimally offensive films in the eyes of a superficial censor. The final, “decent” versions are,
nevertheless, not deprived of piquancy, enlisting the eager spectators’ playful and ingenious complicity, especially in respect to the avatars of courtship and the double meanings of dialogs, conveniently disguised by an apparently irreproachable moral façade for the less cunning external censors. On the other hand, it is true that the redoubtable popularity of screwball comedies, linked precisely to the officially objectionable slapstick punctures of romance, the unconventional gender roles, and the racy innuendoes, was to some extent possible also by the lenience of the PCA in respect to the transgressions of their moral norms in comedies (in contrast to dramatic films). I should briefly remark that this qualified indulgence was a very astute pedagogical tool in an age when bleak economic prospects made spectators demand a maximization of their screen pleasure (cfr. Jenkins 283), a horizon of expectations that was clearly acknowledged by the Hollywood producers of the time.\footnote{This lenience is also undeniably founded on the particular status of comedy, whose transgressions are not taken seriously as a rule and whose very nature requires a licensed, institutionalized deviance from social and aesthetic propriety—as mentioned in the Introduction, comic effect is always based, in some way or another, on the awareness of an incongruity in respect to the socially and/ or aesthetically dominant conventions of decorum and verisimilitude.} While conceding this partiality to comedy during the Depression, when entertainment acquired a conspicuous social importance, it can be argued that the PCA activity is also illustrative for how censorship or “hegemonic ideology” does not repress alternative discourses, as a monolithic mindset and a somewhat oppressive Althusserian vision of ideology would sustain. As Foucault cogently argued in his History of Sexuality, prohibition rather produces or incites to discourse through its regulating mechanisms, which trigger new, creative devices to tackle problematic issues.\footnote{Ramona Curry’s article on Mae West’s performance (i.e., suggestive intonation, facial and body language) and star persona indirectly provides another brilliant example of this argument, showing how the actress could thus successfully overcome the innumerable censorship restrictions of the script. For more details, see “Goin’ to Town and Beyond: Mae West, Film Censorship and the Comedy of Unmarriage” (211-37).} From this constructive perspective and notwithstanding the differences in freedom of expression and in cordiality of communication, it can be said that, after the Spanish Civil War, there were similar...
patterns of conduct between the government-appointed ranking and censorship committees, on the one hand, and, on the other, the film industry personnel, in this case involved in the production of screwball comedies. Even in the absence of a rigorously codified censorship, these Spanish cinema professionals were not so dominated by either external or internal censorship so as to forego the tentative exploration of the fringes of freedom that the new totalitarian regime nonetheless allowed.\(^1\) This chapter will discuss in more detail, however, the situation of the postwar Spanish film industry and its relations with censorship later in this chapter, when examining the special importance of CIFESA for the screwball discourse. In addition, the actual analyses of the Spanish screwball comedies will further provide abundant examples of creative interplay with both censorship injunctions and the most trumpeted slogans of the time.

If most critics agree on the importance of the PCA system of censorship on the forging of the peculiar discourse of screwball, there is a widespread dissension about the genealogy of screwball and about the extent of its emancipatory effect. Charles Musser (282) and Geoff King (56) concur in situating the origins of screwball in the older and wider tradition of romantic comedy and/or the ‘sophisticated comedy’ (sometimes referred to as the comedy of errors and manners), particularly in the subgenre focusing on infidelity. They differ, however, on which comedic antecedent they favor: while Geoff King emphasizes both the remarriage versions of the “sophisticated comedy” of the 1920s and the lower- and middle-class “marital farces” of the Keystone studios, full of slapstick, Charles Musser underlines only the essential importance of the 1920s comedies of remarriage (a version, in his opinion, of the romantic comedy of the 1910s), as exemplified by Cecil DeMille’s directorial work. Henry Jenkins (282) also considers that screwball is rooted in the long tradition of romantic comedy, clarifying that their directors

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\(^1\) “Internal censorship” refers here to the much harped upon self-censorship, an alleged internalization of external repressive mechanisms, so powerful that it seemingly precluded “authentic” displays of creativity and of potentially subversive contents in the Spanish films produced under Franco’s rule, especially in the forties.
tended to have a background in stage farce, yet he argues that they were not linked to revues or vaudevilles but to the “legitimate theater”. However, the actual performance deployed in screwball comedies, with its strong slapstick component, makes it hard to downplay the importance of the vaudeville aesthetic. Besides, the advent of sound brought many variety performers to Hollywood in the early 1930s, who did not come only from Broadway but also from the European music hall, the cabaret, the circus, or the burlesque (King 29). These performers were initially cast in the ‘anarchistic’ comedy that especially the Marx Brothers made famous worldwide. ‘Anarchistic’ comedy was not very enduring because of declining box-office returns, exhaustion of dramatic sources, and pressures from studio heads, whose display of conservatism was consonant with the rising public distaste for the scatological content of ‘anarchistic comedies’—as Henry Jenkins aptly observes (280), Hollywood was willing to deviate from standard film structures only in so far as more daring also meant commercially successful. In so far as my research in this chapter goes, it is interesting to see how screwball comedy emerged in 1934, amid calls for a better integrated and more disciplined narrative, just as ‘anarchistic’ comedies came to an end, leaving behind undeniable formal and thematic traces.

Even after “its demise as an institution” (81), vaudeville actually had a strong impact on popular culture overall, in spite of the understandable failure of Hollywood classical cinema to assimilate (i.e., tame) the vaudeville aesthetic, initially commended for the diversity of its “atomistic spectacle” and the affective immediacy of its performance (Jenkins 24). Whereas previous variety stage successes were a model, after all, for both early silent and sound cinema, the main catalysts for the overarching influence of vaudeville on popular culture were its

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1 This theater, together with other respectable literary sources (e.g., novels and short-stories), heavily influenced silent cinema in the transitional period between 1909 and 1919 in its attempts to use prestigious, morally non-objectible models to counteract the early influence of vaudeville and thus attract a more respectable, better paying middle-class audience (Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins. “Introduction: Acting Funny” 65).
performers, who, as Henry Jenkins observes, “moved with remarkable fluidity across the many branches of the American entertainment industry” (e.g., the burlesque, the circus, the European music hall, the cabaret, the legitimate theater, and/or in silent cinema). Eager to exploit the popularity of these comic personae, already familiar to urban audiences, Hollywood, especially in its sound beginnings, heavily recruited these performers, offering them tempting contracts and the possibility of an even wider, nationwide popularity. Some well-known examples of such versatile performers, with a strong vaudeville background, include Barbara Stanwyck, Cary Grant, Irene Dunne, or Rosalind Russell, who have become associated with some of the most successful and internationally famous screwball comedies (e.g., Bringing Up Baby, His Girl Friday, Meet John Doe, My Favorite Wife, Theodora Goes Wild, The Awful Truth, Ball of Fire, The Lady Eve, The Mad Miss Manton).

Whereas the powerful imprint of the vaudeville aesthetic upon screwball was sometimes questioned, perhaps in the attempt to ascribe more cultural distinction to screwball comedy, the influence of the remarriage and the flapper comedy of the 1920s on the nature of the screwball heroine and romance is generally acknowledged. All these comedic genres are intertwined with widespread discussions in contemporary social thought and popular media (e.g., mass-market writings of sociologists and psychologists, advice literature, popular periodicals, general-interest and women’s magazines, commercial fiction and advertisement) about the institution of marriage and its perceived crisis due to statistical evidence of high divorce rates (Musser 286-90, Olsin Lent 314-20, Shumway 7-8, King 56-57). Parallel to these early twentieth-century hegemonic discourses on marriage were various radical critiques of political and economic gender inequalities as well as subsequent arduous debates on the ‘wild woman’ or the ‘new woman’, contrasted to the ‘true woman’ of Victorian times (Jenkins 248-51). Situated around points of
friction within the dominant social discourses on gender roles, fissuring under the pressure of several emergent counter-discourses, remarriage and flapper comedies in the 1920s as well as screwball in the 1930s and early 1940s implicitly pointed to the instability of social structures. These comedic genres participated in the contemporary cultural debates and negotiated the transition to a different type of femininity and of models of romance and marriage by proposing narratives that appealed to contemporary audiences and enabled them to respond and even incorporate new values in their own conceptions. The eventual acknowledgment of sexual gratification and companionate marriage as the new ideal romance, together with a new model of femininity that eroded the former Victorian cult of domesticity, permeate all the above-mentioned cinematic discourses, articulating the new middle-class expectations of complementary gender roles, enjoying each other’s company and sharing fun and play (Olsin Lent 314).

It is worth mentioning here that the earlier lower- and middle-class discourse of the vaudeville marital farces of the 1910s, strikingly similar to the Spanish revue or of the castizo perspective of the género chico tradition, also participated in the contemporary debates on the ‘new’ or ‘wild’ woman, yet their take was more clearly conservative, linking women’s increased independence to men’s would-be victimization, a clear inversion of the actual reality of most marriages of the time, where women’s power was often at the whims of their harsh husbands. More rigid ideas about rebellious women, stemming from popular comic traditions, thus “persisted as a means of explaining and controlling women who displayed any deviance from socially sanctioned feminine conduct; notions of feminine ‘disorder’ reinforced rather than contradicted the normality and desirability of ideals of feminine domesticity.” (Jenkins 249)

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1 It is interesting to mention here that the Victorian discourse of domesticity returned to Hollywood cinema after the Second World War, an age that also marked the ending of the screwball cycle.
Even if the misogynist image of the rebellious woman (especially wife) was made to justify male discipline in the popular comic tradition, the mere display of female claims for autonomy could unwillingly trigger, however, alternative models of femininity, broadening the available behavioral options within and outside marriage. As Kathleen Rowe notices (31), the public spectacle of the comic “unruly woman”, complementary to the melodramatic narrative of the victimized woman, can be disruptive and emancipatory in patriarchal societies, even if it is framed from a misogynist perspective that is consonant with a cultural politics ascribing women to “silence, withdrawal, and invisibility” (4). In this respect, the traditional restoration of male authority and domestic stability is a narrative closure demanded by generic conventions, which cannot be magically transcended to create radically new ways of envisioning social structures.

While any narrative inherently participates and works through and within the available hegemonic discourses, alternative counter-discourses can reframe it differently when it is produced and/ or put into circulation. Conservative endings do not automatically erase, therefore, the potentially subversive dangers of prior challenging representations to patriarchal authority, a point that is worth underlining and to which this discussion of Spanish screwball will return.

The companionship model of romance in screwball, often paralleled by a reversal of conventional genre relations, is greatly indebted to the 1920s flapper challenges of the traditional image of woman. In retrospective, flappers seem to have offered a consumerist, middle-class version of the more radical sexual revolution associated with the working classes and the Greenwich Village bohemians before the First World War (Olsin Lent 316-18). This commercialized reinscription of the prewar radical female dissent was, of course, more easy to assimilate with the hegemonic values of the time, as it did not challenge political and economic

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1 Some media images of this cult of consumption include “short and revealing clothing, silk stockings for everyday wear, cosmetics, cigarettes, perfume, jewelry, sweets, hairstyling and popular public entertainment” like dancing, drinking, films or amusement parks (Olsin Lent 317).
inequalities: the flappers’ “consumerist feminism” did not seem to question “the social conventions of premarital chastity, matrimony and economic dependence” (318), accepting their primary roles of wives and mothers (and not of income-earners). Their consumerist lifestyles and their behavioral changes, pointing to personal assertiveness, spontaneity, a new “fun” morality, physical freedom, and vitality, were clearly influenced by the Hollywood actresses, styles, tastes and conduct. The actresses’ public personae, which were part of the powerful Hollywood star-system of the age, undeniably participated in that alternative public sphere that Miriam Hansen, following the insights of “the other Frankfurt School”, equated with an inclusive, everyday social horizon of experience that tends to be obliterated from the dominant public sphere, institutionalized and exclusive.

The flappers’ more egalitarian relationship with men, seen as partners, was paralleled by contemporary advertising, whose images featured a couple having fun together, even cooperating in work (e.g., as detectives or journalists). The sense of equality and adventure in flapper comedies was tinged with a more overt display of sexual tension than in the 1930s screwball, which had to minimize the weight of sexuality due to the PCA restrictions.¹ Drawing again on Foucault’s reconceptualization of censorship, conservative endings in both genres of comedy, namely the eventual subordination of the flappers’ career ambitions to those of their husbands (with whom they were not encouraged to compete), might have also been “incited to discourse” as a means of astutely bypassing censorship restrictions while offering their spectators abundant prior racy material. This decorous type of closure, together with the use of the comic register as a means of moral indictment of the female protagonist’s performative excess and modernity, could

¹ Also missing from screwball comedies was the occasional marriage of interest, depicting the flapper heroines as intellectually superior to their partners, whose weakness and inefficiency were “compensated” by social and economic power (Olsin Lent 320). It was, of course, a gender discrepancy that could not be particularly successful in the age of screwball, a time marked by Depression, as we shall later see.
publicly defend the moral “exemplarity” of both the flapper and the screwball comedy. Both the conservative ending and the distancing irony that condemns the heroine’s “frivolous”, “vain”, “silly”, “artificial”, “irrational” or “childish” way of being (to give some of the most common descriptive phrases, which appeared in popular media) thus ingeniously allow the deployment of various elements of playful piquancy, related to a more or less overt sexual tension, to the eccentricity of the heroine, the courtship, and the romance. These comedies thus undeniably appealed to the spectators’ voyeuristic pleasure (i.e., watching the inner workings of other people’s romance and marriage) and triggered their gratifying, albeit vicarious, transgression of public codes of conduct. By trying to balance the audiences’ “guilty pleasures” and the eventual reassertion of the hegemonic gender norms, these comedic discourses seem to be built upon a tension that points not only to a probable concession to censorship but also to a hallmark of all comedy, namely the oscillation and impossible resolution between the subversion and the reaffirmation of hegemonic values. No comedy is indeed inherently “progressive” or “reactionary” (to quote some of the most often labels applied to films in general and to comedy in particular)—the actual reception depends on specific audiences, their expectations and assumptions, as well as on numerous other sociocultural factors (e.g., censorship rules, marketing, programming etc.). At the same time, it is true that comedy (and cinema in general) always participates in the resettling of discursive boundaries, as it both articulates and produces a vast array of possible relations to its age: by putting forth comic incongruities to some historically specific hegemonic norms, these cinematic discourses inherently make available both the shaping power of these norms (e.g., the politics of gender representation) and their points of comedic rupture.¹

¹ Not all comic representations are equally charged, however, as Geoff King judiciously observes (144): when major structural inequalities exist, as it was the case of autarchic Spain, comical punishment along gender lines (paralleling
Comedy’s impressive ability to open up debates of socially charged topics is also evident in another undeniable antecedent of screwball, the so-called “remarriage comedies” of the 1920s, generally associated with Cecil DeMille’s directorial work. These comedies ambiguously address one of the burning problems of that age, divorce, and the subsequent crisis of marriage and of traditional gender roles. According to Charles Musser (289), DeMille’s first take on divorce, paralleling most contemporary moralists’ misogynist outcries, chooses to blame women for the “social degeneration” triggered by the new liberalized laws on marriage: by working outside the house and deserting their traditional domestic “duties”, women are portrayed as immature and oblivious of their “morally superior” roles. Their extramarital relationships appear motivated also by their husbands’ emotional neglect and economic inefficiency in providing the necessary income for their wives’ consumerist sprees. Female consumerism per se is not indicted, however, especially in DeMille’s later comedies, which no longer vilify divorce but lifeless marriages, a change of attitude adjusted to the increasing social acceptance of divorce. Marriage now becomes an issue of personal compatibility and growth, yet the comedic narrative and its implicit sentimental counsel continue to be addressed primarily to women, who are the ones to blame or need to adapt themselves to “hold their man” in the new, competitive society (290-91). Women are thus encouraged to “display and commodify” their bodies, disregarding former “prudish” conventions (312), in order to retain and enhance their sensuality and attractiveness, which are deemed as important as a “girlish personality”. On the other hand, the husbands’ most common faults are rigidity and self-centeredness, which are eventually overcome by the end of the comedy in the effort to foster a companionate marriage (296). Masculine flaws

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an already existing sociopolitical and economic oppression) cannot but contribute to an endorsement of such profound disparities and, consequently, to a more acute sense of oppression. Yet even in these politically unjust circumstances, the foolish or grotesque departures from norms can trigger criticism of the standards from which the (especially female) characters depart. This possibility of critique is undeniably enhanced by the oblique politicized reading that cultural products tend to trigger under a dictatorship.
are portrayed as endearing for women, who appear moved by men’s attempts to change. The only negative masculine characters are conveniently ascribed to the protagonists’ rivals, a kind of “male vampires” whose stock, unchanged personality makes them use the same seducing rhetoric with all their victims. Other interesting male figures are of a lower-class origin and are engaged in farcical marriages that parody the main couple and its problems (291). The lower-class type of matrimony seems to derive from some popular marital farces of the early twentieth century, a subgenre of the slapstick comedies of the Keystone studios.

Most character types present in remarriage comedies reappear in many screwball comedies, even if under a less objectionable moral guise for the PCA censors (e.g., consummated adultery is no longer visible or alluded to in the screwball of reaffirmation, focused on married couples). Other conspicuous traits of remarriage comedies that resurface in screwball are the protagonists’ (and especially the woman’s) zany, excessive behavior and the leisure, upper-class setting, whose lavish, erotic connotations serve both to enhance desire (Shumway 13) and to displace the social and economic anxieties triggered by the Great Depression. Declining financial resources seemed to have made marriage and family the preferred ambience of “social interaction, emotional support and entertainment” (Olsin Lent 315), shrewdly downplaying the importance of money and social status while highlighting the need for compensatory mutual growth through a reinvention of romance and a change of gender roles. One of the partners (usually the woman) often belongs to the upper class, while the other (mostly the male) to the middle or working class. In such cases, wealth is associated with female eccentricity and extraordinary vitality, while middle class work ethic (particularly appealing in an age

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1 Kristine Brunovska Karnick identifies two major types of screwball romance: screwball of commitment, dealing with the establishment of the central couple and ending in marriage or promise of marriage, and screwball of reaffirmation, focusing on the re-establishment of the main couple, initially separated, and ending in remarriage or promise of remarriage (“Commitment and Reaffirmation in Hollywood Romantic Comedy” 131).
overshadowed by Depression) tends to be ascribed to the male protagonist, who will eventually succeed in making the upper class heroine realize the shallowness of a vain, parasitic life, correlated with inherited wealth. The inter-class, companionate and playful relationship and eventual marriage (in the case of screwball commitment comedies) attempts to give a particular account of the necessary balance between personal and professional life and of the corresponding sacrifices that each partner needs to make: while the woman often has to leave behind a leisurely, parasitic and vain life of (inherited) wealth, the man learns to overcome his obsession with professional and/or social advancement, a fixation that is often coupled with emotional and sexual coldness.¹ There are few screwball commitment (e.g., Meet John Doe, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town) and remarriage comedies (e.g., His Girl Friday, The Twentieth Century) where it is the woman’s, and not the man’s, strong desire for a career that stands in the way of a mutually gratifying companionate relationship and, as a result, she either gives up her job in the end or learns the value of cooperating with her husband, instead of competing with him.

Most obstacles and solutions to the new type of romance that screwball puts forth must have been familiar to the audiences exposed to the 1920s flapper and remarriage comedies or to the comic portrayal of marital combat in ‘anarchistic’ and early slapstick comedies. In addition, the eventual reassertion of the screwball hero’s central financial role within the relationship or family (through the female protagonist’s rejection of her upper class milieu, of her competitive stance, or even of her job altogether) had a peculiar appeal to male spectators during the age of Depression, which witnessed men’s increasing dependence upon their wives for additional or

¹ Most screwball reaffirmation comedies were made after the peak of commitment screwball, by late 1930s and early 1940s, focusing on the loss or perversion of the commitment couple’s romantic ideals and a subsequent return to the tension between the personal and professional spheres, where (usually male) obsession with career is paralleled by emotional coldness (Brunovska Karnick “Commitment and Reaffirmation in Hollywood Romantic Comedy” 136).
even primary family income. This masculine failure to fulfill the “traditional breadwinner’s role” unsurprisingly led to important shifts of authority within the family, coupled with “feelings of lost potency and ambition” (Jenkins 255), for which screwball comedy could provide an eventual compensatory, soothing perspective. On the other hand, the consolidation of a comic urban antihero, constantly frustrated and misfit to his social setting, absent-minded and immature for marriage (Gehring Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy 29), most often incapable of seeing the ploys of the woman-led courtship, frequently humiliated by a strong and eccentric heroine, gave a twisted image of the actual gender models of the time: the comedic reversal of traditional roles could trigger, to some extent, a disquieting laughter in the male spectators of the age, forced to indirectly confront their fears and frustrations in respect to women’s changed social roles and to their own dwindling financial protagonism and subsequent self-esteem. It is rather the peculiar screwball heroine, even when she comes from a wealthy background, and not the male protagonist, who often seems to adapt better to difficult socioeconomic circumstances. As such, these emancipating female models may be understood in connection not only with the fast pace of modern life or the social relief that marked the end of Prohibition, but also with an entrenched discourse of American individualism and of self-reliance, unsurprisingly flourishing during the period of Depression (DiBattista 38). Besides these cultural reinscriptions, the portrayal of a woman that is neither vamp nor the Victorian domestic angel but witty and energetic in her pursuit of personal fulfillment can be seen as both a masculine projection of the ideal women companion and a feminine self-creation, both subject to contemporary sociocultural discourses. These “fast-talking dames”, as Maria DiBattista called them, appear to have discovered the pleasure of speech, both playful and liberating, using language not only for the confirmation of desire, but also for its forging. Unable to stand still, the screwball heroines are quite distanced
from the traditional passive image of the female heroine as a mere object of erotic gaze, which was almost ubiquitous in silent cinema: with the advent of sound, female screwball stars triggered a change of camera focus from their face to their mouths, which goes beyond a mere concession to stricter censorship rules to also point to the new leading role of the human voice, both playful and erotic (DiBattista 16).

If melodrama prioritizes visual and gestural excess, screwball comedy is built upon verbal excess, which frequently accompanies farcical situations coming from the slapstick vaudeville tradition. Slapstick and romance are very difficult to integrate, however, as violent comic actions look incompatible both with dignity and narrative comedy (Neale and Krutnik 25): no romance or its protagonists can be taken seriously when engaged in ‘low’ forms of farce, while the short, self-contained characteristic of slapstick, a form of visual gag, cannot be contained by a linear romantic plot structure seeking to establish or reestablish the main couple. The peculiar screwball narrative can, however, accommodate slapstick to a certain extent and ascribe it a playful, adventurous aura: the protagonists have fun together and share a sense of adventure reminiscent of a certain carefree time of childhood, opposed to the adult word of duty, in the best tradition of comedian comedy, which should not make us overlook, nevertheless, the interested minimization of contemporary socioeconomic circumstances that shape these playful protagonists’ personalities and available trajectories. Slapstick is also charged with oblique sexual connotations, which could felicitously eschew the PCA restrictions while allowing the couple to rechannel their erotic tension towards other physical forms of manifestation, publicly uncensored, albeit frowned upon. The astute combination of slapstick, fast talk, and romance also accounts for the constant play between identification and distanciation that screwball triggers: unlike the more polite smiles occasionally elicited by traditional romantic comedy, the
reiterated screwball laughter disrupts a potentially more passive consumptions of the aesthetic and sociocultural conventions both articulated and interrogated in the comedies.

The parodic excess of the “unruly woman” in particular, whose performance and masquerade challenges and disrupts traditional gender conventions, may have come from the older tradition of marital farces, which associated “fast talks and loose morals” (DiBattista 10), yet this older misogynist stock figure of heroine, who dominated her male companion, is positively reinscribed in screwball comedy, despite the fact that she is still subject to a disciplinary discourse through her eventual marriage or remarriage. Even before this conservative closure, when the heroine is more or less equal to the male protagonist in socioeconomic status, she seems to change more than he does: as mentioned before, she grows to learn the value of cooperation with her parental, nurturing partner, who appears wiser and strong enough to protect the woman from her own “infatuation” with career (not devoid of occasional incompetence, less than innocently highlighted), which precludes her from seeing her “authentic” happiness in a companionate union. When the female lead is wealthier than her partner, her final renunciation of her leisurely, vain existence is the conclusion of a kind of Bildung process paralleling the romance, which can be equated to her conversion to the hero’s middle class values and manners. Such change of mind usually accompanies the female protagonist’s reconciliation with her father, whose approval of the relationship endorses the “necessary taming” process that his future son-in-law has accomplished.¹ This patriarchal sanctioning of the successful Pygmalion’s feat implicitly ratifies the “spoiled” heroine’s personal choice as it eventually “reforms” (however different from conventional gender roles) her

¹ As Tina Olsin Lent observes in her note 10 (399), the director Frank Capra, for instance, admitted the influence of the narrative paradigm of Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew for his screwball comedy of 1934, It Happened One Night, whose incredible popularity is considered to have triggered the industrial interest and consolidation of the screwball cycle.
previously “ungovernable” behavior. This symbolic paternal approval, together with the conspicuous absence of the woman’s mother, the indictment and/ or ridiculing of her lax education, might trigger the impression that the screwball female protagonist is actually made by men (i.e., her father and then her partner). The changes that she triggers in her partner (e.g., the overcoming of his emotional and sexual coldness, coupled with an excessive dedication to profession) are often downplayed by screwball researchers, who tend to see her as a mere catalyst for his maturity and better social integration. The parallel devaluation of her performance and masquerade as well as of the original type of romance and relationship the screwball couple is engaged in, focus too much on the domesticating closure and on the displacement of social issues (e.g., class differences) onto gender through the sentimental conclusion of the irrelevance of social status. Such overemphasis of conservative endings ignores the importance of prior alternative discourses or of subversive slapstick moments and also tends to forget the fact that more radical changes in cinema need to be paralleled by larger changes in the culture: the institution of marriage could not just be dismissed at the time, for instance, so a transformation of its structure was instead put forth, a metamorphosis whose problems were intricately articulated and negotiated in screwball comedy.

More egalitarian than in the past, the real-life relationships of the 1930s were still based on “separate subcultures” (Olsin Lent 330-31): despite social changes that granted women more professional roles, married women of the time tended to see themselves in a secondary position, while female high school graduates, belonging to the new youth culture, seemed to prefer to work rather than marry, a preference attributed to the cultural impact of Hollywood movies. Like other products of contemporary popular culture, screwball comedies reinforced new expectations for love and marriage that had great difficulty of actual embodiment. These comedic
representations of playful, companionate relationships, in which mutual physical attraction and emotional fulfillment were essential, contributed, nevertheless, to the gradual redefinition of gender relations, helping to sanction and naturalize such beliefs until they reached social dominance later.

Quite different was the picture in post-Civil War Spain, where the redefinition of gender roles and romance took place along contrary lines, which can better explain both the stronger disciplinary inflection of the screwball discourse in Spanish cinema and the more subversive aspect of its rebellious protagonists, especially female.

“La deliciosa intrascendencia” in an autarkic setting: Postwar continuities and alternative role models

It is quite daunting to understand the complex network of reasons that made the Spanish screwball comedy such a popular film genre, whose subversive role models, even if less daring than in Hollywood screwball comedies, nonetheless provided alternative perspectives that could not be muffled by exemplary disciplinary closures or by the less sparkling movie protagonists and their occasionally awkward banter and body language. A close analysis of several contemporary periodicals (e.g., ABC, Dígame, Triunfo) and of the main film magazines of the age (e.g., Primer Plano, Cámara, Radiocinema), especially of their movie review and editorial sections, seems to point to an unmistakable awareness of the subversive dangers associated to screwball, both Hollywood and autochthonous. Disparagingly labeled as “americanadas” and harshly vituperated for their “frivolity” and “intrascendencia”, screwball comedies were acknowledged sources of youth “corruption” through their alternative role models in language,
fashion, and manners.\(^1\) One of the main dangers of these comedies, linked to a feared “American way of life”, was the perceived female rebellion against traditional domesticity, coupled with her politically problematic excess and insistence on self-government. Equally pernicious seemed a light, nonchalant take on romance, marriage, family, and life in general, which triggered the assignation of the customary label of “intrascendencia” to screwball comedy, a tag that pointed to the subversive potential of these movies, in stark contrast to what was publicly endorsed as a praiseworthy Spanish cinema.\(^2\) As Carmen Martín Gaite perceptively remarked, when talking about the alluring qualities of screwball comedy in postwar Spain (81-82),\(^3\) these films appealed to the younger generations in particular because they seemed to promote a carefree, frivolous existence, devoid of stern calls to responsibility and duty, inviting rather to a happy, extravagant enjoyment of earthly life in a luxurious setting, which provided a refreshing difference from the grim ambience of autarkic Spain. Some of the screwball comedies recalled by Martín Gaite were actually appealing through their very titles, whose Spanish versions were, for example: El placer de vivir, (i.e., Mr. Deeds Goes to Town), Vive Como Quieras (i.e., You Can’t Take It With You), Lo mejor de la vida (i.e., It’s a Wonderful Life), Vivir para gozar (i.e., Holiday).

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\(^1\) According to Carmen Martín Gaite (133-34), several Spanish advice columnists and movie reviewers denounced even the seemingly innocent loose hair that Veronica Lake iconically displayed in the Hollywood screwball comedy I Married a Witch. Her “sloppy” outlook was considered both problematically impractical for household chores and morally pernicious, as it was associated with the disquieting “modern woman” image (e.g., extravagant, frivolous, erotically teasing and, above all, full of initiative in respect to men), most probably recalling the “decadent” Republican times as well.

\(^2\) The official film magazine Primer Plano, for instance, funded at the end of 1940 with a pedagogical aim, was constantly harping in this period upon the political and moral necessity of a “serious” cinema, in consonance with Spain’s “new dawn” after the Civil War. Some of the actual movies that were unsurprisingly lauded and given as uplifting models to follow were Raza, La aldea maldita, ¡Harka!, ¡A mi la Legión! as well as many other films belonging to the cycle of “cine de cruzada”. This cycle generally consisted of resignified Hollywood melodramas that gave a triumphant account of individual subordination and self-sacrifice (personal romantic ties included) to a heroic cause, usually associated with the Nationalist values in the Civil War. This extoled melodramatic strain of Spanish cinema represented a trivial amount, however, compared to the contemporary Spanish output of popular movies, mostly comedies.

\(^3\) She does not actually refer to these films as screwball comedies, but as “comedias intrascendentes”, “románticas”, or “sofisticadas” (when not as “americanadas”, ironically borrowing a common contemporaneous label), yet her reference to their titles, directors, or topics enabled my understanding of her mentions as screwball.
Particularly seductive was the playful, insouciant appearance of love and romance (83), taken less seriously and subject to change, a seeming trivialization whose corrosive effects on the officially endorsed institutions of marriage and family did not remain unnoticed by politically compliant film reviewers, judging by their repeated harsh indictments of such potentially subversive screwball attitudes. Alfonso Sánchez’ angry editorial on the “dangers of the cinematic spectacle”, which appeared in Primer Plano in 1941, thus decries the Spanish spectators’ subjection to “sugestiones perturbadores, la mayoría falsas, capaces de provocar deformes actitudes mentales o anormales estados de emoción, que puedan tener peligrosas derivaciones. Porque el público cree en las imagines”. The alarmed editorialist seems particularly concerned about the audiences’ potential loss of their “most intimate convictions” through exposure to complex plots and an “absurd, accommodating ethics”, which might surreptitiously deny “the most authentic human values” under the guise of a “moralizing, Christian ending” or of a “false […] love of freedom”. This stern condescending attitude, which treats the Spanish postwar audiences as if they were innocent, vulnerable children that need constant parental supervision, seems particularly disheartened in front of the seductive power of cinema in respect to romance, whose glamorous Hollywood image can undermine the sanctioned appreciation of a “true”, “spiritual”, even sacrificial love or of (traditional) marriage as an alluring haven. The women’s magazine Medina, a weekly publication of the Falangist Sección Femenina, also recurrently features articles about the moral dangers of Hollywood cinema in respect to its modern, emancipated manners, gender roles and romance models, a criticism that is paralleled by negative didactic indictments of many American screwball comedies and of their assertive heroines. In contrast, the magazine repeatedly exalts a model of passive femininity (i.e., “la mujer que nos espera pasiva, dulce, detrás de una cortina, junto a sus labores y rezos”), in need
of male protection of any contact with “lo impuro y lo externo” (see, for instance, “Destino de la mujer falangista”, published in 1941). The subversive consolidation of an alternative public sphere in postwar Spain, through repeated exposures to foreign or foreign-influenced models of conduct, understandably triggers a resolute hegemonic counterstrategy, which cannot be reduced only to the “severe preventive labor” of censorship, as is judiciously acknowledged that censorship cannot completely avoid an “erroneous interpretation” on the spectators’ part.

Alfonso Sánchez argues, for instance, in favor of a consistent, “well-reasoned, severe criticism” that attempts to channel individual reactions to the suggestive power of images, yet the actual influence of such critical enterprise upon large segments of population cannot appear nowadays as more than idealistic and thus highly questionable in its desired disciplinary effect.

While there are sporadic concessions that not all Spanish cinema can be “trascendente” or “de altura” (Benítez de Castro), most screwball reviewers censor the “disparatado” humor of such comedies, their dangerous ambivalence and excess, as well as their “antisocial turns” and their “anarchic individualism” (González Ruiz), which are accurately perceived as dangerous alternatives to the disciplinary role models that the ideal postwar cinema would need to highlight.¹ “La deliciosa intrascendencia” of screwball comedy, with its refreshing “gesture of rebellion” and its “light”, “disparatado” humor, could undeniably serve as another source of both individual and collective resistance to the brutal authoritarian pressures of postwar autarky.² As mentioned earlier in the Introduction, the alternative public sphere to whose existence screwball

¹ See, for instance, a 1940 anonymous exhortation from Primer Plano, under the aggressive title “¡Ni un metro más!”, directed against all “pernicious” values and role models from several popular Spanish movies (particularly folkloric comedies), contrasted to a projected national cinema that would exalt “el cumplimiento y el acatamiento a la disciplina y al quehacer común en la marcha militar del Estado.”

² The quoted characterizations are part of the recurrent wording employed by contemporary film reviews in their discussion of screwball comedies, both American and Spanish. The positive adjective “deliciosa” next to the generally criticized “intrascendencia” occasionally appears in the less belligerent magazines Cámara and Digame in 1946, implicitly acknowledging the pleasurable aura of screwball as well as a relative distanciation from the immediate postwar exhortations, echoing military calls to order and discipline.
comedy contributed had a strong social basis due to the regular, ritual cinema-going and to the
strong communal quality of spectatorship, especially in the first two decades after the Civil War,
when movie theatres were the primary locations of mass entertainment.¹

The cinematic display of emancipatory values, especially in respect to female role
models, was associated not only to a modernity related to the United States’ hegemonic
worldwide influence through its cinema, but also to an attempted secular break with tradition that
was subversively connected to the Spanish Second Republic. The latter association was tirelessly
observed and indicted by many journalists and movie reviewers of a politically compliant,
conservative bent and it constituted a major reason for the negative assessment of the discussed
comedy. The alternative horizon of experience that screwball in particular and cinema in general
provided in the 1940s (together with romance novels, popular theatre and music), testifies indeed
to the essential sense of continuity between prewar and postwar times.² The alternative female
images that the teenager Carmen Martín Gaite admired in the Republican magazines secretly
available in her parents’ home (26-27) are strikingly similar, for instance, to the diverse,
emancipated role models of screwball comedies (both American and Spanish) and of
contemporary novelas rosa, being refreshingly different from the hegemonic domestic images
officially extoled.

According to Rosario Ruiz Franco’s analysis, one of the urgent political attempts after the
Civil War was indeed to abolish the emancipating rights that women had obtained during the
Second Republic and to transform them into a kind of “eternal minors”, subordinated to men

¹ For the communal ritual of cinema-going in postwar Spain, see, for instance, Labanyi (i.e., “The Mediation of
Everyday Life”, “Romancing the Early Franco Regime” etc.), Gómez Sierra (“‘Palaces of Seeds’”), Martín Gaite
(Usos amorosos de la postguerra española), Vázquez Montalbán (Crónica sentimental de España), or Palacio (“Cap.
VII. El público en las salas”).
² For more details on the many links between Republican and postwar cinema, see, for instance, Fanés (El cas
CIFESA) or Diez Puertas (Historia social del cine en España). For more general considerations on the lack of
rupture in other cultural areas as well, see Labanyi (“Romancing the Early Franco Regime”) or Vázquez Montalbán
(Crónica sentimental de España).
through enforced domestic roles. The official postwar condemnation of the “decadent” Republican times and, in particular, of its egalitarian gender politics, undeniably clashed with the prevalent screwball display of weak male and powerful female models and, in general, with the comedic image of an “unruly” woman, “making a disruptive spectacle of herself” (Rowe 31). This cinematic discourse was likely to trigger both a compensatory, often nostalgic, female identification with the strong women commanding the screen, and a somewhat distressed male laughter in respect to the “absurd” film situation, reminiscent of a recent past that witnessed a modern take on gender roles. In spite of its legal advances, not all gender inequalities could be removed, however, before the Civil War: the rights and freedoms that women earned during the Republic did not have enough time to become consolidated in what remained an entrenched patriarchal society. It is worth remembering, therefore, that the Civil War winners did not experience such great difficulty, after all, when they restored the pre-Republican conservative legal framework and ratified an utterly discriminatory, even repressive, legislation in respect to women. The harsh discrimination of Spanish women after 1939 was institutionalized through juridical, ecclesiastical, educational, and medical discourses, and reinforced in several contemporary cultural venues (e.g., literature, cinema, advice columns, advertising), which put forth a psychologically and intellectually weak female prototype, relegated to the domestic realm and incapable of autonomous thought and action.¹

A review of various caricatures from La Codorniz, Dígame or Triunfo in the early 1940s shows striking similitudes between the image of the “unruly woman” in Spanish screwball

¹ The Spanish Civil Code after the Civil War ascribed women a legal status similar to that of minors, the insane, and the convicts, making them dependent upon male guardianship (Ruiz Franco 115). The first change of this archaic legislation came in 1961, against a background of economic growth, which entailed a wider availability of jobs. Even if this legal improvement did not obliterate the former patriarchal rhetoric, women could at least have the right to enter the workforce without male consent. It was not the case, however, for married women, who still required spousal approval in order to work, a legal stipulation that was annulled only in 1975.
comedies and a particular misogynist streak of contemporaneous caricatures, whose recurrent presence might be a strong indicator of their popularity. Their peculiar comic vision seems to be based upon the perceived incongruence between the contemporaneous normalized sociocultural discourse about gender roles and the situation depicted in these caricatures: whereas most postwar women were actually subordinated to men and relegated to domesticity, these magazine sketches portrayed them in unlikely despotic positions, “abusing” and “feminizing” men by compelling them to perform household chores or even slapping and punching them. This comic inversion of tacit conventions of decorum was often paralleled by the image of these domineering women “dangerously” indulging in leisure activities while giving orders to their puny husbands. Their subversive leisure time tended to be called “ocupaciones intrascendentes” at that time, using the same adjective employed for the (usually negative) condemnation of screwball comedies in movie reviews. Besides, these female leisure activities were quite similar to those sometimes displayed in screwball comedies and indicted by film reviewers (e.g., drinking and reading romance novels, putting on makeup and seductive clothes for a potential flirtatious escapade, or just sitting down bored while doing nothing).

These recurring projections of ungovernable, emasculating women were also deeply entrenched in the autochthonous género chico tradition, whose impact on popular culture was very strong (in character types, settings, plots etc.), surviving the gradual decline of the genre starting with the second half of the 1920s. As Vilches de Frutos’ and Dougherty’s studies of the prewar Madrid stage compellingly show, even under pressures from the increasingly popular cinema and Parisian-style revue, Spanish theater in general and the género chico in particular remained the most popular leisure time of the 1920s and early 1930s, which was a formative time for most postwar spectators and people connected with the early 1940s movie industry.
Participating in both high and low culture at a time when an unprecedented rise in urban mass entertainment triggered vehement debates about the status of theatre as art and/ or as business, the prewar Spanish stage had to bring up to date both its topics and its scenography in order to maintain its contested popularity. Growing rivalry with cinema and the revue after the First World War thus brought about an impressive display of versatility and reform in theater, which boldly engaged not only with some of the most burning issues of the age, at the intersection of modernity and tradition (e.g., women emancipation and changing gender roles; foreign, especially Hollywood, influences on youth in language, dress, music, manners and leisure time; civil marriage and divorce or social and political unrest during the Republic), but also with cinematic and music-hall techniques (e.g., spectacular visual effects, “modern” singing and dancing, sensual displays etc.).

Vilches de Frutos’ and Dougherty’s impressive attempts of classifying an extremely complex dramatic scene and “the genres of laughter” in particular, which display innumerable miscegenations, are similar to the main current taxonomic endeavors in the field of early silent and sound Hollywood cinema, in so far as there is a general basic division between comic and comedic forms (Neale and Krutnik), or spectacle and narrative form (Jenkins).¹ Most film scholars touching upon early comedy (e.g., King, Rowe, Brunovska Karnick) appropriate this partition and root it in the differentiation between the vaudeville and the “legitimate theater” traditions: while the comic or spectacle-bent leaning of vaudeville merely seeks the generation of laughter, often resisting narrative integration (Neale and Krutnik 2), the narrative form of comedy, generally appealing to a more respectable middle-class audience, seeks verisimilitude and integration. In a similar fashion, the prewar Madrid stage is classified, on the basis of

¹ The syntagm “genres of laughter” belongs to Laura Mulvey (i.e., in “Changes: Thoughts on Myths, Narrative and Historical Experience”), which broadly associates it with all narrative and performance forms connected to carnival.
representativity and popularity, that is, depending upon the number and reception of actual performances, in: comedy (of manners, sainetesca, and astrakanesca), the burlesque (a hybrid, often grotesque construction, made up of farces, juguetes cómicos, and sainetes, whose main function was precisely the generation of laughter), and the “lyrical-commercial” theatre (which includes vaudeville, revue, zarzuela grande, and lyrical sainetes). While this taxonomy has porous borders, the main distinction between comedies and the burlesque genres seems to lie precisely in the degree of narrative integration: in the case of comedia sainetesca, for instance, the authors of the prewar theatrical survey state that it is a subgenre of the comedy of manners and a contemporaneous three-act development of the traditional one-act sainete (La escena madrileña entre 1926 y 1931 77). This narrative extension most probably targets an upper-class audience also by the condescending focus on the nouveaux riches, ridiculed for their superficial modernity, instead of the customary protagonism of lower-class, castizo types from earlier centuries, when the genre was not so heavily informed by a yearning for middle-class respectability.

The successful comedias sainetesca (written by Arniches and the Álvarez Quintero brothers) and the most popular comedies of manners, often called altas comedias, set in luxurious aristocratic settings and belonging especially to Benavente and to the Álvarez Quintero brothers, conservatively engaged with issues and characters that were very similar to those present in the Spanish screwball comedies, particularly by extensively dwelling upon an ongoing “battle of the sexes”. The Álvarez Quintero brothers in particular, followed by Manuel Tamayo y Baus and Jacinto Benavente are actually the main dramatic prewar authors whose plays (i.e., altas comedias, zarzuelas, and sainetes) were successfully adapted to the postwar Spanish screen as screwball comedies. Particularly interesting in this respect, while bearing in mind the structure
of the Spanish screwball comedy, is the example of the popular theatrical comedy “Tambor y cascabel”, written by the Álvarez Quintero brothers and shown in 1927, whose plot seems to bear a striking resemblance to the pattern of the Hollywood screwball comedy of renewed commitment. The play dwells upon the incompatible personalities of a married couple (i.e., the husband, Amadeo, is very stern, while his wife, Juanina, is very frivolous and impetuous), whose unwillingness to change and compromise leads to a period of separation and the threat of divorce, eventually precluded by the couple’s awareness of their love and the news of Juanina’s pregnancy (86-87).

One could actually argue that the tremendous success of Hollywood and Spanish screwball reception was to a great extent indebted to the existing interdiscursive cultural competence of the Spanish audience and film producers, a competence largely shaped by the prewar dramatic stage, in its turn influenced by the existing Hollywood narratives. Some of the most interesting situations of these theatrical comedies (e.g., *alta comedia*, *comedia sainetesca*, *zarzuelas*), later recast in the Spanish screwball, seem to feature the vain and parasitic upper-class woman, whose shallow modernity (in language, dress, leisure, and manners) makes her an unsuitable wife and who will consequently be “reformed” by an authoritarian future husband; the emancipated middle-class woman working as a secretary, actress or singer, who will give up her job in order to properly devote herself to her husband; the womanizing upper-class or middle-class bachelor who will be transformed into a faithful husband by a cunning, practical heroine; the frivolous, condescending wife who will learn to be submissive (while her husband often learns the dangers of marital neglect) etc.

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1 It is also interesting to compare the condescending remarks employed in the post-Civil War film reviews of many screwball comedies with the sarcastic wording of the prewar theatre reviews, according to which the “battle of the sexes” in “Tambor y cascabel”, for instance, is between ‘un calzonazos’ and ‘una pobre mujer histérica’ (qtd. in *La escena madrileña entre 1926 y 1931* 87).
Sometimes the defense of traditional values is voiced by a *castizo* male character feeling threatened in the increasingly modernized Spanish capital that seems to have lost its distinctive “identity”. The sense of confusion triggered by the rapid modernization of Spain is paralleled by a moralizing rhetoric, which often links an alleged omnipresence of vice in the modern city of Madrid with contemporaneous discourses related to the emancipation of women, especially to more radical feminist calls to women’s rights of freedom and self-governance. The trivialization of these political claims to changed gender roles is sometimes carried out by the focus on a simple-minded protagonist, like Dolores Capilla, who comes from rural Andalusia and is superficially yet dangerously seduced by the new female emancipation rhetoric of the capital, as it happens in the prolific Luis de Vargas’ “¿Quién te quiere a ti?”, successfully shown in 1928 (111-12). Like Mari Pepa in the tremendously popular zarzuela “La revoltosa”, to which this chapter will come back later, Dolores is also led to eventually realize, however, that traditional marriage is the only “real” solution for women, a practical advice that is mouthed through *castizo* male characters. The embodiment of conservative values in a male *castizo* type often functions to heighten comic effects when such character is introduced in a cosmopolitan, sensual setting, typical of the French revue, which happens frequently in *juguetes cómicos* that take over dramatic situations typical of *sainete*.

The mixture of these opposing worlds and discourses is in some way or another present in Ignacio Iquino’s screwball comedies, whose reshuffling of Hollywood screwball conventions and prewar *sainete*, vaudeville, and revue traditions triggered, as we shall see, some of the most aggressive film reviews after the Civil War. Such reviews mercilessly attacked especially the destabilizing foreign influences of his comedies, associated to both Hollywood and the French revue (e.g., ungovernable women, weak men, even the soundtrack that included foxtrot, jazz and
subsequent erotic dance moves), some sainete and astrakán types, and the farcical, slapstick imprint of the vaudeville tradition, featuring assertive female protagonists.

Pedro Muñoz Seca, the creator of the playful astrakán in the prewar stage culture, can be credited with the consolidation of a peculiar mixture of a winsome, self-confident fresco character and ambiguous situations and dialogs. While the fresco might have been a modern version of the long-standing picaro type, Muñoz Seca’s focus on such protagonist enabled him to also ridicule the sentimental-melodramatic routines of the Spanish stage and several associated social class conventions of decorum and domesticity, a parodic stance that, together with the mocking attitude of many lower-class sainete types, recurrently permeates the Spanish screwball comedies under the guise of secondary characters, especially butlers.¹

It is useful to once again point out, however, that, while the above-mentioned theatrical situations and characters prepared a welcoming reception of the Hollywood screwball conventions, these prewar dramatic discourses were, in their turn, a counter-response to the contemporaneous Hollywood cinema, which was not only increasingly popular as a prewar form of mass urban entertainment, but also suffused all other cultural manifestations (e.g., theatre, revue, novel, humor magazines, fashion, advertising) and everyday lifestyles in the second half of the 1920s and the early 1930s. As Miriam Bratu Hansen cogently argued (“The Mass Production of the Senses” 340-41), American classical cinema offered what could be called “the first global vernacular”, “an international modernist idiom on a mass basis”, whose worldwide translatability was indebted to its articulation and negotiation of the complex experience of modernity. Its unparalleled national and international impact was probably less brought about by its technical craftsmanship or to its aggressive marketing strategies and more by its discursive

¹ The talented Fernando Freyre de Andrade, coming from the prewar stage, often embodies such a fresco character type in his recurring roles of butler.
power to shape new subjectivities, by challenging “prevailing social and sexual arrangements” and by putting forth “new possibilities of social identity and cultural styles” (341). The prewar Spanish theatre’s patronizing derision of such Hollywood-advanced identity models (e.g., the flapper girl, the adulterous protagonists of remarriage comedies, the new companionate marriage of screwball comedies, the childish, playful social insouciance of the slapstick “lower genres”) and the final disciplinary vindication of a “national tradition” in language, leisure, dress, and behavior, are thus symptomatic of a defensive attitude of panicked conservatism, which tended to mark both the prewar and the postwar Spanish cultural scene. On the other hand, as already mentioned before, the prewar Spanish stage was in a process of increasing competition for audiences with Hollywood cinema, which became the unavoidable intertext implicitly or explicitly alluded to in most theatrical productions of the 1920s and the 1930s.

Associated with cosmopolitanism, speed, the carefree, cynical attitude of the younger generations, and, in general, with a modern, American-based music, dance, and entertainment in general, cinema was also problematically connected with a subversive redefinition of traditional gender roles (La escena madrileña entre 1926 y 1931 18-19), namely with a would-be masculinization of emancipated women and a parallel feminization of men, indicted for their “exaggerated” attention to dress and personal appearance as well as for their blatant incapacity to govern the “unruly” female protagonists. Interestingly enough, the dangerous possibility of feminized men due to the undermining potential of Hollywood cinema resurfaced in the post-Civil War media discourses (Martin Gaite 87), which saw it as a more troubling potential

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1 The Spanish comedy of manners of the 1920s, directed to the upper classes, often satirized the frivolous flapper protagonist, who challenged the traditional feminine role models and was frequently ascribed to the rising bourgeois nouveaux riches, devoid of “distinction” (Vilches de Frutos and Dougherty “La escena madrileña entre 1900 y 1936” 77). The slapstick tradition of the farce was not very powerful in Spain—its prevalence and audience success in the 1920s and early 1930s cannot be understood outside the powerful impact of French vaudeville and, especially, of the tremendously popular Hollywood comedian comedy of Chaplin, Lloyd and Keaton.
redefinition of gender roles than the alleged emancipation of women due to the disruptive models of “americanadas”.

Even more aggressive was the burlesque response of the prewar Spanish stage to the rising mass appeal of Hollywood cinema and its subversive role models, especially in respect to women, marriage and family. Comical farces, sainetes, humoradas cómicas and juguetes cómicos, to a great extent influenced by the French vaudeville tradition, mercilessly attack the modern woman and the disruption of conservative gender roles through extreme caricature, relentless parody of Hollywood models, and more forcefully disciplinary models triumphantly advanced in the end. These burlesque subgenres also display abundant “unruly” female characters, whose occasional physical superiority even enables them to abuse their “disobedient” husbands, a comic stock situation whose popularity was once again based upon the incongruence between the actual sociohistorical situation of women and the theatrical reversal of gender roles.

Occasionally, however, under the influence of the French revue, several plays belonging to the Spanish “frivolous genre”, such as the humoradas and the juguetes cómicos (e.g., dealing with the relationships between older men and their much younger mistresses, or with the repetitive courtship rituals of inveterate womanizers) favored not only farcical slapstick moments, but also a lucrative combination of grotesque parody and erotic innuendoes, obscene jokes, revealing female bodies, and an overall visually alluring spectacle. All these elements sought to attract a wider audience, aggressively claimed by the more and more popular revue and the sweeping expansion of Hollywood cinema (Vilches de Frutos and Dougherty, La escena madrileña entre 1926 y 1931 130-36). Some sainetes, humoradas cómicas and juguetes cómicos were actually translated into revues, mixing autochthonous musical forms and dances, such as the Madrid chotis, with jazz and foxtrot rhythms, often condescendingly referred to as ‘los epilépticos bailes
americanos’ in contemporaneous reviews (qtd. in La escena madrileña entre 1926 y 1931 125). Other interesting hybridizations taking place in Spanish revues of the late 1920s include travelling back and forth from Madrid to Los Angeles, a transatlantic voyage that enables many farcical stereotypical depictions of local inhabitants and cosmopolitan artists (125-26).

The cosmopolitan universe of Spanish screwball comedies is most probably indebted, nevertheless, to similar settings populating both the prewar and the postwar Spanish romance novels, usually called novelas rosa or folletines. Both theatrical comedies and these popular melodramatic fictions actually constituted the most important primary texts of many post-Civil War film adaptations that can be categorized under the genre of Spanish screwball comedy. The vast majority of novelas rosa adapted to the Spanish screen through the screwball generic pattern belongs to Luisa María Linares (e.g., En poder de Barba Azul, Mi enemigo y yo, Un marido a precio fijo, Doce lunas de miel, La vida empieza a medianoche). Her equally prolific sister, Concha Linares Becerra, who openly acknowledged her enthusiasm for Capra’s comedies and for his directorial style (“Los espectadores opinan” 36), also wrote a romance novel that was successfully adapted into the postwar Spanish screwball comedy Una chica de opereta. It is

1 For one of the most interesting examples of this transformation and hybridization between género chico and revue that is discussed in Vilches de Frutos’ and Dougherty’s study of the Spanish stage between 1926 and 1931 (136-38), see the one-act mixture of sainete and French revue titled Todo el año es carnaval o Momo es un carcamal, by Joaquín Vela and Ramón María Moreno, written and shown in 1927.

2 Jo Labanyi mentions the website of the French publishing house Livre en poche, which states that Luisa María Linares’ work generated around twenty film adaptations in Spain, Italy and Mexico, as well as several theatrical and television adaptations (“Romancing the Early Franco Regime” 65). Many of her romance novels were adapted to the screen also as melodramas or more conventional forms of romantic comedy (e.g., Tuvo la culpa Adán). Her alleged sister, Concha Linares Becerra, a prolific writer of romance novels as well, enjoyed less film adaptations of her folletines, yet José Buch’s 1934 adaptation of her novel, Diez días millonaria, might be the first, proto-version of Spanish screwball available, probably under the influence of It Happened One Night, shown in Spain as early as 1934, soon after its release in the United States. The featuring of her novel, Diez días millonaria, in the popular prewar collection Novela cinematográfica might point not only to an implicit success of the Spanish film adaptation made after her narrative, but also to the powerful imprint of the Hollywood intertext in the novel itself, at a time when many novelas rosa published in this collection were print adaptations of successful Hollywood plots.

3 Their blood ties seem to be best substantiated by the 1944 Primer Plano interview with Manuel Augusto García Viñolas (“Concha Linares Becerra y Luis María Linares han llegado al cine a través de sus novelas”), in which even the writers themselves refer to each other as sisters, and disproven by the information given by two publishing houses in their contemporary reprints of some romance novels belonging to these two female authors (see Labanyi,
interesting to mention here that her answers in this interview with the magazine *Cámara* clearly show she was lucidly aware not only of the alluring associations of cinema, the main leisure activity of the age, with diversity, speed and broad perspectives, but also of its powerful impact in the formation of the tastes and desires of her generation.

The Linares sisters, with confessed Nationalist sympathies, were probably some of the most prolific postwar authors of primary texts that were adapted to the screen almost immediately after publishing their romance novels, some texts being even commissioned for cinema in advance (Labanyi, “Romancing the Early Franco regime” 65). In a 1944 *Primer Plano* interview with these female writers, organized by Manuel Augusto García Viñolas (“Concha Linares Becerra y Luis María Linares han llegado al cine a través de sus novelas”), the cinematographic quality of these *novelas rosa* is understandably rooted by Luisa María Linares in the essential contemporaneous role of cinema: “somos de la generación actual, es decir, […] la generación del cine”. The power of cinema to mediate everyday sociocultural discourses and to shape ordinary people’s imaginaries, an impact powerfully substantiated by Jo Labanyi’s coordinated research focusing on the postwar Spanish spectatorship, can undeniably be related to Miriam Bratu Hansen’s work on Hollywood cinema as an inclusive social horizon of daily experience, helping articulate and negotiate a wide variety of responses to modernity and the processes of modernization. Given the already mentioned understanding of a lack of centralization of the Spanish postwar autocratic regime, an issue that will occasionally have to be revisited, Jo Labanyi’s former label of “conservative modernity” (borrowed, in its turn, from Michael Richards) is a problematic, however convenient, description applied to Franco’s dictatorship. A main reticence has to do with the alleged national political project implied,

“Romancing the Early Franco regime” 63), which ascribe their paternity to two different persons (i.e., Manuel Linares Rivas y Astray as Luisa María’s father and Luis Linares Becerra as Concha’s).
concerted and implemented in a centralized way, a reading that is disproven by the historical evidence of numerous internal clashes and a wide multiplicity of interests and opinions of the different ruling “families” in postwar Spain, an evolution that was consonant with the heterogeneity of the groups associated, for various reasons, with the 1936 military uprising (cfr. Beevor, DiFebo and Juliá). This thesis thus adopts a distance towards this questionable label of “conservative modernity” and even more towards the implicit idea of a centralized national project that it entails, which does not mean, nevertheless, that one should disregard the intricate interplays of conservative and modern discourses that permeate postwar Spain and cinema. On the very contrary, one of the main purposes of this chapter’s analysis of Spanish screwball is to ascertain the extent to which especially cinema, theatre, and the *novela rosa* provided both contradictory formative discourses on modernity and an alternative public forum for their discussion and evaluation.

As Jo Labanyi lucidly remarks in “Romancing the Early Franco regime”, Luisa María Linares’ conspicuously cosmopolitan ambience, preserved in the film adaptations of her novels, is manifest both by the changing locations of her plots (i.e., mainly Western European countries and United States, but also more exotic settings like Kenya and Hong Kong) and by the diverse national origins of her characters. This dazzling spatial mobility, which marks a stark contrast in respect to the enforced autarchic seclusion of the Spanish population in the aftermath of the Civil War, seems to be paralleled by an equally noteworthy social mobility, subversively coupled with young, autonomous women, who come to Madrid from the Spanish province, for instance, in search of social and professional advancement (as fashion designers, secretaries, journalists or film actresses) and an exciting life overall.¹ It is important to observe here that the alluring

¹ This narrative pattern is strongly reminiscent of the main plot line of some popular prewar theatrical comedies, such as the already mentioned “¿Quién te quiere a ti?”, by Luis Vargas.
modernity and its speed, variety, and distinction that attract these independent female protagonists to the capital are often associated, in the case of Madrid, with the existence of numerous cinema theatres (“Romancing the Early Franco Regime” 68), whereas the unexpected and sometimes farcical reversal of fortunes, based upon mistaken identities, are often metafictionally labeled as “de película” (72), pointing to the powerful cinematic intertext provided by Hollywood, condescendingly and fearfully associated with “americanadas” in the hegemonic public sphere of the age. This frequent term of comparison indicates the consequential imprint of the filmic discourse on personal subjectivities, which learn to evaluate their own lives in respect to a fictional model, a hermeneutics traditionally and disdainfully ascribed to women and the lower classes by ‘high culture’ canons. The disquieting coupling of aesthetic and political marginality that these romance novels operate, putting forth alternative role models and settings in a ‘low culture’ format, cannot be erased by the conservative endings that mark these interesting novelas rosa. As discussed earlier, such conventional finales can represent a concession to censorship, enabling the publication and circulation of books with subversive gender roles, while they can equally be triggered by the irresistible weight of a long melodramatic tradition, powerfully enforced by the Hollywood cinema of the age.¹

¹ These novelas rosa (a more proper Spanish term for romance novels, perhaps, than the direct translation novelas románticas that Jo Labanyi employs) might better understood genealogically if they are rooted in the melodramatic tradition, especially in the nineteenth-century Spanish folletín lineage, produced under the influence of the French romance novels (see Elisa Martí López’ compelling article, “The Folletín: Spain Looks to Europe”, for more details). According to Sonia Núñez Puente (“The Romance Novel and Popular Culture during the Early Franco Regime in Spain” 235, note 3), many Spanish postwar successful writers of novelas rosa, who contributed to the 1940s editorial boom and mass production of romance novels, actually had a formative apprenticeship through their prewar translation of foreign novelas rosa. Early twentieth-century and postwar Spanish folletines, with their frequent focus on an orphan female protagonist, are best understood if they are seen in a genealogical line of continuity with late nineteenth-century Spanish romance novels, produced under foreign influence, and if they are ascribed to an overarching melodramatic tradition (a discourse that undeniably mediated also the narrative formation of screwball comedies, the generic model to which many such novels were translated). A link between the Linares sisters’ novelas rosa and the “Byzantine novel” (Labanyi “Romancing the Early Franco Regime” 73) is quite problematic, given that the latter is a genre that is temporally too distant to be a convincing precursor of these folletines. Equally questionable seems a connection with the “nineteenth-century Romantic drama” (16), a
The “taming-of-the shrew format” that Jo Labanyi mentions (69), following Carolyn Gallerstein remarks about Luisa Maria Linares’ novels, shapes not only the structure of many novelas rosa featuring strong, independent women, but also most Hollywood screwball comedies as well as various folkloric comedies and war melodramas of the 1940s. In addition, the war metaphors that often accompany the love process (i.e., of conquest, struggle, and surrender), that Jo Labanyi passingly mentions (69), are more extensively dwelt upon by Carmen Martín Gaite in her discussion of the main romance patterns of the first postwar generation (105), reinforced especially by various media outlets (e.g., sentimental advice columns) and by folletines. War metaphors can be aptly applied to the screwball romance as well, with the important distinction that this comedic discourse tends to lead to a more companionate relationship after the woman’s “surrender” and the couple’s alluded or actual marriage. In any case, the structural ambiguity of novelas rosa or of romantic and screwball comedy has traditionally led to many feminist critiques of such narratives as fundamentally ‘reactionary’ and politically ‘regressive’, yet these indictments tend to forget the sociocultural necessity of a conservative ending and of a reinforcement of patriarchal marriage, which attempts to discipline dangerously ‘unruly’ desires, especially belonging to the women. Furthermore, this disciplinary finale does not obliterate the alternative discourses presented earlier, some corresponding to veiled feminist demands for women’s emancipation and freedom. In some way, these romance models offer a complementary, albeit contradictory, pattern of female fulfillment, allowing readers and audiences to identify both with the dashing, autonomous woman professional and with the fairy tale princess happily marrying her Prince Charming eventually, a marriage that astutely presupposes a personal, not imposed, choice of marriage over career. It is useful to point out that

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taxonomic term that tends to camouflage the important discursive weight of melodrama, originating in the late eighteenth century, in the secularized aftermath of the French Revolution (cfr. Brooks 14-15).
the romantic hero to whom the female protagonist eventually succumbs is portrayed as the only one truly “deserving” of such an initially unwilling surrender, a narrative feature thoroughly analyzed by Janice Radway’s pioneering ethnographic account of romance novel female readers and their character preferences, where she convincingly applies a psychoanalytical reading of the nurturing male hero through the lenses of Nancy Chodorow’s feminist revision of Freud (13-14).\(^1\) Combining traits traditionally associated with masculinity (i.e., strength, energy, authority) and maternal, nurturing care, the male protagonist seems to embody both the father and the mother objects of desire, which, in Chodorow’s and Radway’s view, is an implicit “protest against the fundamental inability of heterosexuality to satisfy the very desires with which it engendered women.” (Radway 14)\(^2\)

This indirect dissatisfaction with existing gender roles fires back at the simplistic tag of “escapism” that is commonly ascribed to novela rosa, given that the very notion of escape or of a utopian sentimental projection is inextricable from the uncomfortable question as to what is left behind and why by a wish-fulfilling identification: there can be no desire to escape unless readers or audiences find their everyday personal and social circumstances too narrow and/ or oppressive, as it was the case in post-Civil War autarchic Spain.\(^3\) Whether at a conscious or unconscious level, the wish-fulfilling hermeneutics of romance novels is therefore implicitly critical of personal and collective circumstances, resonating with Pierre Bourdieu’s concise

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\(^1\) Jo Labanyi also refers to Radway’s interpretation (8), without explicitly mentioning the latter’s specific psychoanalytical approach.

\(^2\) This nurturing image of the male partner often lets the female protagonist adopt the pleasurable stance of the pampered child in relation to a protective and caring parental figure, which is, to some degree, consonant with the screwball comedy’s frequent display of the childlike fun and play relationship of the main couple, which also involves a mutually nurturing element. While screwball comedy is slightly more balanced in its treatment of the couple (i.e., in the sense that both partners tend to find a nurturing and protective parental figure in the other), this is hardly the case with the hegemonic educational and legal discourses of post-Civil War Spain that misogynistically infantilized women, an infantilization that cannot, by any means, be equated with the psychological female need for a nurturing and protective parental figure that is displayed in novelas rosa and screwball comedies.

\(^3\) The impressive mass appeal and popularity of such romance novels and films in postwar Spain is another indirect proof of these narratives’ capacity to address unfulfilled collective needs and desires.
conclusion of his brief discussion of bovaryana: anyone who takes fiction so seriously cannot take the “reality” of existing social norms seriously (71), distrusting the collectively sanctioned beliefs in their necessity. This ignored oppositional reading of folletines is to a great extent similar to social anthropologist Mary Douglas’ understanding of humor as “anti-rite”, that is, in one way or another exposing, through ridicule, “the ritual practices of a given society”, showing that “an accepted pattern has no necessity” (“Jokes” 96). Such nuanced interpretations of “escapism” enable us to see more potential uses of both folletín reading and comedy spectatorship, not only as survival and coping strategies in dire personal circumstances, but also as essential forces of resistance and alternative sentimental and political education. Furthermore, these literary and film narratives also provide, for instance, strong, independent, combative female role models, who can be professionally successful, or several (not many) alternative male images not afraid of showing their emotions or of engaging in a more companionate and nurturing relationship with women. Carmen Martín Gaite actually acknowledges that the Linares sisters in particular, but even the popular Falangist romance writer Carmen de Icaza, for instance, gave an air of “cosmopolitanism and modernity” to their Cinderella protagonists: these female protagonists are working professionals who are also educated, intelligent, efficient, and sensitive, drawing the attention of the romantic heroes precisely through such personal qualities (145), which stand in opposition to the domestic role models hegemonically extolled in the age.¹ The institutionalized public sphere’s indicted notion of “exalted” love, a romantic perspective apparently cherished by most postwar Spanish women, was aptly connected to novelas rosa and a Hollywood-type cinema (142-43), the latter being accurately credited with influencing the plot,

¹ For a refreshing reassessment of some Spanish Falangist women writer’s novels, which provide empowering female models of agency and masquerade, in opposition to the openly endorsed image of domestic, passive femininity, see Jo Labanyi (“Resemanticizing Feminine Surrender”) and Sonia Núñez Puente (“The Romance Novel and Popular Culture during the Early Franco Regime in Spain”).
values and character typology of Spanish *folletines* as well.¹ The lucid association of a subversive romance pattern with foreign cinematic models convincingly points out to the hegemonic public sphere’s awareness of the alternative potential of popular cinema and its ambivalent role models.

The recurring attacks upon “americanadas” and their light, “intrascendente” take on love was particularly fierce when Spanish screwball comedies had a strong tendency towards performance and masquerade, which was also present in many postwar romance novels (Labanyi, “Romancing the Early Franco Regime” 72-77), even if it tended to be generally attributed to the powerful imprint of the prewar revue, of theatrical comedy (especially from the *género chico* tradition), and of Hollywood popular cinema (especially screwball and musical).

On the one hand, the film audiences witness many instances of ludic performance from the part of *fresco* secondary characters, which often parody the upper-class protagonists’ occasionally lofty romantic pretenses, as we shall see when analyzing some Spanish screwball comedies. The humorous antics of these secondary characters, interpreted by gifted actors coming from the popular stage (e.g., José Isbert, Mary Santpere, Fernando Freyre de Andrade, Antonio Riquelme, Julia Lajos), can easily be connected indeed to the prewar dramatic legacies of *astrakán* (particularly to Muñoz Seca’s frequently employed *fresco* type) and the politically ambivalent *sainete* and *zarzuela*, with their materialist-carnivalesque perspective, to which this chapter shall later return in more detail. On the other hand, the main screen couple of Spanish screwball comedies was often criticized not only for the discordant gender models they sometimes put forth (i.e., ungovernable or domineering women and weak, effeminate men), but also for their lack of a “formal”, “serious”, or “dignified” take on love and marriage, which were seen as

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¹ This feared female “exaltation” entailed, for instance, yearning for men’s trust and subsequent personal disclosures, or desiring an “interesting”, “different” type of man, who would make them feel “different” and worthy as well, transfiguring their humdrum existence.
“extravagant”, “anarchic”, “irresponsible”, “decadent”, or just “trivial(ized)” through a reiterated use of masquerade and impersonation (e.g., multiple and/or mistaken identities, disguise, excessive concern with personal appearance etc.), which was consonant with a more general view of love as representation, devoid of both passion and of a juridically viewed notion of sin.

The protagonism of wit and a fast speech in the Spanish screwball love process, even if of a more subdued piquancy than in the case of Hollywood screwball comedies, was undeniably incongruous with the conservative moral advice on romantic relationships given to the young people in their few face-to-face encounters. This hegemonic counseling extolled self-restraint, female submission, and cautious, stereotypical formulas, when not silence accompanied by sheepish smiles. Whereas Spanish screwball comedies displayed melodramatic clichés and love declarations, especially towards the end, linked to the conservative finale, they also provided numerous witty skirmishes and ironical remarks, including biting parodies of romantic love conventions (e.g., in Deliciosamente tontos, Rápteme usted, Turbante blanco or Doce lunas de miel). Occasionally, they would also feature a male protagonist who expresses his fear of ridicule, associated with sentimentality and romantic clichés, which does not preclude his self-conscious sporadic recourse to melodramatic platitudes. This recurrent concern with his masculine self-image might also lead him to an apparently cold, authoritarian attitude towards the object of his love, especially when the woman is very sarcastic herself towards these hackneyed courtship phrases (as in Turbante blanco, Deliciosamente tontos or El hombre que las enamora), an attitude that merely adds to the male protagonist’s self-consciousness and fear of effeminacy. The woman’s final “taming” and surrender to such a character is often contrived, leaving a powerful sensation of a rushed conservative ending that cannot erase prior images of a
superior, “unruly” woman in respect to the awkwardly asserted manhood and intelligence of her insecure partner.

Sometimes the main couple gets married for reasons of convenience (i.e., of material and/or social advancement), initially agreeing to be married only theoretically, yet eventually falling in love with each other and consummating their marriage. This pattern of a false marriage, which relies on “frivolous”, “intrascendentes” reasons but which eventually becomes real, is quite widespread in contemporaneous *nueva rosa* as well (Labanyi, “Romancing the Early Franco Regime” 77), being a peculiar reworking of a recurring pattern in some Hollywood screwball comedies, where an initially capricious or potentially insincere marriage is eventually abandoned as “true love” is discovered in a different, companionate relationship. Given that Spanish novels and movies could not engage with divorce in postwar Spain, there is hardly one case where there is a passing mention of a bigamous, hence inherently void marriage, which even remained unconsummated and is cast aside to make way for the “authentic” one (e.g., in *Un marido a precio fijo*). All other Spanish screwball comedies dealing with an initially frivolous marriage focus on the transformation of this shallow relationship into an “authentic” one (e.g., *Ella, él y sus millones*, *Doce lunas de miel*, *El difunto es un vivo*, *Rápteme usted*, *Mi fantástica esposa*).

This distinctive cinematic translation of a Hollywood screwball pattern onto the Spanish postwar scenery could be explained not only by the prohibition of any focus on divorce, but also by the social prevalence of “dissimulation as a strategy for survival” under a harsh totalitarian regime after the Civil War (77).¹ Furthermore, the depiction of marriage as conventional in Spanish screwball comedies is to a great extent representative also for most relationships and marriages

¹ There might be another possible explanation for this peculiar marriage transformation, which would make an indirect comment upon the postwar abolition of civil marriage, which also invalidated all civil unions from the Republican period, requiring the couples to “re-marry” in a Church ceremony in order to “authenticate” the civil marriage.
of the age, judging by contemporaneous testimonials and sentimental advice columns. According to Carmen Martín Gaite’s excellent analysis of postwar middle-class love rituals, the hegemonic discourses on courtship and marriage of the 1940s and 1950s most often led to a ceremonious relationship between two strangers, forced to put up with each other after a premarital period of “transitory rhetorical enthusiasm” (18). The eventual mutual discovery and love that Spanish screwball featured after an initially superficial courtship and wedding ceremony did not only respond to a ritualized social situation, they could also positively respond to an entrenched lack of affection and personal dissatisfaction with existing relationships, triggering a wish-fulfilling belief in the potential transformation of a humdrum marriage into loving, even companionate bond. Spanish women in particular could easily give in to dreams of seeing their indifferent husbands overcome their emotional coldness and/or womanizing tendencies and resort to personal disclosures and passionate declarations of love. Even if these sudden events were not very frequent in most Spanish screwball comedies, due to the male protagonists’ fear of effeminacy, the few male confessions might have had a powerful reassuring effect, making the ensuing female surrender more worthwhile while triggering utopian hopes of similar disclosures in everyday life.

A comedic excess of performance and impersonation can also trigger a more acute critical distance in the Spanish audiences and subsequent politicized critique towards the elaborate cultural artifice underlying conventional gender roles. The enhanced visibility of existing romantic clichés, hidden under materialist motives, and of hegemonic identity politics that a structural reliance on masquerade brings about further corrodes the socially legitimated symbols, a task that humor, as “anti-rite”, most commonly performs: by playing with accepted sociocultural forms, humor can prompt the spectators’ awareness that “an accepted pattern has
no necessity” (Douglas “Jokes” 96), thus revealing the contingency or arbitrariness of both this pattern and of the established sociopolitical order that endorses it. By showing other alternatives through comic performance and impersonation and by allowing the freedom of multiple identification, screwball comedies could operate a useful defamiliarization of everyday life in postwar Spain, which might therefore elicit also the willingness to change this constraining situation. Thinking about the impact of Hollywood screwball on real-life relationships in the United States of the 1930s, Spanish screwball comedies and their discourse on love and marriage reinforced new expectations that also had great difficulty of actual embodiment in postwar Spain, yet they might have similarly contributed to the gradual redefinition of gender relations and the naturalization of alternative perspectives before they could reach a widespread social dominance: not only a means of articulating divergent role models from the hegemonically advanced ones, Spanish cinema permeated everyday experience as the main entertainment venue until the beginning of the 1960s, which enabled it to shape the audiences’ subjectivities and hence to contribute to new social constructions.

The wish-fulfilling projections of these screwball comedies implicitly pointed as well, as it was already mentioned, to personal and collective dissatisfactions with existing identity roles and social circumstances. They also put forth alternative models in manners, fashion, language, and leisure time, all heavily influenced by the appealing Hollywood screwball comedy. Even the visual resemblance with popular Hollywood cinema (e.g., in glamorous clothes and lavish settings) or the postwar Spanish star-system, imitating the same seductive model, beneficially fostered “deseos de ascenso social y placer contrarios al ideal fascista [rather, typically totalitarian] de subordinación del individuo al servicio del Estado”, as Jo Labanyi judiciously observes in respect to even the more hegemonically marked historical films produced in the
aftermath of the Civil War, but which were also permeated by politically subversive discourses ("Negociando la modernidad a través del pasado" 23). As she further noted in a footnote on the same page, pointing to the preliminary findings of her ethnographic account of cinema audiences in postwar Spain, “bajo las condiciones represivas y de escasez material de la posguerra española, el escapismo facilitado por el cine podia desempeñar un papel político activo”, as its very denial of “realism” “ofrecía la visión de un mundo donde las cosas podían ser de otra manera.” If we consider Ervin Goffman’s compelling notion of “cultural frame”, which analyzes how social existence is an ongoing “negotiation” about which cultural frame should envelop and thus ascribe meaning to events and actions, postwar Spanish cinema, functioning under the inescapable referent of the Hollywood cinema, with its different cultural frame on the quotidian, clearly contribute to a change not only or not necessarily in the actual content of everyday experience but, more importantly, in the larger framework in which this content was interpreted and appropriated and in which social behavior was given meaning and thus potentially altered in the long run. The “sanctity” of established institutions (especially marriage and family) was gradually eroded through repeated exposure to screwball alternative perspectives, which, despite conservative endings, carried out their operation of reframing mainly through mockery and inversion of hegemonic role models. Concurrent exposure to the disparate comedy, which will be analyzed in the next chapter, further contributed to breaking the existing cultural frames and to sanctioning and naturalizing alternative views on hegemonic institutions, gradually more radical and materialist towards the beginning of the 1960s, which witnessed the rise and flourishing of a powerful strain of Spanish dark comedy.
Various testimonials of the age (e.g., in Carmen Martín Gaite)\(^1\) and several contemporary studies (e.g., by Jo Labanyi, Esther Gómez Sierra, Triana Toribio, José Luis Castro de Paz etc.), in their passing references to popular films in postwar Spain, indeed show the audiences’ enthralment with Hollywood comedies as well as with several Spanish ones, many of which belonged to the screwball register (e.g., especially Ella, él y sus millones, Deliciosamente tontos). Having to work within existing representational conventions from different cultures and traditions (i.e., of the glamorous Hollywood screwball and of the popular autochthonous discourses of novela rosa, revue, alta comedia, sainete, zarzuela and astrakán), Spanish screwball comedies transformed and redirected them, however, in order to have a necessary contemporaneous appeal. This attractiveness was greatly indebted precisely to their hybrid status, which modeled the distinctive relevance and pleasurable comprehension of these movies for the postwar Spanish audiences: the malleable generic framework of these heterogeneous films could activate multiple interdiscursive cultural competencies, shared to different extents by both producers and spectators at that time. This hermeneutic familiarity undeniably contributed to the forging of alternative cinema-going communities and public spheres after the Civil War, which, in turn, permeated and shaped everyday experience in postwar Spain in a very different manner from that envisioned by the hegemonic exhortations of the age. This community ritual of cinema-going was substantiated not only by the several hours per week routinely spent in the movie theatres (Gómez Sierra, “‘Palaces of Seeds’” 95), but also by retelling the film plot in a family or informal setting (Labanyi, “The Mediation of Everyday Life” 106) or by various other forms of sociability in one way or another associated with the popular cinema of the time and its complementary star-system (e.g., through film reviews, magazine articles and fashion advertising

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\(^1\) In Usos amorosos de la posguerra española, she dwells on the personal experience of the postwar (middle-class) younger generation in conjunction with contemporaneous editorials, sentimental advice columns, popular romance novels and movies etc.
related to the actors’ private lives and tastes, ecclesiastical discourses and sentimental advice columns using popular movie characters and actors as models or anti-models, popular film soundtracks played on the national radio etc.).

The heterogeneous generic and cultural background that prepared the successful acclimatization of the Spanish screwball model were related not only to the bleak autarchy, with its specific psychological and sociohistorical impact on audiences, but also to the interests of the Spanish cinema industry, as we shall presently see when discussing the role of the film company CIFESA, the main producer of screwball comedy in Spain and the only distributor of all screwball movies. Only Turbante blanco, directed by Ignacio Iquino, who made his apprenticeship with CIFESA, was produced solely by Emisora Films, while a number of other screwball films (i.e., El difunto es un vivo, Boda accidentada, Una chica de opereta, and Ángela es así) were made by CIFESA together with Aureliano Campa’s investment group (i.e., Campa P. C.). Judging by the typical production template of the cinema industry, applicable for the Spanish case as well, film companies favor the production in cycles, consolidating (if it is the same company that initiated the cycle) or imitating (in the case of rival companies) the most profitable and popular cinematic pattern in terms of subject matter, plot, setting, and/ or characters (Altman, “Reusable Packaging” 15). Bearing this common studio practice in mind, we can better understand how CIFESA successfully initiated the screwball cycle in Spain, consolidating it due to its wide appeal, after which other minor production companies (e.g., Emisora Films, Edici, Cinedia, Hércules, Montesinos) tried to reap benefits, in their turn, from the already established popularity and commercial success of screwball comedy. A thorough
The consequential rise of CIFESA after the Civil War

CIFESA (Compañía Industrial Film Español S.A.) was founded as a production and distribution company in 1932. The owner, Vicente Casanova, was a rich, Valencia-based businessman who was affiliated to the so-called “sociological right” (Fanés 33). It is important to note here that, since 1930, before CIFESA was actually founded, it was the political spectrum of the Spanish right, of a conservative orientation, which was very interested in a national cinema industry and culture. Trumpeting patriotic rhetoric and downplaying the economic stakes, these industrialists’ publicly advertised motivation stressed the national importance of an autochthonously owned film company in order to counterbalance the popular flux of Hollywood movies, which allegedly “perverted” and “denatured” an obsessively clamored “Spanishness”. The propaganda model of the fascist German and Italian cinemas was already very alluring as well at that time and, after the Civil War, it set a political-economic standard for a state-supported interventionism on the national cinema in Spain, an industry that remained, however, in the hands of private investors.

CIFESA emerged during the Spanish Second Republic, owing its presence to the capitalist support of the industrial and financial bourgeoisie, who initiates its first investments in the cinema industry in the early 1930s. This capitalist presence also meant a certain degree of

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1 These minor production companies produced between one and four screwball comedies, some of which are no longer surviving under any format today.
2 This political spectrum is ascribed to the “bourgeois nationalism” close to the CEDA by Félix Fanés, who sees its ideological rhetoric as a mixture between anti-Marxism and moral and religious traditionalism.
production control that, as in the case of CIFESA, would be significantly increased after the Civil War. This internal censorship was of a conservative bent and was mostly manifest at the level of the moral and political ideas allegedly present in the movies: what was particularly indicted was any explicit erotic suggestiveness or leftist critique (e.g., class struggle, workers’ demands etc.) in favor of an imagined community united beyond any ideological conflicts (Afinoguénova 131). It is also important to mention that CIFESA was created in a very difficult period of the Spanish film industry, due to the lack of state protection, the meager cinematic output, the technical underdevelopment, the huge costs attached to the transition from silent to sound cinema, and the overwhelming rise of the Hollywood film industry, which already dominated the cinema and entertainment world market.

Not only in Spain, but also throughout Europe after First World War, there was an irrefutable preponderance of Hollywood films, which were universally preferred by European exhibitors and distributors because of the higher profits gained by showing American movies rather than local productions (López 420). This fierce competition was actually seen as a fundamental threat to local national cinemas and even as an overarching crisis of European civilization under the pressure of homogenizing consumerism and technology, generating debates about the underlying economic, aesthetic, and social reasons for this foreign hegemony (424). This international success of the Hollywood film industry consequently triggered passionate calls for state responsibility “to protect and/ or foster a national cinema” (424), an issue that became even more vehement and politicized in Spain in the aftermath of the Civil War. This widespread Spanish and European anxiety over the loss of national identity, felt to be giving way under the momentous Hollywood glamor, chose to sidestep, nevertheless, a thornier reason behind Hollywood’s overwhelming global power, “less as a question of exceptionalism,
consensus, ideology, or crude economic power […] than as a question of cultural circulation and hegemony.” (Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses” 340) As a cultural export, Hollywood cinema shared the main characteristics of the expanding American mass culture, including civic values, changed gender relations, and new forms of sensory perception, sociability, and leisure, all, in their turn, deeply affected by the way Hollywood cinema articulated, negotiated, and altered the personal and collective experience of modernity. Aided by its cosmopolitan community of producers and integrating widely different “traditions, discourses and interest on the domestic level”, that is, “forging a mass market out of an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous society” (340), American cinema successfully developed more easily translatable and appealing cultural products abroad, whose efficient circulation and marketing was doubtlessly fostered by an aggressive business mastery of distribution and exhibition. According to a general operational rule of mass culture, observed by various degrees by both the Hollywood movie industry and the postwar Spanish one (notably CIFESA), the industrial-commercial venue is the inescapable condition of possibility of any circulation of meaning for the cinema audiences, whether one considers conservative or more ambivalent or subversive values and role models: actual reception and interpretation depends on the “ambiguous, unstable, and contradictory make-up” of the industrial-commercial field and of the differing types of public (Hansen, “Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres” 204). The public sphere’s openness and alternative potential is indeed actualized through the industrial-commercial venue, a very important aspect worth keeping in mind as it further problematizes any monolithic account of film spectatorship. The industrial-commercial realm does contribute to the production and release of diversified cultural objects as it inherently strives to balance between the political necessity of “cultural respectability and legitimacy” and the economic need to provide “a
maximum of inclusion” for many different audiences or consumers (200-01). If the former demand draws the industrial-commercial milieu to the hegemonic public sphere, the latter opens the market both in terms of consumers, coming from mixed social constituencies (some of which might not have even been considered as a public before) and in terms of the varied everyday practices that make their way in the cultural products available on the market at a given point.

As Miriam Hansen judiciously observes as well, the mass appeal of American cinema was undeniably indebted to its impressive capacity “to engage viewers at the narrative-cognitive level”, providing powerful identity models for how to cope with the challenges of modern life while also opening radically “new modes of sensory perception and experience”, which expanded their spectators’ sensory and experiential horizon (“The Mass Production of the Senses” 344). By suggesting different patterns of organizing a frustrating quotidian, American cinema forged “a global sensory vernacular”, a kind of “a mass-mediated public sphere capable of responding to modernity and its failed promises”. One of the main reason for which Hollywood cinema found a global resonance was because it was able to mediate a distinctive historical experience for widely different people, challenging “prevailing social and sexual arrangements” and putting forth new forms of “social identity and cultural styles” (341). It is important to mention here, however, that, far from leveling the heterogeneous personal and collective experiences it encountered, American cinema was reconfigured differently in each particular context of reception, due to the specific injunctions of marketing, exhibition, censorship, and of the divergent experiences and horizons of expectations that different audiences had. Furthermore, the peculiar (self-)reflexivity triggered by Hollywood movies in its nationally diverse spectators seems to point to a fertile imaginative field for the ordinary people who made up the mass public, to whom American cinema provided an alternative public sphere
to articulate and negotiate their bewildering daily experiences and, therefore, to shape new subjectivities. In the case of autarkic Spain, this reflexivity and constructive potential meant that Spanish film audiences as well were enabled to question and resist the hegemonic discourses of the institutionalized public sphere, giving rise to a conflict of values that had an essential long-term impact upon the democratization of Spanish culture and society. Hollywood’s powerful formative influence did not manifest itself only directly, through its own products, but also indirectly, through the countless waves of imitation that its glamor, commercial success and audience popularity brought about, as it was the case with screwball comedy, so resourcefully translated through the already mentioned local generic patterns.

An essential fact for the emergence of the screwball discourse in Spain actually goes back to CIFESA’s initial Republican period, when it enjoyed exclusivity in importing Columbia movies (in between 1933 and 1935), thus distributing many Hollywood comedies from the newly initiated screwball cycle—It Happened One Night, directed by Frank Capra and considered the first screwball comedy, was shown, for instance, in Spain in 1934, the same year as in the United States. In the 1930s, Columbia actually became one of the most profitable and glamorous Hollywood production companies due to Frank Capra’s popular movies (Fanés 51). This beloved comedy director, associated with Columbia from 1927 to 1939, shrewdly capitalized on the recent studio transition to sound by ascribing an essential protagonism to fast talk in screwball.

As the largest distributing company, CIFESA imported many other Hollywood movies, screwball included, also after 1935, as we could easily see from the available data in prewar and postwar film magazines. The excellent ratings that its Spanish movies received from the postwar censors, together with their impressive commercial success brought CIFESA the official acknowledgement of “exemplary business” in 1944 (Fanés 196), which enabled it to continue to
be the main distributor of foreign films, whose number depended both upon the number of Spanish movies produced and upon their ratings by censors. Economic and political reasons contributed, however, to the considerable decrease in the number of imported Hollywood movies during and after the Civil War, until 1944. Because of the substantial number of Hollywood films that it was allowed to import, dependent upon the propitious censorship ratings of its Spanish productions, Emisora Films, the Barcelona-based movie company that produced *Turbante blanco*, for instance, in 1943, was considered a mere “license factory” for Hispano-Fox, the Hollywood film distributor that had the most significant business presence in Spain (Díez Puertas 158). Ignacio Iquino, one of the most popular comedy directors of the 1940s, whose fame was greatly indebted to his initial association with CIFESA between 1940 and 1941, is among the pillars of Emisora Films’ rise through his accurate artistic and business sense for successful movies, which had to avoid any possible withdrawal of the existing Barcelona investors from Emisora Films (Fanés 112).

Thinking about the embedded dichotomy of the industrial-commercial sphere that I previously mentioned, it is perhaps easier to understand the position of the Spanish film industry in the aftermath of the Civil War. Naturally interested in the commercial success of their productions and quite distanced from any blind adherence to the hegemonic exhortations regarding the Spanish “model” cinema, CIFESA and other minor film companies such as Emisora Films chose to make many low-cost, profitable movies, which were very popular with a wide variety of postwar audiences. At the same time, they shrewdly produced few high-cost, state-sponsored films, mostly melodramas, on historical, military, or, especially after 1945, religious topics. Many of these high-scale cinematic endeavors chose to safely adapt already existing literary works (especially from the nineteenth century), relying on censorship lenience.
towards respectable classics or writers considered politically compliant. CIFESA, for instance, would simultaneously work with two different sets of movies: while one of them, the so-called “cine de calidad”, ascribed social distinction and hegemonic legitimation to the brand, the other one, the commercially successful group of films, including screwball comedies, would reap economic benefits (Fanés 166). It is to this latter set of films that many independent capitalist ventures often contributed, one of which belonged to Aureliano Campa, who later founded Emisora Films, another important production company of postwar screwball comedies. These capitalist ventures were unsurprisingly interested in a fast return on their investments, a fact that the popular comedy director and scriptwriter Ignacio Iquino, for instance, in charge of several popular Spanish screwball comedies (e.g., El difunto es un vivo, Boda accidentada, Turbante blanco), could not afford to disregard as he left CIFESA and joined Emisora Films in 1941.

In a 1944 interview with the Primer Plano contributor and film critic Fernández Barreira, Ignacio Iquino frankly declared that his postwar comedy production was meant to both entertain and distract the Spanish public “de su psicosis de guerra, para aliviar la tremenda tensión con que acababa de vivir un periodo tan trágico”. In a later interview with Mario Tribeiro, from Cámara, Iquino reinforced his previous confession, asserting that Spaniards needed “oblivion” and a “healthy laughter” in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, a psychological necessity that was parallel to an industrial and social context that did not seem to welcome many grand historical film productions (8-9). A 1946 article from the same magazine (i.e., “La película cómica”), written by a mysterious “Ariel”, also shrewdly pointed to the essential role of comedy both after the Civil War and after the Second World War, two devastating carnages that triggered an

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1 Their cultural prestige and/ or political docility were also linked to potential commercial gains for the producing company under the form of official prizes and classifications, which translated into total or partial state reimbursement of the production costs and the much coveted import and distribution licenses of foreign (especially Hollywood) movies.
understandable escapist desire from the grim everyday reality and a psychological necessity of laughter “por los medios que sean” (5): “Risa y más risa, puente para salvar las deficiencias del momento alimenticio, de las malas noticias del extranjero”. “Ariel” also accurately observed that, despite any elitist critical contempt, the Spanish audiences were primarily attracted to a movie about which they had heard it was comic (i.e., generated a lot of laughter). He further notes an important change in public taste after the postwar, when gradually more female spectators became attracted to comedies (i.e., “películas intrascendentes”, “comedias ligeras”), being no longer very interested in melodrama as before, in prewar times, when comedies mostly appealed to men.¹ In the case of screwball comedies, this change of spectatorship could have also been catalyzed by the astute hybridization of slapstick, gags and melodramatic elements (centered around the protagonists’ romance), which ensured that the film would commercially appeal to a wide variety of people and hence satisfy both producers and audiences: “quien manda es el público, y el público no quiere más problemas ficticios, que ya le bastan y agobian los reales.”

On the other hand, in 1942 Iquino acknowledged in a flash interview with the magazine Digame that making people laugh is much more difficult than making them cry (a potentially subversive remark in the harsh autarkic and repressive setting of the age), which accounted, in his opinion, for the conspicuous shortage of comic plots that could be used in the Spanish cinema of the time (“Entrevista con Iquino” 6). This potentially inflammatory bent was further reinforced by another unceremonious confession, according to which he could not take “life” seriously, as he tended to view everything through caricature lenses, an assertion that was in an

¹ Even if CIFESA was deeply conservative before the Civil War as well, for reasons that have been already stated, more morally objectionable erotic innuendoes could be integrated in the authochtonous movies, especially during Republican times, when there was less concern of the Spanish cinematic industry with middle-class notions of decorum and respectability.
undeniable opposition with the recurring lofty, stern exhortations of the postwar. Iquino seems to have taken his peculiar humor from the popular theaters and cafés historically associated with the Paralelo Boulevard from Barcelona (e.g., Apolo, Victoria, Arnau, El Molino etc.), a district that has been functionally equated with the Parisian Montmartre. The revue roots of his comedies (e.g., through mistaken identities, vaudeville-picaresque situations, inclusion of musical breaks, very subtle sexual innuendoes) enabled him to rapidly connect with the majority public of the time, an urban proletariat without high intellectual demands (Vidal 67). Iquino’s reiterated use of musical interludes can also be explained by his apparent fascination with the Hollywood musicals (70). This foreign intertext constituted an indicted subversive alternative in the aftermath of the Civil War, as it was associated with a corrupting, American-based modernity and a typically Republican “loose living”, both of which also meant a dangerously emancipated woman, who could not be fit into any Catholic domestic models. Having a limited budget at his disposal, Iquino’s production team could not afford the same glamorous stars as CIFESA, yet he often made a fortunate recourse to the same secondary actors, such as the tremendously popular José Isbert, Guadalupe Muñoz Sampedro, Mary Santpere, Fernando Freyre de Andrade (70), who can be credited, to a great extent, for both the ambiguity and the reception success of these Spanish screwball comedies.

It is not always clear, of course, how the alternative elements of these comedies actually functioned for each postwar spectator, but it is perhaps easier to substantiate that social ascent or material improvement might have seemed more feasible, for instance, for the middle-class audiences. Lower-class audiences, which could dream of survival more than of any actual ascent or significant material improvement, might have regarded this mobility as more or less utopian, which does not mean that these comedies were not efficient catalysts for counterhegemonic
constructions of subjectivities in their case as well (in so far as gender roles and romance models were concerned). Furthermore, as it has been already mentioned before, the Spanish screwball comedies provided an important continuity link, not deprived of subversiveness, with the filmography of the Spanish Second Republic (in topics, settings, characters and actors) while preserving many alternative role models originally stemming from the Hollywood screwball. It is very difficult to imagine how these audiences would have constructed their subjectivities in the long run without this significant exposure to such divergent discourses and practices from the hegemonically extolled ones, a difference that will be more clearly understood in the analyses of actual screwball comedies.

The harsh social and material circumstances in the aftermath of the Civil War made comedy both necessary and alluring, as they fostered a transitory, politically charged evasion from a bleak everyday life striving to resist and cope with hunger, poverty, and political repression. The grim life of autarkic Spain, with its comprehensible consolidation of “material myths” (Vázquez Montalbán 50), witnesses indeed an unsurprising popularity of especially the folkloric and screwball comic subgenres. The latter are set in lavish settings, characterized by exclusive, very clearly delineated interiors, with a minimal recourse to street shooting, which deprives them of any explicit visual reference to the shortage and repression that constituted the quotidian for most Spanish people after the Civil War.1 It is interesting to note here that, if most movie reviews of the age (e.g., in magazines such as Primer Plano, Cámara, Radiocinema, or Digame) tend to disciplinarily indict the “excess”, “absurd”, “gracia burda” and “chabacana”, or

1 Spanish secondary actors like the popular José Isbert, whose earnings were meager compared to the romantic stars’ glamorous contracts but who were part of the local star-system nonetheless, often provided, through their public declarations, an inherent model for the prevalent survival goals of the vast majority of postwar population. A 1942 flash interview set up by the magazine Digame is very illustrative in this respect: at the question “Si hubiese fuego en su casa, ¿qué es lo primero que salvaría usted?”, José Isbert pragmatically answered “¡La cartilla de abastecimientos, que es lo más imprescindible hoy día!”, a retort that must have drawn him even closer to the less fortunate segments of the postwar Spanish population while pointing to a crude reality.
the “disparate grotesco” of screwball comedies, they choose to salvage and commend the lavish settings and clothes, clearly striving to imitate the ambience of Hollywood screwball and cinema. This peculiar imitation of Hollywood, which implicitly muffles the autarchic landscape of postwar Spain, is among the very few “borrowings” that is consistently not condemned by the conservative Spanish critics, who most often decry the “anarchic” foreign influences of the American film industry upon the Spanish cinema and society. Furthermore, alongside the eccentric courtship ending in marriage or romantic reaffirmation (if the couple is already married), almost all screwball comedies feature social mobility and/ or material advancement, often united with the subject of the double, which coupled a compensatory gratification and a final, providential stroke of luck that could happily solve the initial confusion of identities. In most cases, the compensatory gratification presupposes a kind of pragmatic change of personality in response to exterior demands (a useful flexibility in the aftermath of the Civil War) and the alluring possibility of simultaneously living in two different realities before finally remaining in the more glamorous one. We should not, however, undermine the cultural reframing potential and pleasure of the playful and lavish spectacle itself, or of the transitory wish for identification from the postwar spectators’ part, a utopian desire already commented upon and which was present in contemporaneous novelas rosa as well.

The romance pattern also suffuses the popular novelas cinematográficas, which will be briefly referred at the beginning of this chapter, whose postwar inventory (i.e., between 1942 and 1944) includes a significant amount of screwball plots, which indirectly testifies to the success and wide circulation of the screwball discourse in the Spain of the 1940s. The postwar

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1 The recurrent topic of mistaken identities in Spanish screwball comedy can be retraced not only to the Hollywood screwball, where it is not very prevalent, but also in the already mentioned novelas rosa, in its turn heavily influenced by a powerful melodramatic tradition (both literary and cinematic), and the autochthonous discourses of the so-called comedia de enredo, sainete or zarzuela, with which the Spanish screwball enters into a fruitful dialog.
established collection “Biblioteca de cine Rialto” offered romance novels that were an adaptation of some of Hollywood and CIFESA’s most profitable movies, such as the screwball comedy Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife (released in the United States in 1936 but shown in Spain only in 1942), whose Spanish literary version belonged to María Amalia Dampierre (Díez Puertas 342-44).

Despite the many problems that the Spanish film industry faced at the time of its postwar consolidation, imprinted by both autarky and the shortage linked to the Civil War and the Second World War, the enforced self-sufficiency trumpeted after 1939 was also beneficial for the cinema industry in Spain and, in particular, for CIFESA, which was strongly supported by a series of protectionist measures implemented by the new Spanish state. Not wishing to unnecessarily dwell on the extensively researched issues of the Spanish postwar cinema policies, it is interesting to note, however, that Vicente Casanova, CIFESA’s founder, shrewdly capitalized on the new regime’s lenience towards his business endeavors. This benevolence was actively courted and went beyond Casanova’s leaning toward the political right and beyond similar ideological options on the part of some of the most influential directors and actors who worked for CIFESA in the aftermath of the Civil War. During the war, Vicente Casanova and some of the leading members of CIFESA openly declare their Nationalist sympathies, enlisting their help to produce war and propaganda documentaries, which were added to their production of few feature films, consisting in folkloric comedies, rural melodramas, and some screwball comedies, a genre that was already consolidated in the United States and that enjoyed a lot of popularity since Republican times. After the end of the Civil War, CIFESA continues to shoot some propaganda documentaries and news bulletins in its studios, which parallels Vicente Casanova’s useful rapprochement to various Nationalist generals and Falange high officials as well as his
friendship with the influential Carrero Blanco (Fanés 196-97). It is useful to remember here that the Falange was among the most important supporters of a strong and politically efficient Spanish national cinema, ideally modeled after the interventionist model of the fascist German and Italian cinema. The Falange officials were also in charge of the cultural policies of the Spanish state immediately after the Civil War, yet the mediocre bourgeois officials who had an active role in the supervision of the Spanish film industry through various newly created state institutions were unable to implement a centralized system of ideological control, much less so after the regime’s gradual reconversion to a more openly endorsed Catholicism towards the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942. The main impact of these state institutions was exerted through prizes, subsidies and several protectionist measures, whereas censorship was more strictly enforced in the moral realm, especially after 1942.

Censorship also targeted explicit political critiques of the regime, hence it tended to tackle the fields that would unsettle a conservative outlook. In most cases, the censors’ suggestions corresponded to Casanova’s own guidelines, who was personally involved in almost all movies produced by CIFESA and had the privilege of the first screening, which enabled him to make suggestions of amendments before any official censor could undermine the classification of the CIFESA films (which unsurprisingly tended to be excellent under these circumstances) and their subsequent box-office destiny. In a way, this internal mechanism of self-regulation was very similar to the Hays Code, serving an analogous purpose, to prevent the action of external censorship and potential political and economic retaliation.

The paternalist-conservative type of censorship of the immediate postwar period greatly intensified after 1945, when the Catholic Church massively joined the state apparatus and thus became even more actively involved in censorship. The support of the Catholic Church was
essential in the legitimation of the Francoist regime abroad after the Allied victory in the Second World War, when the Spanish postwar rule needed an urgent cosmetic lift in order to wipe away the memory of its ideological affinities with Fascism and of its former partnership with the defeated Axis powers. The nationally and internationally trumpeted endorsement of a National-Catholic discourse was also meant to revitalize Spain’s image abroad as a devout Catholic nation, gradually replacing the official Falangist rhetoric of the immediate postwar. The authoritarian public intervention of the ecclesiastical circles in national cinema and their stricter enforcement of censorship in the moral realm (especially in what diverged from their sanctioned role models) meant not only an opportunistic rise in religious melodramas after 1945 but also a parallel gradual downplaying of the more playful, “frivolous” and nonsensical comic elements that characterize Spanish screwball comedy. 1946 actually marks the official end of this successful cycle in Spain and also the beginning of a period very scarce in comedies altogether, which will flourish again starting with the mid-1950s, an ascent that is paralleled by a gradual disappearance of religious melodramas and the growing modernization of the Francoist regime, as we shall see in the next chapter.

There are other reasons, however, for the extinction of the Spanish screwball comedy after the end of the Second World War, one of which is related to the vicissitudes of the policies regulating the Spanish imports of Hollywood movies. It is useful to passingly mention here that, even if there were isolated instances of Spanish screwball films during Republican times, it would have been economically unwise in times of crisis for the local cinema industry to resort to a massive production of Spanish screwball that could never rise to the virtuosity of the original models, which were otherwise consistently and successfully available to the autochthonous audiences (who could even enjoy them dubbed in Spanish). These prewar distribution and
exhibition circumstances are to some extent responsible for the astute reliance of the national cinema industry on a populist, “authentically Spanish” (i.e., castizo) production, made up of rural melodramas, folkloric comedies, and some sainetes and zarzuelas, which could not only enjoy an easy internal monopoly in respect to the powerful Hollywood industry but also responded to the high demand of the lower-class Spanish public for such topics and settings. The drastic decrease in the number of imported American movies between 1940 and 1944 unsurprisingly triggered a prompt rise in Spanish screwball comedies, many of which were unfortunately lost or destroyed, especially from 1940 (e.g., Yo soy mi rival, No quiero, no quiero, En poder de Barba Azul), which joined the unfortunate fate of some 1939 screwball films (e.g., Julieta y Romeo, La linda Beatriz).

The flourishing of Spanish screwball comedies in the aftermath of the Civil War was also indebted to the bilateral agreements with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, which brought about significant imports of German and Italian movies until 1942 (Díez Puertas 69, 357; Llinás 111-12), screwball comedies included, judging by the passing remarks about their plots and titles.\(^1\) Pejoratively branded as “cinema dei telefono bianchi” since the beginning of the 1940s (because of their heavy reliance not only on mistaken identities but also on social and class distinction and on urban consumerism),\(^2\) Italian imitations of Hollywood comedies fused local theatrical and vaudeville traditions as well and were similarly dismissed as frivolous “americanatas” in Fascist

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1 The bilateral cinema agreements with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany must have come to an end in 1942 also because of the ideological reconversion of the Spanish regime in mid-1941 and early 1942, a change of façade marked by the ousting of some of the strong historical leaders of the Falange, such as Ramón Serrano Suñer and Dionisio Ridruejo, and by the increasing power of Catholic officials. In addition, there was an increasing resentment on the part of contemporaneous German and Italian leaders with the additional Spanish censorship of their fiction and documentary movies, which had already obtained the sanction of their respective systems of censorship (Díez Puertas 69).

2 The label “comedias de teléfonos blancos”, the most widespread name given to the Spanish or Italian screwball comedy by Spanish film critics and historians, is significantly institutionalized in Spain in the 1970s, when it is inseparable from a Marxist understanding of such comedy (and of the Spanish cinema of that age in general) as “reactionary”, “escapist”, “false” etc., a view that is consonant with the traditional leftist consideration of popular artifacts of mass culture.
Italy. They flourished roughly between 1937 and 1941, with an important ascent especially after
1939, due to the abandonment of Italian markets by the main Hollywood production and
distribution companies (D’Amico 34-36). Unlike the Italian versions yet similar to many Spanish
forms, the Nazi screwball comedies constructed more disciplinary gender models and displayed
an acute obsession and anxiety with effeminate, “incomplete” men, who are eventually led to
more socially and politically acceptable modes of masculinity (Nathenson 85). Ironically, despite
the conventional tendency towards more authoritarian endings in both the German and the
Spanish screwball, it was the Italian and not the German cinema that was generally more popular
with Spanish audiences, which led to an astute profitable translation of the Italian and not of the
German screwball models in Spain. Like Hollywood comedies, Italian screwball put forth more a
playful, often mischievous type of humor, as it was the case, for instance, with Dopo
divorzieremo, from 1940, adapted to the Spanish screen in a more toned down manner (as Un
marido provisional), yet contributing from Miguel Mihura’s witty, playful contribution as a
dialog writer.

In any case, the growing number of Italian and German screwball comedies, at a time
when the number of Hollywood films was very scarce, must have undeniably contributed to the
consolidation of the Spanish screwball discourse after the Civil War. If Spain’s enforced autarkic
policies and the international isolation and punishment it suffered in the immediate postwar
triggered a necessary supply of the local market with Spanish movies (alongside with German
and Italian imports), starting with 1944 there is an increase in the number of Hollywood films
that enter Spain (i.e., the double or the triple of previous years). By analyzing Fèlix Fanés’
comprehensive import figures (122), we further notice that this augmented number rises even
more after the end of the Second World War, despite the punitive inclusion of CIFESA in the
Motion Picture Association (MPA)’s “black lists”.¹ This ascending flux of Hollywood movies in Spain after 1944 brought about the Spanish public’s change of cinematic tastes, given that they were exposed to different American films in the aftermath of the Second World War, a time that also marks the end of the screwball cycle in the United States.

The year 1946, which marks the end of the screwball cycle in Spain after a progressive weakening of its specifically playful take on romance, marriage and family after 1944, is also linked to the beginning of a long period of crisis for CIFESA, which led to Vicente Casanova’s decision to radically change its company’s cinematic style and make it more consonant with the new cosmetic face-lifting of the Francoist administration. Consequently, CIFESA started preferring grand historical and religious movies (i.e., the so-called “superproducciones”), which entailed less but more costly film productions that were popular with the Spanish public only for a brief period of time. These lavish “superproducciones” understandably benefited from ample state support (through the wide range of protectionist measures targeting the Spanish cinema) and from ecclesiastical praise, very important in an age that witnessed a more significant public intervention (censorship included) of the Catholic Church. However, it is not the task of this chapter or thesis to further analyze the new difficult period that CIFESA had to go through at the end of the Second World War. The examination of the Spanish screwball needs to focus more instead on the peculiar imprint of the género chico tradition on the local translation of the Hollywood comedic discourse.

The inquiry into the importance of CIFESA for the successful Spanish implementation of screwball cannot be closed, actually, without an important observation, related to the Republican times. This prewar period witnessed not only CIFESA’s important collaboration with Columbia,

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¹ MPA was the powerful association of some of the most important production and distribution companies from Hollywood.
but also its strong interest in cinematically adapting several zarzuelas (e.g., belonging to the Quintero Brothers or to the popular Ricardo de la Vega) and sainete elements in order to carry out the trumpeted patriotic mission of making a national Spanish cinema. This national cinema from Republican times was politically commended for its social critique and anti-hierarchical stance, but it was also often criticized for its excessive dependence on theatrical forms. According to Ríos Carratalá, “la incorporación de lo sainetesco al cine coincide con la práctica desaparición del género en el ámbito teatral, lo cual implica que lo incorporado es ya una materia que ya no tiene la cohesión propia de una obra teatral ajustada a unos determinados cánones genéricos.” (Lo sainetesco en el cine español 11) There are hardly any theatrical sainetes actually adapted to the screen after the Civil War, yet there is an ample cinematic use of its characters, settings, plots, and techniques (12), which are singularly hybridized even with the Hollywood screwball discourse, as we shall presently see.

The imprint of zarzuela and sainete on the Spanish screwball comedy

As a popular Spanish theatrical discourse, the sainete becomes prominent through Ramón de la Cruz’ extensive work, in the second half of the 18th century, yet its origins go back to the Spanish Golden Age entremés, belonging to the “minor theater” and conceived as a comic interlude featuring lower-class characters. The entremés would take place in between the main acts of a longer play (i.e., comedia), which has raised two important issues: of the potential carnivalesque subversion operated through the entremés (i.e., a subversion of the more disciplinary discourse of the main play) and of the extent of narrative or dramatic integration
between the two types of plays. However, towards the end of the 18th century, the *sainete* is consolidated as a *castizo* conservative discourse against modernity and, in particular, against what was perceived as an adulterating fashionable influence of French civilization upon Spanish national culture and tradition. According to Rafael Lamas, the gradual acceptance of this popular discourse by the Spanish intellectual elites of the nineteenthcentury is inextricably linked to the rise of Romantic nationalism and its nostalgic-idealized version of an atemporal *Volksgeist*. Towards the end of the nineteenth-century and the beginning of the twentieth, the most paradigmatic author of popular *sainetes* is Carlos Arniches, “un clásico de sedimentación”, who astutely employed efficient theatrical formulas that could satisfy the wide, enthusiastic audiences “en busca de diversión y atracción” (Ríos Carratalá, *Arniches* 18-19). What Arniches successfully accomplished was indebted to his skillful reshuffling of Madrid-related costumbrist, humorous elements, which he refurbished especially in the sphere of colloquial spoken language, but also by adding a conservative moralizing ending that highlighted a melodramatic poetic justice.

The entire *sainete* tradition, not only Arniches’ plays, are powerfully marked by an extraordinary level of communication between audiences and theatrical actors, for whom diction and a plastic facial and body language were essential for the efficiency of jokes and double-meaning dialogs as well as for a pleasurable reaffirmation of human types and stock situations, which the public could immediately recognize. This marked insistence in the generation of

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1 For more information on the Golden Age roots of *sainete* and on its carnivalesque bent, see Lucy D. Harney’s skillful analysis in “Carnival and Critical Reception in the *Sainete* Tradition”.
2 One of the most frequent target of satire in these *sainetes* were the “Frenchified” *petimetres* and *petimetras*, who were made to appear ridiculous through their unfounded, shallow pretenses that could be subsumed under the entrenched dualist metaphor of the “form without substance”.
3 As a genre, the *sainete* is a based on a simple plot structure, comic dialogs of a seemingly naïve, superficial satire, and some enduring human types in the Spanish theatrical tradition (e.g., “unruly” women, the doorman, the *fresco*, the ingenious servant, the Madrid *chulo* etc.), usually marked by their costumbrist belonging to a certain geographical area.
laughter at all costs, a peculiar mark of the vaudeville tradition in general, tended to be very disparagingly seen from the vantage point of the comedic narrative tradition, which favored strong plots, rounded characters and carefully constructed narrative motivation. Arniches has thus been repeatedly indicted for his excessive “insistencia en los diálogos cómicos o por la necesidad de precipitar un final feliz y conciliador” (Ríos Carratalá 24), a criticism that actually echoes some of the most recurrent issues of dramatic construction in Spanish screwball comedies as well. On the one hand, most critics of such Spanish comedies mercilessly vituperate their vaudeville tendency to indulge in various humorous dialogs and situations that rely upon verbal and visual distancing effects and that are mostly interested in generating the audiences’ hearty laughter, at the expense of a smoother narrative integration and of a closer identification with endorsed role model characters. These Spanish film reviewers thus accurately perceive that the mere portrayal of such moments of humorous confusion, uncertainty and rebellion in screwball comedies is undoubtedly subversive, even if temporary insubordination is presented as a ridiculed counter-model from the perspective of the final conservative ending. This necessary presentation of visible alternatives to the accepted social patterns has the potential to act as a catalyst for new behavioral roles, which enables a seemingly “light”, apolitical form of mass entertainment such as comedy, whether theatrical or cinematic, to have political relevance beyond its sanctioned break from everyday rules and conventions.

On the other hand, both sainetes and postwar screwball comedies are, of course, under the formal obligation of a final disciplinary resolution, meant to openly reinforce the existing social and political hierarchies by “reforming” the ungovernable characters and reconciling them with the established order. It is thus unsurprising that the compulsory discipline exercised in the end in both artistic forms is almost always accomplished through a melodramatic happy ending,
featuring romantic union or reconciliation. Bearing this formal and political necessity in mind, it is interesting to see how most advertising posters of the postwar Spanish screwball comedies also reinforced melodramatic and not comic expectations, as melodrama tended to be considered more conciliatory and politically harmless, also offering the necessary hegemonic endorsement of middle-class values and respectability, an astute device of eschewing censorship in times of political repression. In the case of the Spanish screwball comedies, this melodramatic marketing choice must have also been an astute device, meant to attract especially the female audiences, offering them, besides, images of their preferred local stars (i.e., the leading couple) in melodramatic stances. The same comedy often has, however, several types of posters, depending on the marketing venue and the targeted public—sometimes what were highlighted were the stock comic postures featured by popular secondary characters, interpreted by gifted actors coming from the prewar theatrical scene, notably from the género chico tradition.

As in the case of Hollywood in the period of transition to the sound, the prewar and postwar Spanish cinema was characterized by a significant infusion of theatrical and revue actors, seduced by the attractive conditions of work and by the glamor of the big screen. As Emeterio Díez Puertas observes, an initial formative experience on the theatrical stage even tended to be the norm for most talented Spanish movie actors, whose conspicuous migration to the CIFESA, Emisora Films or other studios was also indebted to the already mentioned gradual crisis in the Spanish theater beginning with the 1920s. On the other hand, these movie companies, especially CIFESA, practiced what Félix Fanés calls a “monopoly of talent” policy

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1 Grown even more severe after the Civil War, the crisis of the Spanish theater involved entrepreneurial problems, heavy gradual losses of its work force and of private investments and, consequently, the necessary infusion of the Spanish theater with state subventions, which ensured its difficult survival. The plight of the Spanish stage was also greatly indebted to the fierce competition with other industries, more technologically advanced and increasingly popular, as it was the case of cinema and later with television, which also secured more public funds due to their more alluring ideological and economic profitability in respect to the audiences.
(193), most notably in the case of its most famous directors and of its most glamorous leading actors, who would become its public images and would enjoy exclusive contracts that entailed fabulous sums, particularly during harsh autarkic times. The prewar and postwar Spanish public was actively courted by CIFESA both by the local star-system it developed and by the unmistakable Hollywood touch of its movies, as it was the case of screwball comedies. Furthermore, the Spanish audiences were also seduced by CIFESA’s shrewdly instrumented public visibility: Vicente Casanova’s company officials knew how to astutely flatter its spectators by widely mediated events such as festivals, charity campaigns, talent contests, opinion polls etc. The Spanish star-system promoted by CIFESA actually draws it closer to the envied model of the well-known American film production and distribution companies such as Paramount and Columbia, which became a working model also in respect to the transformation of the Spanish cinema into a profitable business, with an industrial output (i.e., well-equipped studios, exclusive professional contracts for its stars, directors, and technicians, even for the common employees and the auxiliary staff etc.). The popular, extraordinarily gifted cómicos who came from the theatrical or revue stage (e.g., Antonio Vico, José Isbert, Julia Lajos, Guadalupe Muñoz Sanpedro, Fernando Freyre de Andrade, Camino Garrigó, Mary Santpere) were astutely recruited by CIFESA and had a vital impact both upon the popularity and the ambiguity of screwball comedies, in which they usually interpreted secondary characters. As we shall see in the analyses of individual screwball comedies, these secondary actors’ capacity for powerful,

1 An illustrating example is the enviable contracts of the leading stars (i.e., Amparo Rivelles and Alfredo Mayo) and the glamorous advertising around the extremely popular Deliciosamente tontos, produced and distributed by CIFESA in 1943.

2 CIFESA’s founder, Vicente Casanova, was publicly known for his apparent personality cult (after the Civil War he was even nicknamed “Franquito” for that, an inherent comparison that it arguably says a lot about the ordinary public’s lucid awareness of the publicly constructed figure of the “caudillo”). He would actively elicit the Spanish public’s high regard, in respect to which he tried to cultivate a strong relationship, both affable and paternalist, through personally stamped advertising campaigns, popular opinion polls, and public festivals and ceremonies (Fanés 195).
immediate connection with the cinema public, through their peculiar humor and dramatic art, not only often compensated for the more rigid and artificial body language of the main couple, but also introduced a subversive carnivalesque downgrade of the moralizing bent of the Spanish screwball, particularly of its decorous melodramatic endings.

Quite customary of sainetes, the human types interpreted by these popular cómicos tend to be conventionally imprinted by their socioeconomic milieux and by several recurring characteristics (e.g., personal tics and wardrobe), which facilitate their rapid identification by contemporaneous spectators and the relatively easy success of the verbal and sight gags stemming not only from the Spanish género chico but also from the Hollywood silent comedian comedy traditions. From the moment they make their appearance on the stage or on the screen, these actors visually embody a certain preexistent comic profile, springing from one or more generic traditions (e.g., sainete, Hollywood comedian comedy, revue etc.). This initial profile is further enriched by the actors’ own star personae (especially by their public media image) and by their peculiar interpretation of each character-type in the individual play or movie, characterized by abundant, loosely integrated dialogs, full of double meanings and wordplays. Whereas the occasional slapstick moments that these cómicos embody subversively point to a body out of control (a particularly problematic issue under dictatorships), the recurrent sight and verbal gags also allow more margins for alternative interpretations by the audience, as they are less visually or narratively constricted. The resulting comic instability and confusion with which these popular actors infused the plays and films they featured in seems to have disciplinarily called for a stricter control of humor in the end, usually through melodramatic union or reconciliation of the main couple, who usually have the last word in their embodiment of more conventional identity models (i.e., the rebellious woman’s or man’s domestication).
The imprint of *sainete* on the Spanish screwball comedy is actually obvious not only in the realm of such secondary characters, dialogs, settings or general gender roles, but also at the level of the main thematic pattern of Spanish screwball, namely the social domestication of an idle womanizer or an emancipated, “unruly” woman. Some Spanish screwball comedies (e.g., *Mi fantástica esposa*, *Ella, él y sus millones*, *Boda accidentada*) choose a secondary focus on an older couple, sometimes lower-class, a complementary stress that highlights the dangers of a weak masculinity, when the husband looks ridiculous because he is dominated by an emasculating female figure, a misogynist pedagogical stock topic in the *género chico* tradition, which is not deprived of ambiguity: this “unruly woman”, meant to be funny and ridiculed as a counter-model, can also function as a subversive empowering example for some female spectators given that its very presentation implicitly offers an alternative behavioral image.

Interestingly enough, this humorous perspective also appears in various early 1940s caricatures, which, as previously noted, show striking similitudes in the depicted image of this “unruly woman”. Their peculiar comic vision seems to be based upon the perceived incongruence between the actual contemporaneous gender roles and the inverted situation depicted: whereas postwar women were in an inferior position, relegated to domesticity, these magazine sketches portrayed them in implausible authoritarian stances, “feminizing” men by compelling them to perform household chores and even physically abusing their husbands. The implicit disciplinary warning of these narratives can be associated with a conservative discourse in respect to gender roles and romance models that, in the case of Spanish screwball comedies, is often present through secondary characters in the *sainete* tradition like the butlers (i.e., “mayordomos de casa grande”), who often have a better perception of the main couple and of their power games than their pretentious, rich masters. The lavish settings of these film comedies occasionally include
extravagant characters, sometimes upper-class (i.e., aristocrats), who are also interpreted by
gifted theatrical actors from the género chico tradition, such as José Isbert and Guadalupe Muñoz
Sampedro in Ella, él y sus millones or Julia Lajos in La vida empieza a medianoche.

The satire of the pretentious, extravagant rich and of lower-scale authorities (e.g.,
“guardias civiles”) began to more powerfully appear in Spanish sainetes after the 1870s,
following the rise of the so-called “teatro por horas”, which privileged numerous daily
performances, both brief and cheap, in the face of the contemporaneous economic crisis (which
also affected the number of theatrical spectators).¹ Whereas sainetes initially targeted rather
marginal audiences, coming from the lower classes, who were offered more clearly
carnivalesque topics and humorous treatment, the consolidation of the “teatro por horas” entailed
a gradual change in the social class of its spectators, who came to be much more heterogeneous
and eventually became predominantly middle-class, which, as in the case of American vaudeville
or early cinema, meant a progressive elimination of the more subversive carnivalesque strains of
earlier sainete and increased moral and social respectability (Harney 326). Particularly noticeable
was the clear moralizing bent of this theatrical form that sought to discard whatever threatened to
undermine the existing social and moral hierarchies endorsed by the rising middle-classes.² Most
género chico works from this period seem to thus gradually converge towards a denial of their
alleged emancipatory social and political values: in consonance with the liberal elites’
romanticized and conservative outlook on the popular classes, the “castizo” heroes of the late

¹ According to María Pilar Espín Templado, dramatic performances were divided in four one-hour parts, the so-called “sesiones por horas”, which were considerably cheaper, in order to counter this crisis and to avoid the bankruptcy of the theaters. Their production venues were not only traditional theaters but also the cafes, and, particularly in summertime, open-air celebrations and festivals (e.g., verbenas, ferias etc.).
² Both Lucy D. Harney and Rafael Lamas, among other researchers of género chico, analyze in great detail how the Spanish and European Enlightenment witness sustained efforts from the part of the professional and middle-class milieux (joined by the aristocratic and ecclesiastical spheres in Spain) to eradicate the carnivalesque cultural strains, which seems to be inseparable from a comprehensible but publicly unavowed fascination with the anarchic elements of carnival.
nineteenth century and the early twentieth century seem to assert a kind of “historical pessimism” and “social and political immobility” (Lamas 112), endorsing the middle-class hierarchical values. This elitist, idealized vision of sainete characters as authentic folkloric representatives of a Spanish national character (a vision that might have been internalized by some members of the popular classes) has surprisingly endured to the present day, even in academic scholarship, which brings us to some brief but necessary remarks about the “Spanishness” of the género chico tradition and, consequently, of this popular strain of Spanish screwball comedy as well.

Contemporary Spanish film historians like José Luis Castro de Paz, Julio Pérez Perucha and, especially, Santos Zunzunegui (who is faithfully quoted by the previous two researchers), have recurrently tried to reinscribe the sainete and the género chico discourses as unproblematic “formas estéticas propias en las que ha venido expresándose históricamente la comunidad española” (Zunzunegui, “Cap. IX: Epílogo” 492) and, as such “humus”, they would form part of a fiercely defended national cultural heritage that has never been more than superficially influenced by international movements (491). These popular forms seemingly represent “la veta más rica, original y creativa de nuestro cine” (El extraño viaje 158), its “españolidad” (99) or “la especificidad cultural de la nación española” (113). The most problematic part of these analyses is not their insistence on the “typically Spanish” form of these popular theatrical and cinematic forms, but their seeming oblivion of the heterogeneity of the género chico discourse (part of several national narratives that belong to the cultural elites) and of its very condition of discourse instead of a dubiously incarnated, “authentic”, seamless Spanishness that has been allegedly preserved throughout the last two centuries at least.¹ There are, nevertheless, specific versions of

¹ Unsurprisingly enough from such a fiercely nationalist stance, one of the main enemies of Zunzunegui’s account of Spanish cinema is what he vaguely terms “el cliché postmoderno” (102) of the “estudiosos yankis” (88) and,
“Spanishness” in the *sainete* that have been favored in particular historical circumstances: all these discourses are complex constructs, divided along class, region, and gender line and favoring a specific group identity and sense of national community. The national self-definition that is inherent in the predominant Spanish critical discourse on *sainete* and *género chico* attempts to consolidate an intellectually and politically hegemonic national vision that camouflages various interest groups and cultural taste formations, denying other alternative versions, which do not bear the same cultural distinction or legitimacy.

The idea of a national cultural identity (i.e., “Spanishness”) that reclaims a kind of romanticized, costumbrist form of “the popular”, hence an elitist cultural reinscription of the “popularismo casticista”, seems to be theoretically legitimated by Ortega y Gasset’s authority and, in particular, by his study of Goya’s understanding of the “popular classes” (“Preludio a un Goya”), an analysis in which Ortega highlights Goya’s representativity for the “stylization” of the Spanish art. This alleged artistic movement parallels the emergence of an upper-class enthusiasm for “the popular” in eighteenth century Spain, which, according to Ortega, leads to a gradual stylization of the “plebe” (significant word choice by an elitist cultural theoretician), which is also visible in the theater and bullfights of the age. Santos Zunzunegui goes even further and, capitalizing upon Pedro Salinas’ generalizations on the Spanish art and realism, he dubiously credits the Spanish artistic tradition with an overarching “stylized realism” that goes beyond a would-be superficial, mimetic one in other cultural traditions (*El extraño viaje* 89).
This necessity to ground a genuinely “Spanish realism” seems to be part of the ongoing struggles of cultural and national legitimation, for which unqualified, widely used concepts such as “national identity” or “national culture” are respectable “cultural handles”, as Valeria Camporesi lucidly remarks (9). These passionate national reinscriptions tend to be ultimately inseparable from a cultural elitism that feels threatened by a commercial mass-culture erasing the more respectable “signs” of cultural identity.

These national and cultural discourses of legitimacy are present in the realm of Spanish film studies as well, where some Spanish film historians like those mentioned before tend to obsessively defend a national Spanish cinema of “pure” autochthonous roots, set against the apparently alienating, homogenizing foreign influences and, in particular, against the would-be repetitive, commercial, and shallow menace of foreign film genres (especially those related to Hollywood). Santos Zunzunegui thus celebrates the sainete and the zarzuela as two the long-standing carnivalesque discourses of popular culture that had survived the expansion of urban capitalism and tended to give rise to a constantly unstable hybridization between different registers, such as the coarse and the lyrical, or the serious and the parodic (“Cap. IX: Epílogo” 492). His account significantly obliterates, for instance, the inescapable dialog and formal hybrization of género chico with the French revue and Hollywood cinema after the First World War, an interaction that was already commented upon earlier in this chapter.

His sustained effort of national cultural reinscription is unsurprisingly paralleled, on the one hand, by an endorsement of auteurism and, on the other, by a genealogical attempt of recuperating and disseminating a specific composite cultural tradition, not only related to an established intellectual-artistic canon (e.g., the picaresque tradition, a romanticized costumbrism, Goya etc.) but also to a politically commendable historical period in terms of progressive,
democratic politics of leftist orientation, as is the case of the Spanish Second Republic. The national cultural reclaim of *sainete* by Spanish film historians thus becomes instrumental also in establishing an intellectual and political link to the frequently mythicized Republican cinema and to its extolled social and ideological critique. This Republican canon is often retrospectively overemphasized in respect to the political satire that permeated many alleged “reactionary” films produced during and after the Civil War (e.g., *Los hijos de la noche*, *Morena clara*, *Alma de Dios*, *Canelita en rama*, *Suspiros de España*, *Un alto en el camino*), which were actually aesthetically and ideologically very similar to many folkloric films and/ or melodramas exalted as “progressive” and produced in Republican times. By choosing to focus on the more obvious conservative elements or endings (which seem even more oppressive in the postwar than they must have appeared in the prewar period), the above-mentioned critical preferences tend to minimize the alternative value of a large number of post-1939 movies (particularly of the Spanish screwball comedies with *sainete* elements), whose remarkable cultural significance is but enhanced within a socio-politically desolate ambience that severely curtailed the margins of expressible dissent in respect to Republican times. The fact that the *género chico* discourse was often reprehended for its subversive links with the Second Republic in more ideologically compliant film magazines such as *Primer Plano*, issued after the Civil War, merely served in further substantiating the “progressive aura” of the *sainete* and in consolidating it as preferred autochthonous genealogical sample of a quintessentially Spanish aesthetic form (with a decisive

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1 Most of these simplistically labeled “reactionary” movies owe their pejorative tag, to a great extent, to their shooting time (i.e., after the Civil War) or location (i.e., the Nationalist territories during the Civil War) and/ or to their directors’ more or less formal affiliation with the Nationalists during or after the Civil War.
imprint on the makeup of a national cinema in terms of popular humor, settings, actor and characters types).\(^1\)

Incapable of autonomous actions, the lower-class characters from the late nineteenth century sainetes and zarzuelas cannot seem to overcome their socioeconomic circumstances, while their “critique of political institutions are not constructive, but sarcastic and antimodern” (Lamas 112), an attitude that can be linked to the conservative Romantic idea of an idealized, homogeneous people, without any subversive potential. Later on, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, with Arniches’ popular plays, which are representative for the evolution of sainete and its steady acquisition of cultural respectability, we witness a gradual displacement of the lower-classes by the middle-classes and their values, which parallels a gradual change in the genre’s audience towards affluent bourgeois spectators. In an age more and more dominated by the Hollywood cinema (particularly by the silent comedian comedy) and by the Parisian revue, both heavily infused with the burlesque aesthetics, the new type of Spanish sainete of the early twentieth century acquires stronger vaudeville elements and loses a great extent of its sociopolitical critique, while it also unsurprisingly increased its melodramatic rhetoric, particularly in its conciliatory, conservative end (Ríos Carratalá, Arniches 58).

In the case of Arniches, we should assess this different discursive makeup not only in terms of a fierce competition with the two popular foreign registers, as documented by Vilches de Frutos’ and Dougherty’s reception study of the prewar Madrid stage, but also in relation to the audience failure of his more critical, bitter plays, with a regenerationist touch, like La Señorita de

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\(^1\) In 1944 Primer Plano publishes, for instance, a very indignant editorial by Luciano de Madrid (most probably a convenient pseudonym), where the lingering presence of the sainete in national Spanish cinema is strongly indicted. Associated with the “decadence” of the Second Republic and the “national-socialist filth”, the sainete and its irreverent humour are considered dangerous for the triumphing post-war “exemplarity”: “no hubo honrado tipo de sainete que el 18 de julio no se enfrentara, vistiendo el mono de miliciano, con la Historia alzada en armas. [. . .] ya no hay sainetes que valgan. Hay Historia, como ejemplaridad.”
Trévelez (43-44), which were (mis)understood by their contemporaneous spectators within a horizon of expectations configured by the rising sentimental, middle-class versions of *sainete* (43). Constrained by the market, Arniches returned to a *género chico* genre whose historical imprint displayed a more superficial social and moral critique, sweetened by a kind of “sentimental reformism” (49) that did not fundamentally question the underlying social structure.

His plays did attack, nevertheless, the “frivolous” and *cursi* upper-classes (especially the younger women of this social category), given that, from a bourgeois morality, such upper-class representatives were “solo interesados en aparentar, en contraposición con el modelo tradicional de la familia, basada en el sentido común, la honradez, el trabajo y el mutuo respeto entre sus miembros” (62). Some of the most recurrent situations of these theatrical comedies, later recast in the Spanish screwball, thus seem to feature the already mentioned womanizing bachelor, frequently upper-class, who will be transformed into a faithful husband by a cunning, practical middle-class heroine, or the vain and parasitic upper-class woman, whose shallow modernity (in language, dress, leisure, and manners) makes her an unsuitable wife and who will consequently be “reformed” by an authoritarian future husband, usually middle-class. The satire of the superficially modern, upper-class characters, is not only voiced from the moral perspective of the contemporaneous bourgeois middle-class, which constituted the majority audience of the *género chico* performances of the age (both *sainetes* and *zarzuelas*), but it also points to a similar class origin of most directors of theater and of theater companies. Their conservative background and values, which inevitably influenced the moralizing bent of the genre, are quite similar, in postwar times, to those harbored by the ruling positions in the Spanish cinema business (i.e., the industrial and financial bourgeoisie), by most Spanish film producers, and by the lower middle class state officials who were in charge of the system of movie censorship and classification after
the Civil War. This similarity of social origins and moral orientation ensured a certain conservative, paternalist continuity in the sanctioned social roles displayed in prewar commercial sainetes and postwar screwball comedies, especially as far as gender roles were concerned, which inevitably meant a relative domestication of the more subversively “modern” humor of the Hollywood screwball. The sense of confusion triggered by the rapid modernization of prewar Spain is indeed paralleled by a moralizing rhetoric, which often links an alleged omnipresence of vice in the modern city of Madrid with contemporaneous discourses related to the emancipation of women, especially to more radical feminist calls to women’s rights of freedom and self-governance.

Similarly restrained in terms of morality and social hierarchies, the early twentieth-century zarzuela put forth a kind of a pre-capitalist nostalgia, an idyllic-sentimental vision that even in the grim autarchic postwar paraded a romantic idealism that was apparently stronger than any material pressures, an important topic of Spanish screwball comedies as well, whose essentially pragmatic plot lines (marked by a love story that is inseparable from material improvement and/or social ascent) nevertheless contradicted this romantic pose.\(^1\) The bleak quotidian of postwar Spain, with its comprehensible consolidation of cynicism and “material myths” (Vázquez Montalbán 50), witnessed indeed an unsurprising popularity of the screwball comic subgenre, as was previously mentioned: these comedies were set in opulent milieux and made a minimal recourse to street shooting, which deprives them of any explicit visual reference to the shortage and repression that constituted everyday life for most Spanish people after the Civil War. On the other hand, the postwar harsh social and material circumstances endowed comedy with the capacity to constitute a transitory, yet politically charged evasion to different realms from an

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\(^1\) The zarzuela had a powerful popular revival in the 1940s, which paralleled the continued circulation of prewar and postwar “zarzuelas filmadas”, a popularity that significantly waned in the 1950s (Vázquez Montalbán 47).
oppressive daily life, characterized by the struggle to survive and cope with hunger, poverty, and political repression.

The final outspoken idealism of the Spanish prewar género chico or of the postwar screwball comedies often clashed with the more traditional, lower class pícaro types, who very astutely knew how to carry out their more materialist, down-to-earth objectives. These picaresque characters may see their objectives carried out in the screwball comedies if they embody desirable values (e.g., the domestication of a socially rebellious character). While the successful use of various cunning ploys in the courtship or reconciliation process is sometimes inseparable from materialist interests (i.e., social or material advancement), these elaborate comic ruses are often conveniently clothed in the afore-mentioned “sentimental reformism”, being used to tame an idle womanizer or an emancipated woman and to transform them into a model spouse. The eccentric side of the domesticating character’s personality is, however, significantly toned down or even eradicated once the taming process is successfully concluded to make way for a more conservative outlook on the newly formed or reconciled couple, which implicitly points out to the disciplinary objectives of these picaresque ploys, namely social domestication through romance. If the reformation of the idle womanizer powerfully resonates with some of Arničhes’ sainetes, steeped in middle-class morality, the domesticating paradigm for frivolous, emancipated women is present not only in sainetes, whose heritage is particularly conspicuous in the case of unruly, domineering married women that are eventually humbled, but also in altas comedias or popular zarzuelas, especially those of the Álvarez Quintero brothers, which often provide the basic plot line for the postwar screwball adaptation, as we shall later see.

The underlying domesticating paradigm for rebellious women is the taming-of-the-shrew model,

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1 Vázquez Montalbán also mentions the pragmatic lessons of many popular songs in postwar Spain, which cynically trumpeted, for instance, that, both in love and business, “para darse la gran vida/ es cuestión de cara dura” (in one of Ramón Evaristo’s songs), not of courage, intelligence, or hard work.
solidly rooted in Western culture, if we are to think only of the notorious examples in
Shakespeare, the Golden Age Theater or the screwball comedy in the twentieth century.¹ The
closest autochthonous version of this widespread model is provided by the popular zarzuela “La
revoltosa”, whose peculiar disciplinary version is essential for the punishment of the extravagant
female protagonist of the Spanish screwball comedies.

One of the most popular zarzuelas of all times, many times adapted to both the stage and
the screen since its emergence at the end of the nineteenth century, “La revoltosa” would
allegedly seek, according to Rafael Lamas, a kind of utopian balance between the castizo and the
modern values that suffused the Spanish society in the last decades of the nineteenth century and
later. Their possible coexistence, however problematic, is inscribed through a disciplinary
resolution of a socially subversive set of desires. As in the case of Dolores Capilla, the disruptive
female protagonist of Luis de Vargas’ “¿Quién te quiere a ti?”, Mari Pepa, the main female
character in “La revoltosa”, is similarly presented as a woman actively attempting to become
independent to do whatever she likes, thus challenging the unwritten rules of the patriarchal
society of her time. Her socially unsanctioned desires as a “free” woman are embodied mostly in
her performative adoption of the traditionally male ways of walking, talking and looking at the
others, which means that she takes over a position of power instead of submission in terms of the
traditional gender roles available at the time, a defiant stance that is very similar to that of many
screwball heroines. Her final transformation in a submissive wife is rather abrupt and
unconvincing, as is the case with most Spanish screwball heroines: in an analogous manner, Mari

¹ The implicit insistence on the necessary domestication of the rebellious female lead is quite obvious in the postwar
Spanish translation of Bringing Up Baby (Howard Hawks, 1938) as La fiera de mi niña, whose peculiar pedagogic
word choice not only alludes to the heroine’s “pet” leopard, but also, by means of an indirect comparison with this
dangerous predator, makes a not so subtle reference to “la fiericilla domada”, the Spanish equivalent of the
expression “the taming-of-the-shrew”. A 1941 Radiocinema review of the film release in Spain caustically stated
that only Hollywood productions can fuse “los elementos necesarios para que un cúmulo de disparates tan enormes
[…] sean distracción regocijada durante casi dos horas.”
Pepa suddenly changes as she falls in love, in her case with the conservative Felipe or, using the phrasing of the zarzuela, with “el más castizo chulo de Madrid”, who comprehensibly prefers a wife with a modern look (which, for him, means with “gracia y salero”), yet otherwise traditional and submissive. Mari Pepa’s apparent “problem”, kindred to that of the Spanish screwball heroines of the 1940s, is inscribed as her initial lack of a truly strong male partner who can tame her and thus help her become as she allegedly wanted to be actually at a “deeper” level. This autochthonous adaptation of the well-known taming-of-the-shrew pattern is, of course, a particular, historical Spanish response to the perceived threat of a “corrupting”, foreign-based modernity that is conservatively countered through the transparent allusion to an “authentic” identity that survived in Mari Pepa’s heart, hence at an emotional, not rational level (a traditional gender vision of what dominates women), despite any treacherous “appearances” of modernity.\footnote{Not only Spanish screwball comedies, but also many autochthonous folkloric musicals (e.g., \textit{Morena clara}, \textit{Torbellino}, \textit{Suspiros de España}) display a similar “taming-of-the-shrew” pattern featuring a fast-talking, witty female protagonist (usually belonging to the lower class) and an unconventional romance where the woman leads the conquest of a less spirited, more passive man.} Love is what makes this “hidden” identity acquire a concrete manifestation, which triggers Mari Pepa’s socially commendable recovery of “authenticity”: her marriage to the conservative male protagonist enables her to become what she essentially “was” or dreamed of being, as she is made to submissively and lovingly declare to Felipe in the end. Her marriage could be consequently read, according to Rafael Lamas, as a paradigm of harmonization between the advanced, modernizing forces (the women) and the traditional conservative ones (the men), a problematic reading that will soon be revisited. The disquieting sense of identity loss, brought about by the rapid modernization of Spain, would thus seem to generate a conservative moralizing retort that seeks to counter the feared emancipation of women, seen as both a
consequence and a cause of this disturbing modernity and of its subsequent questioning of the
hegemonic social and moral roles of the age.

Promoted by the Spanish Catholic Church and endorsed by various “families” associated
with the power circles in Spain in the aftermath of the Civil War, a radical, reactionary form of
antifeminism was one of the most widely popularized politically conservative discourses, which
considered female self-government and her refusal of domesticity as one of the most pernicious
social influences, stemming from the subversive, modern, secular education of Republican times
and from a feared “American way of life”, publicly available through Hollywood products such
as screwball comedies and their local imitations. The postwar redress of power in the social and
political realms was thus paralleled by the attempt to impose traditional, domestic gender roles,
which sought to reverse the indicted Republican or foreign subversion of domestic family values
and to remedy the decried “decay of values” triggered by “una modernidad desnaturalizadora”
(Graham 183-84). The restoration of the “authentic” identity for the Spanish society and nation is
thus made to appear also as a byproduct of a disciplinarily restored domesticity, an essential
subtext of the Spanish screwball of commitment or reaffirmation centered upon women, that is
conspicuous especially towards the domesticating end of the comedy.

In the case of the final transformation of the female protagonist of “La revoltosa”, Rafael
Lamas analyzes Mari Pepa’s abrupt change as “una grieta entre conciencia y comportamiento,
interioridad y actuación pública. […] Si al principio la apariencia moderna de la protagonista
parecía indicar un acto de rebeldía frente al poder tradicional establecido, al final esa misma
apariencia queda reducida a comportamiento de moda, vacío de significación crítica y
desprovista de autoconciencia. La zarzuela opera la conversión de Mari Pepa cambiando el
significado político de sus acciones y reduciendo su actuación a mera simulación. […] una vacía
These conclusive remarks entail, nevertheless, some problematic assumptions, even beyond the doubtful legitimacy of the allegorical enterprise that makes Mari Pepa a straightforward embodiment of late nineteenth-century Spain. The harsh criticism of the female lead’s “representation” or “mere dissimulation” seems to point to a debatable belief in the possibility of an essential “authenticity” or “truth” of this character, whose “superficial” performative ploys seem to question the extent of her “true nature”. Leaving aside the potential concession of such disciplinary ending to both censorship and the expected public tastes of the audience (predominantly male, conservative, and middle-class at the end of the nineteenth-century), we should neither disregard nor vilify the protagonist’s short-lived playful stance, which can have a positive, emancipating role for the female spectators despite the final moralizing constraints of the zarzuela. Rafael Lamas seems to actually chide Mari Pepa for her complex, contradictory profile, which makes her impossible to be unproblematically classified as either conservative or dissident but rather transforms her into a kind of fluid field of intersection of multiple types of forces. What seems to be thus condemned in both Mari Pepa and, through a dubious allegorical translation, in nineteenth-century Spain, is their resistance to be monolithically delineated. Furthermore, Rafael Lamas indirectly denies any emancipating power of a ludic performance and of the inherent opportunity to experiment with alternative identities, which can be a tremendous force of resistance for the audiences in respect to the ruling moral, social and political attempts of domestication. In a similar fashion, the postwar Spanish screwball comedies harbored, as we shall presently see in more detail, a similar ideological ambiguity, verging between conservative and subversive tendencies, which invalidates any constrictive fit into simplistic, monolithic patterns—despite the commercial success of such
movies, despite the confessed conservative intentions of their directors or actors, and despite their seeming compliance with the censors’ views.

**Love, discipline, and humor: Alternative Role Models in the Spanish screwball comedies**

The Spanish screwball comedies to some extent maintained the witty, fast-paced comic style of the Hollywood model, its bizarre romance pattern, dominated by an intrepid, zany woman, a romantic model that also emerged against a bleak socioeconomic and political context. This relative thematic and stylistic preservation was naturally enabled, as we could see, by the autochthonous registers of the *novela rosa* and of the prewar Spanish theater and revue, which were themselves powerfully influenced by the Hollywood cinema industry. As I also mentioned before, however, the transatlantic voyage of the Hollywood screwball, frequently through Italian and German screwball imitations, unsurprisingly resulted in a more authoritarian form of Spanish comedies in the aftermath of the Civil War. The Spanish versions thus put forth a socially domesticating model of sentimental education, which highlighted either the taming of a weak, idle womanizer into a trustworthy husband, or, much more frequently, the domestication of a frivolous and extravagant woman into a submissive wife.

A taxonomic division of the Spanish screwball, based upon the seventeen surviving copies currently available (from an estimated total number of twenty eight), takes into...

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1 The total number can give us an important indication of the representativity of the genre in the postwar Spanish cinema, as it stood for more than half of CIFESA’s total film production in this period. The Spanish screwball comedies that have, unfortunately, not survived to this day or not in their entirety are: *Diez días millonaria* (José Buchs, 1934), *La linda Beatriz* (José María Castellví, 1939), *Julieta y Romeo* (José María Castellví, 1939), *Un marido provisional* (Nunzio Malasomma, 1940), *Yo soy mi rival* (Mario Bonnard and Luis Marquina, 1940), *En poder de Barba Azul* (José Buchs, 1940), *No quiero, no quiero* (Francisco Elías, 1940), *Un marido barato* (Armando Vidal, 1941), *Yo no me caso* (Juan de Orduña, 1944), *Paraiso sin Eva* (Sabino A. Micón, 1944), and *Mi enemigo el doctor* (Juan de Orduña, 1945). Judging by the sparse information available, some of them seem to be screwball screen adaptations of *altas comedias* by Jacinto Benavente (e.g., *No quiero, no quiero*), *novela rosa* by Concha...
consideration this authoritarian tendency along gender lines, which enables me to put forth three distinct subtypes of Spanish screwball, two dealing with commitment comedy (i.e., focused on the establishment of the central couple and ending in marriage or promise of marriage) and one dealing with reaffirmation comedy (i.e., focused on the re-establishment of the main couple, initially separated, and ending in marital reconciliation). While there are two subtypes of commitment comedy, one centered upon women and one upon men, there is only one reaffirmation comedy, centered only upon women, from which one could infer that, once married, men, unlike women, no longer need to be reformed, an unstated assumption that actually corresponds to a recurrent stoic advice given to the postwar Spanish married women in various sentimental columns of the age.

The screwball of commitment centered upon women is based upon a taming-of-the-shrew pattern. The domestication process targets either the emancipated middle-class female professional, working as a secretary, actress or singer, who will give up her job in order to properly devote herself to her husband, once it is clear that the male protagonist can be a successful family provider (e.g., Doce lunas de miel, La vida empieza a medianoche), or the vain and parasitic woman, frequently upper-class, whose shallow modernity (in language, dress, leisure, and manners) makes her an unsuitable wife and will consequently be “reformed” by a more or less authoritarian future husband (e.g., Boda accidentada, Un marido a precio fijo, Deliciosamente tontos, Turbante blanco, El ladrón de guante blanco, Te quiero para mí).

Linares (e.g., Díez días millonaria) or Luisa María Linares (e.g., En poder de Barba Azul), while Un marido provisional and Yo soy mi rival seem to have been Spanish versions of more daring Italian screwball comedies, such as Dopo divorzieremo and L’uomo del romanzo which sometimes share actors, directors, screen adaptors, technical personnel or even studio location (i.e., Cinecittà).

1 Given that in the aftermath of the Civil War there were no depictions of divorce allowed, Spanish screwball comedies understandably transformed the Hollywood remarriage pattern into one of mere marital reconciliation.

2 It is perhaps easier to understand why the Spanish screwball comedy displays a marked preference for female protagonists that are rich heiresses and/ or spoiled brats (middle-class as well), not successful professionals: the various social discourses that exalted female domesticity and large families (in a postwar setting of drastically
The central theme of the screwball of commitment centered upon men includes primarily the transformation of a womanizing upper-class or middle-class bachelor into a faithful husband by a cunning, practical heroine, who is not lacking either materialist reasons or pedantic harangues, especially towards the conservative melodramatic ending (e.g., in *Ella, él y sus millones*, *Eres un caso*, *Cinco lobitos*, *Ángela es así*, *Una chica de opereta*, and *El hombre que las enamora*).

The basic pattern of the screwball of reaffirmation, centered upon women, featured a taming-of-the-shrew pattern of the frivolous, arrogant wife who initially despises her weak husband and who will be therefore taught to be submissive while her husband often learns the dangers of marital neglect (e.g., *Mi fantástica esposa*, *Rápteme usted*, and *El difunto es un vivo*). Here it is interesting to mention that these married couples always appear as childless, the focus being only on the protagonists’ relationship, which clearly clashes with the officially promoted model of family with many children at that time.

As it was previously mentioned, some Spanish screwball comedies (e.g., *Mi fantástica esposa*, *Ella, él y sus millones*, *Boda accidentada*) choose a subsidiary focus on an older, sometimes lower-class couple, which is pedagogically meant to show the dangers of a weak, ridiculous manhood, incapable of standing up to an emasculating female figure, a stock topic in the género chico tradition. This vaudeville humorous perspective also appears in various early 1940s caricatures, which show interesting similitudes in the depicted image of this “unruly woman” who despotically “abuses” and “feminizes” her husband, a significant comic inversion of the contemporaneous power balance between genders.

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reduced population rate and severely diminished birth rate) were accompanied by the legal regulations that prevented Spanish women from truly joining the work force in the dire autarchic conditions after the Civil War.
Quite differently from the prevalent Hollywood register, in which the upper-class female lead is gradually imbued with the middle-class ethics through romance, the Spanish screwball protagonists’ peculiar realm of romantic action is marked by social ascent for the main middle-class male character, an unsurprising wish-fulfilling mechanism in the bleak autarkic setting of postwar Spain, and by material improvement for the noble, but impoverished female protagonist and her family, an inter-class union that also obliquely alludes to the many contemporaneous marital alliances between nobility and the upper, industrial middle-classes and that is perhaps best portrayed in the immensely popular screwball comedy Ella, él y sus millones. Generally speaking, the Spanish narrative association between romantic (yet dispassionate) love and social ascent and/or material improvement eventually takes a less socially subversive turn, in the sense that what is materially or socially convenient for the screwball heroine’s family is somehow the best choice for her as well: if many rich heiresses from the Hollywood screwball rejected their upper-class family and wealth in the end in order to live more modestly together with their middle-class working partner, the spoiled heroines of the Spanish screwball do not have to choose a husband against their families’ wishes. The upper-class Spanish female leads do not consequently “lower” themselves by marrying someone from the middle-class as such lower-class husbands, even if they are not noble, are usually richer from the start, which is both a necessary material compensation for their lack of blood nobility and an efficient solution for the serious economic problems of the woman’s family (as is the case of Ella, él y sus millones). In some comedies, the middle-class husband is conveniently made to appear not only as a necessary domesticating influence upon a frivolous, emancipated upper-class or and/or affluent heroine (e.g., Un marido a precio fijo, Boda accidentada, Un ladrón de guante blanco), but he is even sometimes made the sole inheritor of the wealth that would have corresponded to the female
protagonist (who is significantly deemed too frivolous to be able to manage her inheritance). This reversal of fortune strengthens his position of power even more and further consolidates the patriarchal hierarchy temporarily questioned by the rebellious young woman: the transference of the inheritance from Estrella’s tutor directly to her inflexible husband in *Un marido a precio fijo* efficiently parallels a symbolic transference of power from a father figure to another, thus amending the tutor’s reproachable educational lenience in the female heroine’s building.

Less complex and sophisticated than their American counterparts, the Spanish screwball protagonists do not tend to converge towards more egalitarian gender roles nor towards a more companionate relationship, even if there are some notable exceptions, like *Ella, él y sus millones*, *Doce lunas de miel*, *Turbante blanco*, *La vida empieza a medianoche* and *El difunto es un vivo*, which are still more authoritarian, however, than their Hollywood models. This enhanced gender inequality of the Spanish screwball is inseparable from a widespread male fear of emotional self-expression, disparagingly coined as “sentimentality”, which was associated with femininity. This male anxiety triggers compensatory disciplinary displays of virility and an overall lapidary inflexibility, commonly associated with a strong, successful masculinity. Such authoritarian spectacles are usually followed by a dubious female masochism: the more mistreated women are, particularly the rebellious ones, the more madly they will eventually fall in love with their abusers. This narrative punishment of powerful female characters is strengthened by comic, merciless camera shots, both long takes and close-ups, which underline the woman’s protagonist’s frustration, stupidity, or would-be shallow pretenses, and, quite often, their eventual, contrived intellectual inability to stand up to their male partners.

However, the couple’s verbal bantering tends to favor the woman’s witty replies, which, together with her excessive performance of frivolous femininity, is quite ambiguously associated
with her rebellious nature that “needs” to be tamed. The humor associated with this kind of female protagonist, placed in the mouth of an outspoken, “unruly woman”, actually acts as another challenge to an authoritarian interpretation of screwball comedy, as it repeatedly undermines her partner’s already problematic self-esteem and, at the same time, it was a prototype that undeniably clashed with the hegemonic gender politics of the age, which put forth a psychologically and intellectually weak female prototype, relegated to the domestic realm and incapable of autonomous thought and action.

Equally pernicious seemed a light, nonchalant take on romance, marriage, family, and life in general, which, as it was mentioned before, triggered the customary label of “intrascendencia” to screwball comedy, a tag that pointed to the subversive potential of these movies, in stark contrast to what was publicly endorsed as a praiseworthy (i.e., “trascendente”) Spanish cinema, usually referring to “serious”, politically and morally resignified melodramas, in consonance with Spain’s postwar regime. As Carmen Martín Gaite perceptively remarked, when talking about the alluring qualities of screwball comedy in postwar Spain (81-82), screwball comedies appealed to the younger generations in particular because they seemed to promote a carefree, frivolous existence, devoid of stern calls to responsibility and duty, inviting rather to a happy, extravagant enjoyment of earthly life in a luxurious setting, which provided a refreshing difference from the grim ambience of autarkic Spain. Particularly seductive was the playful, carefree appearance of love and romance (83), taken less seriously and subject to change, a feature that unsurprisingly triggered many outraged reviews and articles as well as numerous ecclesiastical indictments. An example of this alarmed attitude is Javier F. Olondriz’ 1943 editorial, “Las peores películas”, which astutely sees the undermining potential of movies that, while apparently “indiferentes e inocuas”, “deliciosa[s], divertida[s]” (the most common labels
for screwball comedies in Spain at that time), are fundamentally “materialist”, “frivolous” and “earthly”, being capable of “deceiving” the (immature) Spanish youth in particular. What the outraged journalist seems especially worried about is the negative impact of these films upon the audiences’ spiritual life, which can appear unconvincing and strange in the long run, leading to a feared “decristianización paulatina de la sociedad”.

The accused frivolous heroine of such Spanish screwball comedies very much resembled not only the Hollywood screwball heroine or the 1920s flapper, but also the so-called “niña topolino”, a frequent object of satire and criticism in the aftermath of the Civil War.¹ As in the case of the flapper image, “la niña topolino” was also a kind of commercialized feminist emblem in the postwar scenery, “mimada, vacua y gastadora” (Martín Gaite 79), anticipating, in a way, the future widespread consumerism of the 1960s. “La niña topolino” not only used fashionable, extravagant shoes and outfits, which had a prohibitive price for the vast majority of the Spanish population of the time, but she also adopted a seemingly emancipated, daring stance that tended to be linked to the modern, empowering Hollywood female models: full of initiative, frivolous, carefree, self-assured, smoking, driving a car, going to parties, wearing flamboyant clothes, boasting of male friendships, making romantic advances and conceding “confianzas y atenciones” to men, using a “superlative” kind of language, both nasal and blasé, parading loose, ostentatious manners etc. (80) As it was the case with the 1920s flappers, this Spanish version of female consumerism and rebellion did not entail, however, a break with “the social conventions of premarital chastity, matrimony and economic dependence” upon men (Olsin Lent 318): even if they seemed more open to suggestive insinuations and, as such, they were publicly dismissed as desirable wives, “las niñas topolino” did neither fight for a potential economic or

¹ According to Carmen Martín Gaite (79), the name “topolino” was initially associated to a small, functional car type, belonging to Fiat, and later it was associated with a specific type of women shoes, a kind of platforms, that were disparagingly referred to as “zapatos de coja” for their orthopedic look.
sociopolitical equality to men nor ultimately questioned their main status of eventual wives and mothers. Their condemned “mal tono” in terms of manners, language and dress was, of course, made from the standpoint of the class-based notion of “buen gusto” and its implicit sense of distinction: from this perspective, “las niñas topolino” and their nouveau riche parents were alarmingly inseparable from a connotation of both “plebeian” and cursi (Martín Gaite 80), threatening to disrupt the social hierarchies of the time. Unsurprisingly, the girls’ parents were severely indicted for their seemingly lax moral education, which triggered an unprincipled irresponsibility in their offsprings (85), making them unsuitable, impractical wives, accustomed to “unnecessary” luxuries and, as such, likely to bring about their future husbands’ ruin.

Definitely not a model of domesticity and submission, “las niñas topolino” also threateningly posed the problem of (limited) female rebellion and insistence on self-governability, an implicitly defiant social and political stance that was, in their case, enabled by economic affluence. If their actual influence might have been limited to their social circles, “una élite que no pasaba hambre” (85), a class that possibly also saw more real possibilities of social ascent and/or material improvement in the available paradigms present in the Spanish screwball comedies, it is impossible to understand their relatively modern, oppositional personal construction outside the powerful role models of the autochthonous and American screwball and of a Hollywood-influenced styles, tastes, and conduct. It is problematic to talk about a “superficial” influence of such cinemas and star-systems, as this argument consciously or unconsciously both operates with a binary model of “depth” and disregards the already commented upon educational importance of identification, imitation and performance with/of multiple role models, not deprived of oppositional political value. Moreover, the socially corrosive effects of this rebellious, consumerist feminism and of the seeming trivialization of the
officially endorsed institutions of marriage and family did not remain unnoticed by politically 
compliant film reviewers, judging by their repeated harsh indictments of these dangerous 
alternatives to the disciplinary role models that the ideal postwar cinema would need to 
highlight. What is especially reprehended is an insufficiently domesticating ending, especially in 
respect to a powerful image of an emancipated woman, which disrupts the existing canons of 
domesticity and decorum. Other vituperated narrative developments or finales are those that 
promote a certain attempt of an egalitarian, companionate relationship (e.g., El difunto es un 
vivo, Turbante blanco or Ella, él y sus millones) or those that feature strong carnivalesque 
secondary characters that subvert the explicitly compliant melodramatic ending (e.g., 
Deliciosamente tontos). In contrast, more openly conservative and didactic movies and/ or 
endings (e.g., Una chica de opereta, Un marido a precio fijo, Mi fantástica esposa, Ángela es así) 
are unsurprisingly praised, even if this sanction might be paralleled by a side concession about 
the “lack of pretensions” of these comedies. The endorsement of these moralizing stances is 
sometimes rounded off by a peculiar Spanish form of star-system, which is present in the more 
politically compliant women’s magazines (e.g., Medina, Chicas etc.) or film magazines (e.g., 
Cámara, Primer Plano etc.), and which consists of the actors’ publicly voiced opinions about 
their movie parts and general traditional perspectives on gender roles, romance, marriage and 
family. We find an illustrating example of such conservative consolidation of desired role 
models in an interview with Rafael Durán, the popular actor of the 1940s who interpreted a 
commendable domesticating husband’s part in Un marido a precio fijo. The interview appeared 
in the film magazine Cámara, under the title “¿Cuál de sus películas le hubiera gustado vivir en 
la realidad?” , in which the Spanish actor pedagogically asserts that he was very enthusiastic 
about his “mission” in that screwball comedy, as it gave him the pleasurable opportunity to
“doblegar el carácter de una niña discola, millonaria y mal educada”, educating her to become aware of her “obligación de menesteres caseros” and making her fall in love with him “como una etíope”.

This kind of remarks, hegemonically advanced as exemplary, gives us an enlightening perspective not only of the officially extolled romance models and gender roles but also, implicitly, of the noteworthy difference that the Hollywood-influenced protagonists and types of relationship marked in the bleak setting of the age. This differentiating impact was even more pronounced in the first years of production of Spanish screwball, until around 1942, when we even witness bare legs and revealing female cleavages and swimsuits (e.g., in the 1940 Râpteme usted) and a more sexually explicit humor, judging by the outraged review of Un marido provisional (the Spanish version of the apparently more daring Italian screwball Dopo divorzieremo), in which the anonymous film critic decries the excessively “picante humor de las segundas intenciones” and “el tema atrevido que bordea las alusiones escabrosas”. The first postwar years might have offered indeed more margin of freedom of expression to the Spanish cinema industry than afterwards in the 1940s, most probably enabled by the administrative chaos that encompassed the recently reorganized movie industry and the censorship state apparatus in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War.¹ In response to Vázquez Montalbán’s derision of the apparently “asexual”, dispassionate cinema romance and protagonists until 1945, not only in Spanish but also in Hollywood films (72), it is worth to reiterate here the connection between the erotic protagonism of speech and the introduction of the Hays code, a mechanism of internal censorship that marked the development of the screwball genre and rechanneled the expression

¹ Until the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, when the postwar regime saw its first major political reconversion, there was less ecclesiastical presence in the newly (re)formed state institutions, which were initially dominated by staunch members of the “historical Falange” (who were cast aside and replaced not only by strong Catholic elements but also by more opportunist, mediocre Falangists, who often shared a stricter moralizing bent with the ecclesiastical circles).
of desire—not only through witty and fast verbal exchanges but also through a sexually charged slapstick. Furthermore, in the specific case of the authoritarian postwar Spanish setting, it definitely could not offer a propitious scene for a more radical type of comedy or more erotically explicit romance alternatives, given that more deviant identity models and more subversive comedies could have emerged only if paralleled by larger changes in the Spanish culture as well, which would have opened more space for debates and critiques. On the other hand, a more clearly sexualized version of romance appears in Hollywood movies after 1945, especially in noirs and family melodramas, when the screwball cycle is extinct in the United States and severely debilitated in Spain. The American films imported in Spain after the end of the Second World War were, however, undergoing severe censorship, to a great extent indebted to the more significant ecclesiastical presence in the censorship committees and in the power structures of the time: the official endorsement of Catholicism by the Francoist regime after the conclusion of the Second World War, meant to revitalize Spain’s international image and to erase the uncomfortable links with Fascism and the former alliances with the Axis countries, also entailed a stronger, explicit protagonism of moral and religious elements in the realm of the autochthonous cinema industry, not the display of a more sexualized type of romance or characters.

Let us go back, however, to the first half of the 1940s and to the bleak autarchic setting in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and let us conclude our general overview of the Spanish screwball comedies’ hegemonic reception. If we take into consideration the existing compulsory censorship of the script and the numerous official prizes and subventions that most of screwball comedies received, it is very likely that the film producers opted for a limited political risk and thus for more conservative finales, which, in some cases, could have meant that
they chose to soften the initial versions, potentially more daring. Despite the compulsory
disciplinary ending and an overall conservative tendency, which can be circumscribed to the
much stricter control of humor under totalitarian regimes, the Spanish screwball comedies could
still provide subversive alternative models of conduct in their recurring presentation of moments
of chaos and uncertainty against hierarchical divisions or sanctioned social roles: even if such
instances were meant to be funny and ridiculed as counter-models, especially when they are read
from the standpoint of the end, the mere visible availability of deviant identity models at that
time could have represented a welcome counterhegemonic educational role, inseparable from the
postwar spectators’ vicarious wishes (also bolstered by the local star-system and the pleasure of
the cinematic spectacle itself). As it was observed before, any wish-fulfilling projection or desire
to escape implicitly means that such audiences find their everyday personal and social
circumstances too oppressive, as it was the case in post-Civil War autarchic Spain. The
impressive mass popularity of Spanish screwball films is thus another indirect proof of their
capacity, on the one hand, to address unfulfilled collective needs and desires and, on the other, to
critically point to a constricting social ambience through the questioning role of humor. This
oppositional reading of comedy is consonant with Mary Douglas’ understanding of humor as
“anti-rite”, which was mentioned before, an “anti-rite” that exposes existing social constructions
through ridicule, which may lead to an increased awareness that they are unnecessary (96).

Such nuanced interpretations of “escapism” enable us to see more potential uses of
comedy spectatorship in postwar Spain, not only as survival and coping strategies in dire
personal circumstances, but also as essential forces of resistance and alternative education,
shaping the audiences’ subjectivities and hence contributing to new social constructions—on
gender, love and marriage in particular, as we shall presently see in the detailed analyses of
screwball comedies. Even if these identity models could not immediately reach a widespread social dominance, they did arguably contribute to the gradual redefinition of social relations and the naturalization of alternative perspectives.

**The screwball of commitment: Disciplining an “unruly woman”**

Both *Boda accidentada* and *Un marido a precio fijo* seem to have found their inspiration in Frank Capra’s well-known screwball masterpiece from 1934, *It Happened One Night*, which is most commonly considered the comedy that initiates the screwball cycle in the United States. This popular Hollywood movie is centered upon the gradual process of falling in love between Peter Warne, a bohemian reporter, recently fired, and Ellie Andrews, a spoiled millionaire heiress who rides a Greyhound bus incognito from Miami to New York (where she is supposed to meet her secretly espoused husband, a society aviator, that is rejected by her father). The romance begins on the bus and continues through a series of adventures that trigger a gradual transformation of the girl, who eventually abandons her frivolous, spoiled attitude as she grows more and more impressed with Peter’s commanding “authenticity” and energetic displays of masculinity—he seems to be the only man that can be an equal partner in verbal sparring and who is even capable of leaving her speechless at times.

The previously mentioned Spanish comedies display a similar taming-of-the-shrew pattern, focusing on the domestication through romance of a frivolous, emancipated heroine, engaged in a triangular relationship that culminates with a “runaway bride” (one of the most frequent narrative characteristics of the Hollywood screwball of commitment). This paradigm also includes multiple sight gags and slapstick scenes (punefully focused especially on the
female protagonist) as well as numerous fast-talking, witty exchanges that together contribute to
the building up of a tense love-hate relationship that melodramatically concludes with a marital
union in which the female protagonist is made to openly (but not necessarily convincingly)
acknowledge her submission to her husband’s “superiority”. Leaving aside the actual presence of
a triangular relationship or of the “runaway bride” motif (which also appears in El hombre que
las enamora, for instance), the other elements are significantly recurrent in all comedies
belonging to the screwball of commitment centered upon women.¹

Both Boda accidentada and Un marido a precio fijo (and, to some extent, Deliciosamente
tontos) highlight an image of love as rivalry or “battle of sexes” and not as an emancipating force
for both protagonists, which is the case of a Hollywood screwball subtype denounced
“liberation comedy” by Ann Campbell and which only rarely appears in the case of Spanish
screwball—in films like El difunto es un vivo, Ella, él y sus millones, Turbante blanco, La vida
empieza a medianoche or Turbante blanco, more inclined towards the delineation of a more or
less egalitarian relationship. The most obvious traits that differentiate the Hollywood cycle from
the Spanish one are, on the one hand, the comedic heroes’ more explicit authoritarian tendency
in the Spanish versions, which is paralleled, on the other, by their female partners’ conspicuous
masochism: whereas men unwaveringly seek to publicly humiliate their fiancées (e.g., by
making them fall prey to all kinds of ridiculous accidents) in order to assert and secure their male
superiority, the female leads seem to madly fall in love with the very men that openly despise
them to the extent that the more mistreated women are, particularly the rebellious ones, the more
meekly they will eventually fall in love with their abusers. This peculiar gender inequality of the

¹ The taming-of-the-shrew pattern, accompanied by sight gags, slapstick and verbal bantering also appears in the
screwball or reaffirmation focused on married women, where the husband’s domestication of his frivolous,
emancipated wife melodramatically ends, as we shall later see, in marital reconciliation and eventual female
submission.
Spanish screwball is inseparable from a widespread male fear of sentimentality, associated with femininity, an anxiety that is coupled with erotic tension and that triggers compensatory disciplinary displays of virility through a scornful and sarcastic attitude: what the seemingly strong male lead of Boda accidentada, Niko, is most afraid of his potential ridiculous stance (in front of the object of his love and in front of the other people), which he ascribes to an open confession of his emotions, which leads to his verbal and physical abuse in order to eventually dominate a dangerously “unruly woman”. By expressing his belief that a frank display of his affection would render him “imbécil” and “monigote”, Niko actually betrays his apprehensive aversion of the hackneyed melodramatic rhetoric, traditionally associated with emotional weakness and/ or excess and, as such, with a social construction of femininity as rationally inferior, incapable of (emotional) self-control. Under such circumstances, it is all the more ironic that it is this open confession of love that which triggers the previously unyielding heroine’s submission: softened by this acknowledgement of feelings in a man that parades a strong, unemotional masculinity, Katie forgets her assertive, emancipated self and recognizes in Niko a different and commanding character mixture from the men that she was accustomed with.

Katie’s newly tamed self and her final decision to abandon the middle-aged, overweight and slightly bald Cándido cannot erase, however, the previous narrative sequences of female emancipation and triumph nor can they muffle the sense that her final surrender is indebted not only to Niko’s ostentatious male power, but also to his physical attractiveness and youth—if the two actors that interpreted Niko and Cándido would have switched roles, it is very doubtful that the disciplinary ending would have been even mildly convincing, which once again indirectly points to the crucial importance of actors and their interpretation of comedic roles. Furthermore, Niko’s fear and indictment of a melodramatic display of emotions is all the more ironic even as
we can see from one comedy poster: the official public images of *Boda accidentada* and *Un marido a precio fijo* (and of most screwball comedies) highlighted a clearly melodramatic rhetoric that in fact appeared only towards the end of the film, clothing a domesticating paradigm. This conspicuous discrepancy between the preferred advertising choice of screwball comedies (i.e., melodrama) and the actual register of their film genre, which prioritizes a humorous verbal bantering, sight gags and slapstick, might be explained by an astute awareness of the targeted female audiences’ generic predilection for melodrama and by a defensive political stance, given that melodrama tended to suggest a more conciliatory and politically harmless horizon of expectation.

Katie and Estrella, the “unruly women” of these two Spanish comedies are not so sophisticated as the Hollywood screwball heroines, being, to some extent, close also to some autochthonous female protagonists that were recurrent in the prewar theatre and its local version of the 1920s emancipated flapper (usually characterized by an excessive impersonation, manifest especially through ongoing laughter and teasing innuendoes). From the standpoint of the authoritarian narrative resolution, these apparently frivolous and insouciant women seem to merely have waited, however, for a “truly strong” man, unimpressed by their obtrusive flirting. This romantic dynamics resonates with the rhetoric of the sentimental columns of the age, which often stressed that the women’s secret yearning is to find someone stronger (i.e., a man) to completely yield to, which would happily bring about a destruction of the “malos gérmenes” (e.g., vanity, frivolity, selfishness). As far as the many Spanish screwball comedies are concerned, the image of this seemingly strong man, capable of domesticating a frivolous and vain woman, is often accompanied by material inferiority in respect to the object of his conquest or to his rival. The male protagonist thus has to prove that he can win the heroine despite this
initial handicap: whereas Niko, in Boda accidentada, is the impoverished friend of Cándido, Katie’s fiancé, Miguel, in Un marido a precio fijo, is at first considered a petty thief by the female protagonist while he is actually a reporter, whose income is insignificant if compared to Estrella’s. Both men are eventually triumphant not only in domesticating the “unruly”, emancipated heroines but also in securing their significant fortunes, which triggers a desired public reinforcement of their masculinity. Niko’s victory is all the more conspicuous if we take into consideration Katie’s well-known weakness for luxury, which she will eventually “outgrow” as she refuses Cándido’s wealth and submissively acknowledges Niko’s radical difference in respect to her fiancé and all other rich suitors, who might be fortunate in business but not in love (i.e., as they are not “strong” enough to efficiently tame a rebellious woman). The screwball protagonists’ final union is consequently on equal economic terms, given Katie’s poverty-stricken situation—her decision to marry Cándido was purely mercenary (i.e., to solve her material problems) and followed her aunt’s pragmatic suggestion.

Katie’s indicted frivolity and vanity are related to the enviable possibility of spending (her fiancé’s) money at her ease in clothes, jewels and various types of entertainment while at the holiday resort that provides the setting of the screwball comedy. All these expenses are inscribed not only as unnecessary but also as morally harmful, a useful warning in the harsh autarchic times when the movie was released: as Katie is made to appreciate the “true love” of a disciplinary man who could not offer her any economic outlets for her consumerist desires, it is implied that her spending sprees consolidate her socially dangerous attempts to parade as an emancipated modern woman. A similar logic lies behind the moralizing ending of Un marido a precio fijo, where the female protagonist, Estrella, also learns to give up unnecessary expenses and her frivolous habits, even if, in her case, she was born in a wealthy environment that seemed
to be conducive to this kind of life. Forced by her nominal husband to briefly live in an isolated mountain hut in wintertime, Estrella will learn not only to be thrifty and to perform household chores, but also to be very appreciative of and completely submissive to Miguel, a disciplinary transformation that is pedagogically contrasted to her initial stance as a counter-model of domesticity and decorum in a lavish, upper-class setting (e.g., she smoke, drank heavily, danced and flirted with other men while her husband was away).\(^1\) The rudimentary country ambience of the mountain hut seems to provide the perfect domesticating ambience for the spoiled millionaire girl as it prevents not only any possibility of money waste but also any dependence upon other persons for carrying out her frivolous desires or even the basic household tasks: it is within this rustic dwelling that Estrella grudgingly learns to become a model housewife, according to the exhortations of Fray Luis de León’s sixteenth-century manual, *La perfecta casada*, which is briefly alluded to in Miguel’s list of household chores for Estrella and which was otherwise one of the most common and publicly commended wedding gifts of the immediate postwar in Spain.\(^2\)

The unsophisticated country milieu of the mountain hut, which serves as a catalyst setting for the heroine’s conversion to an acceptable female role, also echoes some of Arniches’ plays centered upon young couples that learn to appreciate the (socially sanctioned) delights of a simple, *castizo* life. This change makes them overcome the dangerous seductions of the frivolous seaside resort of San Sebastián, whose “corrupting” modernity is mostly imagined through Charleston dance moves and smoking women, a scenery that strikingly resembles some of the American flapper

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1 This socio-politically undesirable female model was nonetheless occasionally marketed as a fashionable, modern stance, if we consider, for instance, an alternative poster of *Un marido a precio fijo*, which advertised the movie as the venue in which the latest society dance, “Il Tipolino”, was performed and showed a lavish, high-society picture of dancing couples. This type of setting and heroine undeniably resonate with Hollywood screwball comedies, whose alluring model was a confessed model for the director Gonzalo Delgrás, according to his 1943 declarations to *Primer Plano*, in the issue 116 (where he mentions his endearment with the “género intrascendente” and the directors Frank Capra and Ernst Lubitsch).

2 This detailed list of chores appears in the movie under the name of “Manual de la perfecta mujercita de su casa”, an obvious allusion to the above-mentioned book, a well-known cultural reference of the time.
comedies of the 1920s that were contemporaneous with these plays.\textsuperscript{1} The moral condemnation of a frivolous indulgence in luxury, whose image is a stereotyped version of many Hollywood settings, also appears in many sainetes and farsas cómicas that exalt a domesticity grounded on self-restraint, common sense and social conformity.

This conservative morality is inseparable from the taming-of-the-shrew pattern of these Spanish plays and screwball comedies, whose heroines are nonetheless eventually rewarded (for their newly learned obedience) by means of an openly acknowledged melodramatic declaration, which briefly and conveniently softens the male protagonist’s inflexible masculinity, ensuring his partner’s enthusiasm and subsequent meek gratitude. In Un marido a precio fijo, for instance, a film adaptation of Luisa María Linares novela rosa, it is quite unclear to what extent Miguel’s domineering behavior had a long-lasting domesticating effect on Estrella, whose mocking impersonation of what the perfect housewife should be (according to his sermonizing speeches) and her clearly grudging performance of her enforced household duties undermine the exemplarity of the disciplinary pattern in this screwball comedy. Miguel’s obdurate insistence on Estrella’s word-for-word repetition of what a submissive, loving, and appreciative (house)wife should say to her husband in his view is quite clearly accompanied by ironical renditions (judging by the female lead’s suggestive tone of the voice and by her sarcastic facial expression, not so much by her rather rigid body language), which successfully capitalize on the subversive power of double meanings and impersonation. She also defiantly asserts her right to self-governance in front of her inflexible (mock) husband, which casts even more doubt on her pretended submission to his authority, as this acquiescence seems to take more the guise of an unwilling impersonation under inauspicious circumstances (potential physical abuse included).

\textsuperscript{1} According to Ríos Carratalá (Arniches 73), the moral efficiency of the young couple’s brief stay in an isolated country house is further consolidated in Arniches’ plays by the presence of a rugged, noble-hearted Basque priest who gives them ample advice in order to eradicate the nefarious modern influence of both city and tourist life.
She only abandons this attitude of enforced pragmatic compliance as he valiantly rescues her from the ominous snowstorm and potential death, a melodramatic climax that also entails Miguel’s passionate declarations of love, embraces and kisses to the severely endangered Estrella. It is upon recovering from this hazardous situation and hearing Miguel’s displays of love that the screwball heroine actually gives in, seeing in him more than a domestic tyrant. In some cases, this final female submission and male emotional display are accompanied by the surrender of her material possessions to be properly administered by the girl’s tutor, undoubtedly meant to further consolidate her obedience in the future as well. In Estrella’s case, for instance, her tutor and administrator of her fortune (until she comes of age) greatly appreciates Miguel for his pedagogical inflexibility and, believing that Miguel and Estrella are actually married and not just pretending for the sake of social appearances, he decides to transfer all her money on his name, thus putting Estrella in an inferiority position from the material point of view as well: already romantically attached to Miguel after the snowstorm, which strengthens her enforced marital obedience, she will also be immensely grateful for escaping poverty through her final religious marriage to the newly rich Miguel. The male protagonist is thus portrayed to have shrewdly acquired not only an obedient beautiful wife, but also an impressive fortune that places him in an unquestionable position of power over Estrella, should any doubts remain as to her “authentic” submission. It is quite dubious, however, to what extent her final docility is based on actual romantic considerations, despite her previous enthrallment with Miguel’s confession of love—Estrella’s affectionate display of gratitude to her partner in the end might have thus prompted the (especially female) audiences’ awareness of her lack of real solutions (for a woman of her social origin and upbringing) to live independently without any money. This implied dead-
end can implicitly shed more light on the postwar Spanish women’s bleak situation and painful compromises on the “marriage market”.

Unlike the blatant attempts of unrelenting female domestication in Un marido a precio fijo and Boda accidentada, the screwball comedies Doce lunas de miel, La vida empieza a medianoche and Te quiero para mí, all film adaptation of Luisa María Linares’ novelas rosa, put forth a more subdued pattern of restraint of the emancipated heroine and a more ambivalent appropriation of the melodramatic rhetoric by the male protagonist.¹ Jaime, the male protagonist in Doce lunas de miel, is skillfully interpreted by Antonio Casal, whose privileged power of communication with the audiences is greatly indebted to his formative years in variety shows, the circus, and on the castizo theatrical stage (i.e., of sainete and zarzuela). This prior acting experience enabled him to acquire a very rich and nuanced body (especially facial) language, judiciously praised as “muy natural y humano” in the issue 171 of Primer Plano. As José Luis Castro de Paz also remarks about Antonio Casal’s acting style in Rafael Gil’s “comedias humanas”, which is valid for his interpretation in the screwball comedies Doce lunas de miel or Cinco lobitos as well, Antonio Casal’s immense popularity in the 1940s capitalized on his ability to instill lifelike credibility to “el tipo de entrañable galán de clase media, modesto y débil, honrado y soñador, finalmente triunfante, por medio del cual, gracias a la pasmosa naturalidad con que lo encarna, logra el actor la plena identificación del público.” (“Antonio Casal, comicidad y melancolía” 20) His peculiar body language reminds Charlie Chaplin’s and especially Buster Keaton’s, while his comedic style is an ingenious mixture of sarcasm and melodrama, triggering an unstable balance between distancing and identification: on the one hand, many melodramatic clichés are constantly undermined by his pragmatic, ironical remarks, uttered in a matter-of-fact, impassible tone, yet, on the other, his most clear melodramatic

¹ The available posters of these three comedies are also based upon a melodramatic reading.
propensity is embodied by his frequently sad and melancholy smiles and looks as well as by his unwavering capacity to cling to his dreams and to his belief in an ultimate poetic justice. These essentially melodramatic yearnings have their expected happy resolution in the comedy, quite often by a providential *deus ex machina* solution, which ascribes a certain aura of unreality to the protagonist’s newly found prosperity, as Jaime J. Pena observes (35), and which also formally seek to erase, in my opinion, the protagonist’s previous destabilizing ironical comments for the sake of a more politically and commercially compliant narrative closure. In any case, Antonio Casal convincingly employs both interpretive stances (i.e., the sarcastic and the melodramatic) in the portrayal of his fictional comedic characters, as is the case of Jaime, from *Doce lunas de miel*. In contrast, the female lead, Ana María Campoy, who plays Julieta’s role rather awkwardly at times, contributes to the delineation of a heroine whose beauty is rather inconsistently matched with intelligence, sophistication or sense of humor. This acting disparity between the two characters is even more conspicuous within the comedic plot, according to which Julieta is a triumphing music-hall star in Hollywood, an incongruity not deprived of potential disciplinary reasons to which I will soon return.

From the very beginning of the movie, we witness Julieta’s embarrassing recitation of verses as she attempts to demonstrate her dubious acting talent to a Hollywood actor passing through Spain and briefly lodging in a luxurious hotel in Madrid. The famous actor’s poor impression of Julieta’s interpretive skills prompts the heroine to look for another way of achieving her desire to go to Hollywood and become a movie actress: a formal marriage for money with someone (i.e., Jaime) that she just met in the elevator after she had found out that the extravagantly romantic Doña Flora, an old and rich woman, decided to give a generous dowry to twelve couples who are truly in love but cannot marry because of financial hardships. Julieta
consequently attempts to convince Jaime to help her feign true love in front of Doña Flora and thus receive half of the dowry. Their success in front of the sentimental old lady is more indebted to Jaime’s histrionic and melodramatic skills than to Julieta’s—the latter does not actually say anything during the meeting with Doña Flora, but merely appears as a flustered, stammering girl, whose shyness prevents her from properly articulating anything. Even if he desperately needs some money to carry out his invention plans, Jaime is dominated by a very different interest as he monopolizes the conversation and successfully dissimulates an ardent affection in front of the old lady: he actually fell in love at first sight with the beautiful Julieta, which made him decide to play along cherishing the hope that, as his future wife, she will eventually harbor the same feelings. The underlying reason for Jaime’s melodramatic performance is therefore portrayed as based upon “authentic” feelings and, as such, less morally objectionable than Julieta’s implicitly indicted infatuation with the prospect of becoming a famous Hollywood actress (which was strongly associated with loose morality in postwar Spain). Her unconvincing acting skills in Doce lunas de miel can thus fulfill the narrative necessity to reinforce the absurdity of her professional dreams of emancipation in respect to the indirectly recommended domesticity—Ana María Campoy otherwise skillfully interpreted her lead roles in Doce lobitos and Ella, él y sus millones, two screwball comedies of commitment centered upon men, in the comedies Huella de luz or Tuvo la culpa Adán. Further support for this conjecture may be derived also from the presence of other punitive comedic tools, both at the level of narration and of movie editing. Leaving aside her modest interpretive skills as an aspiring actress and despite their fortuitous realization in some Hollywood musicals (i.e., an important film producer merely wanted a “new face” for his new film), Julieta does not seem to be very efficient at emotional self-control and/or dissimulation (an incapacity that is astutely underlined through camera close-ups), especially
in front of Jaime, with whom she will eventually fall in love towards the end of the comedy. The female lead thus appears as an impulsive, capricious woman, neither very intelligent nor very glamorous, yet capable of rousing passionate love in Jaime, in Douglas, her manager, and in Harry, a powerful Hollywood producer. Jaime’s sarcastic retorts also have a castigating narrative function, as they often leave Julieta speechless in the second part of the movie, after Julieta’s return from Hollywood: her intellectual inability is astutely played against her material and social superiority in respect to her impoverished husband, who is inadvertently hired as a butler in Julieta’s vacation house as she triumphantly comes back to Spain. The verbal register is actually the most important means of establishing Jaime’s superiority and of ensuring the audience’s fondness towards his character. Unlike Niko, from Boda accidentada, or Miguel, from Un marido a precio fijo, who also seek to verbally assert their superiority in respect to their female partners, Jaime does not indulge, however, in the vicious pleasure of publicly humiliating his nominal wife in order to consolidate an endangered masculinity.¹

Whereas his romantic manifestations are not deprived of disciplinary touches, Jaime appears as a much kinder male protagonist than what we can generally witness in most Spanish screwball comedies. His main objective actually seems to be the achievement of Julieta’s love and not of her submission, despite the occasional sarcastic references that Jaime makes at her poor domestic skills and at his (legal) rights over her, in his nominal capacity of husband (e.g., to prevent her from meeting and flirting with her admirers or from returning to Hollywood). Both types of references, on the other hand, implicitly point to the institutionalized oppressive status

¹ There are some instances of sarcasm that are more ambivalent, nevertheless, as is the case of the explanation that Jaime gives to Doña Flora, who reproaches Julieta for not having written her any letter, unlike Jaime, in the three years that elapsed since their formal wedding. At this reproach, Jaime hurriedly “saves” Julieta (before she has any chance to come up with an answer) by telling Doña Flora that it was because “ella tiene fallos de ortografía y le da vergüenza”. In many cases when Jaime does not intervene, however, Julieta does not seem to be able to say anything convincing that can provide a way-out out of a potentially embarrassing situation.
of women in postwar Spain, in respect to which Jaime’s liberal attitude and his domestic skills (as a butler) stand in a stark contrast and might even trigger the controversial label of “effeminacy”. This “weaker” form of masculinity is further associated, in Jaime’s case, with sensitivity and an occasional unostentatious display of emotions as well as with a desire for a (moderate) companionate relationship, which enables him to respect Julieta’s freedom and not to prevent her from returning to Hollywood in the end, if she wanted to. On the other hand, it is precisely this apparently selfless love (together with the news of Jaime’s material success as a patented inventor) that convince Julieta of his disinterested love and make her give up her career for the sake of a happily married love with Jaime. The end of the movie thus highlights the heroine’s eventual awareness of the “superiority” of marriage and family, which are no longer seen as an obstacle but as conducive to her personal fulfillment.

If we take into consideration Jaime’s differential character traits and if we remember Janice Radway’s analysis of romance through the lenses of Nancy Chodorow’s insights, it is very difficult to generalize the subdued moralizing ending of Luisa María Linares’ romance novel (at the origin of the screwball screen adaptation) and of Doce lunas de miel as the superiority of marriage and family per se: the romantic, nurturing hero to whom Julieta eventually succumbs is quite unique and, as such, the only one who is truly “deserving” of such an initially unexpected surrender. In a postwar context that tirelessly insisted on traditional gender roles and stressed the importance of female submission and domesticity, Jaime’s image is quite original and alluring: he combines traits habitually ascribed both to masculinity (i.e., energy, strength, authority, intellectual preeminence) and to a maternal femininity (i.e., a nurturing type of love). Through their uncontested popular appeal to female readers and film audiences, this type of ending and hero can both point to the utterly unsatisfactory gender roles
and romance options of the age and put forth some alternative solutions. This wish-fulfilling characteristic heavily permeated most novelas rosa of the time as well, which portrayed similar images of masculinity and romance that heavily clashed with the hegemonic role models of the time and might have instilled different expectations and behaviors in their frustrated female readers, thus providing a kind of alternative sentimental education through romance reading. These new forms of social identity and relations in postwar Spain could have a strong impact on an even wider population through movie spectatorship, as it must have been the case with the film audiences of the Hollywood-influenced screwball comedy that flourished in Spain in the first half of the 1940s. Frequently taking over intriguing plots from popular novelas rosa (in their turn influenced by the Hollywood model), popular Spanish screwball comedies like Doce lunas de miel, La vida empieza a medianoche or Te quiero para mí could advance alternative identity models on a large scale, as cinema-going was almost ritual in the immediate postwar and in the first two decades after the Civil War, when movie theatres were the primary locations of mass entertainment. In the case of autarkic Spain, the questioning of hegemonic gender roles and romance novels triggered by such screwball comedies meant that Spanish film audiences as well were enabled to resist the prevailing discourses of the institutionalized public sphere, a resistance that had its constructive contribution to the eventual democratization of the Spanish culture and society.

La vida empieza a medianoche, another successful screen translation of one of Luisa María Linares’ romance novels, is a screwball comedy of commitment centered upon women that puts forth some interesting gender and romance alternatives, which are once again quite different from the hegemonically exalted ones and somewhat similar to those in Doce lunas de

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1 The good film review of Doce lunas de miel, which appeared in the issue 171 of Primer Plano, mentioned both the romance and the humorous appeal of the comedy to the Spanish audiences, who ensured a massive box-office success of the movie, which apparently generated much hearty laughter.
miel (with the refreshing exception that the female protagonist is now wittier and more sophisticated, being skilfully interpreted by the beautiful actress Marta Santaolalla). From the very beginning of the movie, we see an emancipated young woman, Silvia, who comes as a hopeful professional to Madrid in order to be a free, independent woman—she even openly manifests her disinterest in men and her rebellious consideration of marriage as “un complemento de la felicidad, pero nunca el único objetivo de la mujer”, thus going very clearly against the contemporaneous enforcement of domesticity as the only sanctioned pattern of female fulfillment. Her sarcastic comments about the sentimental columns and the “boring articles” she had to write in her provincial town (most probably in a standard women’s magazine) provides a subversive take on such professional journalists’ actual belief in what they were forced to write in order to earn their living, pointing to a double life, based upon everyday dissimulation, even in the ranks of those credited to be earnestly endorsing and promoting the hegemonic sociopolitical and cultural values after the Civil War.¹ Such implicit questioning of a monolithic ideological perspective is accompanied by a reversal of the usual gender relations of power: not only it is always Silvia and not Ricardo who has the last (witty) word in their verbal skirmishes, but Silvia is also the one who constantly mocks Ricardo’s sentimental discourses and his desired projection of a seductive masculinity.² Like Jaime, from Doce lunas de miel, Ricardo

¹ It is tempting to add here another example of a satirical allusion to the public necessity for women to preserve a stern and prudish façade, an image indirectly associated with many activists of the Sección Femenina, whose members did not necessarily believed deeply in this publicly endorsed model. A tangential irony in respect to this need of public impersonation appears in La vida empieza a medianoche as Clarita (i.e., the chorus girl who was actually paid to play the wife’s role for Ricardo’s stepbrother) is hastily interrupted when she confesses that she works in the realm of the revue as a chorus girl (i.e., “en el coro”): not only is she not permitted to talk more about her actual activities in a professional venue associated with loose morals, but she is immediately made to perform a different kind of job, as a choir member (i.e., “en el coro”) of the Junta de Damas Austeras, a humorous transference that is made possible by the ambiguities of the word “coro”. The frivolous revue song and dance that she performs in front of the startled audience (i.e., Ricardo, Silvia, the old man and his would-be great-grandson) further increases the sarcasm, ambivalence and derogatory connotation of this fictitious Junta de Damas Austeras.

² When Ricardo thanks Silvia for helping him, for instance, she condescendingly laughs and promptly retorts: “No sea usted presuntuoso, lo he hecho por el abuelo. Me enternecen los ancianitos.” She also openly criticizes him in front of his stepbrother’s grandfather, when, playing the role of Guillermo’s wife, she teasingly says about Ricardo,
seems to embody a “soft” masculinity in respect to the contemporaneous standards of postwar
Spain, according to which he could even be labeled “effeminate”: not only does he display a kind
of maternal nurturing care towards his stepbrother’s grandfather, but he is also very sensitive, not
afraid of showing his emotions, and clearly desiring a companionate relationship with Silvia, not
one based on submission and domesticity. It is precisely this kind of nurturing male hero,
nevertheless, quite unlike most other men Silvia encountered, that seems to command her respect
and love: at some point in the movie, she openly confesses Ricardo that he seemed refreshingly
different to other men, whose more traditional endorsement of rigid gender roles must have
dissuaded her from any initial endearment with the idea of marriage. Once again we are in front
of a configuration of gender roles and romance patterns that provides a refreshing alternative to
the hegemonically endorsed models in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Another similar alternative appears in Te quiero para mí, a 1944 film adaptation of one of
Luisa María Linares’ novelas rosa, and it focuses both on the gentle domestication of the
capricious, immature boarding school senior Lili and on the timid and kind César’s eventually
awakened masculinity. In César Guzmán’s case, the screwball comedy indulges in a topical
association between his awkward shyness and his job and training as a philosophy teacher, which
make him blissfully unaware not only of women’s intricate seduction ploys but also of the
cynically material ruses of those around him (e.g., the school administration, Lili’s tutors and her
would-be husband etc.).

His nurturing way of being, magnificently interpreted by the talented

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1 The high school administration wants to fire César because of his disciplinary inefficiency as a teacher, yet they readily change their opinion when finding out about his newly inherited fortune, which even prompts their interested offer to make him an honorary president of the school council. Furthermore, when Lili’s tutors find out about her scandalous night stay with César on the country estate their reaction is one of ostentatious moral outrage, threatening the school with a public scandal and subsequent bankruptcy, followed by an immediate suggestion of marriage once
Antonio Casal, is even capable of becoming completely self-sacrificial for Lili’s envisioned happiness: as her tutors and Enrique Heredia (the school administrator and Lili’s object of infatuation) interestedly insinuate that Lili cannot marry the man she loves (i.e., Enrique) because of his and the tutors’ lack of sufficient financial resources, César readily gives up his own hopes of marrying Lili and happily agrees to donating five million from his newly acquired inheritance just to make her happy and secure. Furthermore, as he finds out that his fortune amounts to almost nothing (due to more heirs than he was initially informed about), he attempts to give all his publishing earnings to Enrique, even the amount of his future income (i.e., his monthly wages as a teacher), in order to provide at least something for Lili’s dowry. His own passionate interest in her person notwithstanding, César never tries to take advantage of his superior power position in respect to her but prefers to respect her openly stated wishes of marrying Enrique: not only is he financially preferred by her relatives, who relish in the prospect of his wealth, which could save them from bankruptcy, but he is also formally called upon to marry Lili to save her blemished honor (i.e., they spent the night on the same country estate, where they took refuge because of a broken car and of a rain outpour). Ironically enough, César eventually commands the capricious heroine’s loving respect and desire to marry him as he puts aside this sacrificial, nurturing stance (upon finding out Enrique’s selfish, materialist reasons in Lili and his refusal to go on with the wedding in the absence of the promised dowry). Under these circumstances, enraged by Enrique’s cynical refuse, César ostentatiously bares his torso and starts a boxing fight with his rival, whom he easily defeats due to his years of intense training in boxing. His playfully pragmatic defense of such recourse to (male) force is attributed to his father, who told him that boxing could compensate for those cases when a stoic

they hear about César’s purportedly huge fortune. This kind of biased reversal of attitude could implicitly mock the existing materialism and cynicism of the age, customarily clothed under respectable moral guises.
philosophical approach to life fails. This paternal advice seems to finally earn him Lili’s affection and respect (hence her domestication as well) as well as a narratively required overcoming of his weak masculinity.

It is true, however, that, in Ricardo’s or César’s cases, their irresolute masculinity may have been easier to condone publicly, given its widespread association with the liberal professions (e.g., composer and philosophy teacher), a connection that also appears in the less authoritarian screwball comedy *Turbante blanco*, whose hero, Alejandro, is a composer like Ricardo. Ricardo’s first work (i.e., *La vida empieza a medianoche*, the operetta that gives the title to the screwball comedy) is made to conveniently enjoy a tremendous success, enabling him to lead a leisurely life without being integrated in a constraining production cycle and to assert himself better in front of the emancipated Silvia, to whom he offers a job as a secretary when she loses a similar job (as María Linz’, a successful female writer’s, private secretary).

The revelation about María Linz’ shameful theft of her deceased husband’s manuscripts conspicuously punishes her socially unsanctioned status of freedom, independence and emancipation as a female writer, showing that it is actually a man (i.e., her late husband) who deserves all the credits and who knew to write so well. Her haughty, self-governing stance is dismantled through her former husband’s vindictive son, who abandons his initial impersonation as her flirtatious driver and exemplarily punishes the woman who dared usurp his father’s power and well-deserved social visibility. What is also castigated is María Linz’ unrestrained desire and frivolous self, full of erotic initiative, which is deemed morally unbecoming for her middle age and for her position as a woman, as the corresponding contemporaneous hegemonic model was one of submission and domesticity. This fake female writer that was married several times is consequently made to look ridiculous as she initially believes her stepson’s exaggerated
compliments and erotic insinuations, while her obvious envy of Silvia’s youth and beauty merely adds to the narrative construction of a repellent female counter model and invalidates her otherwise interesting remarks about gender roles in the context of the age: “los hombres sois tan engañosos, prometéis tanto… En cambio, nosotras somos todo corazón, tan impresionables, tan dispuestas a dejarnos llevar por los impulsos generosos que no sabemos negaros nada.” Put in the mouth of an insincere, scheming character, who callously stole her husband’s manuscript and left with all his fortune, these words are contrived to lose their potential critical impact and their anticipation of Silvia’s narrative trajectory in this screwball comedy.

The destruction of María Linz’ fame and self-reliance also annihilates Silvia’s professional possibilities of independence and emancipation as a single woman in Madrid: jobless and homeless only a few hours after she arrived so hopeful and defiant from the province, Silvia is left without any opportunity of self-sustenance as she is opportunely given the choice not only to be Ricardo’s private secretary (in an obvious inferior power position in respect to him) but also his wife soon afterwards, without any obligation to work to earn her living, hence even more dependent upon him. The ending is clearly disciplinary, performing the narrative function of domesticating a formerly rebellious, emancipated protagonist and simultaneously asserting Ricardo’s social and material superiority over Silvia. The comedy finale is not deprived of ambiguity, however, given the continued allusions to Ricardo’s weak masculinity: not only is the old man, his would-be grandfather, openly chastising him in front of Silvia for his apparently pusillanimous lack of initiative (i.e., of declaring his love and asking her to marry him), but he also verbally abuses him constantly, also in front of Silvia, by calling him “tonto”, “mentecato”,
Clearly embodying a strong masculinity and a traditional patriarchal figure, the old man, magnificently interpreted by José Isbert, seems to provide the missing masculine strength and authority to his adopted grandson, Ricardo, and to act as a catalyst for both the romance and the domestication of the main female character: it is due to him and to the ostentatious frailty of his health that Silvia agrees to stay with Ricardo and play the role of his stepbrother’s wife, while their subsequent meetings and propitious setting for the marriage proposal are also engineered by the old man. On the other hand, the old man seems much less prudish about sexuality than Ricardo, as he mockingly starts to “help” his fake grandson undress in front of his presumable wife, Silvia, and as he suggestively smiles and stares at Ricardo while wishing him and Silvia good night and sweet dreams, before locking the door of their enforced bedroom. The male protagonist’s almost terrified reaction at being undressed by his grandfather in front of Silvia and at seeing himself locked in a room alone with her sheds some significant light, actually, on his embattled masculinity and subsequent fear of ridicule in front of the object of his love, who appears much less impressed by Ricardo’s potential nudity or by their compulsory intimacy. Her falling asleep in his arms at the end of the movie—when excitement should have prevented her from doing that as he was melodramatically declaring his love to her, can hardly be explained only by her extreme fatigue after a long journey to Madrid and an eventful night, casting more doubts on Ricardo’s actual success as a romantic figure. This hypothesis is further consolidated by Silvia’s sudden and effortless waking up at their would-be son’s mocking grimaces at Ricardo’s passionate declarations, followed by a good-humored laughter at the child and at her future husband. This scene is immediately succeeded by

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1 As the old man finds out, to his surprise, that Silvia is not (yet) his fiancée, he scolds Ricardo in front of Silvia and urges him to propose to her by telling him: “No comprendo qué esperas […] ¡Atrévete, tonto! ¿No ves que lo está esperando? Lo veo por los ojos.”
Ricardo’s laughter and a melodramatic kiss, which precedes the final shot of a clock showing that the time was five in the morning.

The title of this screwball comedy, La vida empieza a medianoche, is in itself quite subversive at the time when the movie was released, as it points to a temporal frame that was not a typical realm of action or adventure for the “decent” girls and women of the age: according to Carmen Martín Gaite (140), returning home after ten o’clock in the evening was a characteristic of men or the so-called “mujeres de la vida”, as not even the most modern and emancipated unmarried girls would have the key of the entrance door to be able to come back home later. The fact that Silvia arrives in Madrid so late in the evening (around eight o’clock) and spends the entire night going back and forth and only goes to bed at five in the morning, after Ricardo’s proposal of marriage, seems to point to a rather atypical temporal background for both sanctioned dating rituals and conventional job hours (i.e., Silvia needs to meet her employer in the hotel at midnight, after which they go to the restaurant to eat and drink). The title of the movie, like that of Ricardo’s successful operetta, triggers instead a completely different background, which resonates both with the more liberal temporal frames and mores during Republican times and with the Hollywood screwball comedies and their highlight of pleasurable, insouciant evenings and nights that are the perfect setting for romance and adventure. The movie thus seems to feature an alternative take on romance and marriage (and on life in general), a perspective that is light, playful and nonchalant and seems to invite to a carefree, enjoyable existence that is dramatically different from the stern ambience of autarchic Spain, when this screwball comedy was released.

Even if it often indulges in a melodramatic rhetoric, Doce lunas de miel similarly displays ample playfully parodic stances of the more conventionalized forms of postwar
romance, particularly through Jaime’s mouth. It is true that this sarcasm might be more easily motivated in some instances, when the melodramatic register is employed by one of his rivals, Douglas (hence Jaime’s interested subversion of his hackneyed declarations to Julieta), or by Julieta’s female cook, who openly wails, sighs and moans for him, a sentimental show that elicits many ironies from Jaime, who is utterly uninterested in her affection.1 One of the most parodic instances that Jaime is responsible for occurs during the wedding party organized by Doña Flora, when Julieta reproaches him for his publicly unfeigned coldness, which looks strange in such apparently happy circumstances. As she asks him to tell her something very passionate, in order to better impersonate a romance they were not involved in, Jaime looks into her eyes rapturously and starts passionately declaiming some prosaic textbook details about the province of Lérida as if he were making a romantic declaration. This humorous contrast between a conventional melodramatic stance and the actual words employed sarcastically points to the impersonating ease and “artificiality” with which the melodramatic elements can be used even in the absence of any “authentic”, underlying feeling. It is arguable to what extent, nonetheless, Jaime’s frequent ironical comments are meant to balance his sensitive, emotional side and to avoid any melodramatic excess, which is parodied as a “form without substance” by the main character. On the other hand, it is unclear if what the protagonist ridicules at Doña Flora’s party is other couples’ potentially interested exhibitionism of (missing) feelings, an empty sentimental rhetoric in general, or the “artificiality” of film melodrama, especially in its Hollywood forms. The possible satire of this cinematic discourse could disciplinarily warn against its uncritical appropriation by female audiences and against a subsequent yearning for a similar,

1 When Julieta’s maid tries to move Jaime into acknowledging the cook’s romantic suffering for him, by pointing to her frequent sighs and tears, Jaime prosaically and sarcastically remarks, for instance: “Yo no me fijaría en esto. Las cocineras lloran mucho porque se pasan los días pelando cebollas.”
“exaggerated” rhetoric of love in everyday life, which grows to be judged according to a fictional pattern associated with shallowness and falsity.

Another noteworthy parodic moment of Doce lunas de miel is when all the newly married couples start smiling from ear to ear upon hearing the wedding photographer’s encouraging remarks (i.e., “¡Piensen en el dinero!”). This beaming stance is in a stark contrast to the long faces that most newly weds had before this exclamation, which ironically alludes to a more widespread impersonation of love, not only to Jaime’s and Julieta’s, in order to receive the coveted dowry of forty thousand pesetas from the generous Doña Flora. Furthermore, this parodic situation easily makes this screwball comedy fit the larger thematic pattern of most Spanish screwball movies, which conjoin a domesticating pattern of romance with material improvement and/or social ascent, a peculiar union that must have been very alluring in the grim autarchic times when these comedies were released. Moreover, a willful use of this kind of parody might point to an acute contemporaneous awareness of the importance of money to start a family: the film’s temporary focus on the existence of hundreds of couples (some being in a relationship for twenty years) that vie for Doña Flora’s monetary gift in order to finally set up home alludes to one of the main hardships for many Spanish couples in the desolate aftermath of the Civil War. Later comedies such as El inquilino or El pisito will resort to a much more mordant social critique of the contemporaneous housing problem, which made many impecunious couples incapable of getting married and starting a family in their youth.

If we closely examine the comic register of the screwball comedies that has been analyzed so far, particularly of Boda accidentada and Un marido a precio fijo, we notice a harsher parody of the heroine’s performative excess to the extent this unsympathetic humorous treatment becomes a kind of social indictment and punishment of her problematic indocility.
This authoritarian derision clearly goes beyond the benevolent paternalism of Hollywood screwball, especially when it insistently focuses on the frivolous women’s facial display of a kind of dumb, shallow theatricality, a castigating image that also appears in one of the posters of Boda accidentada. The recurrent close-ups that appear in these Spanish comedies are thus not only meant to melodramatically reinforce the happy moments of final union, centering upon the couple’s beaming faces that allude to the joyous resolution of a previous love-hate relationship, but they also highlight the disciplinary moments of the movie, when the female protagonist is ridiculed and, unable to wittily retort, she powerlessly exhibits an irritated, bewildered look, sometimes followed by a furious, helpless stamping of her foot. Needless to say, when the male hero finds himself in a similarly frustrating experience (e.g., in a ridiculous situation for his ego, unable to retort in equally ingenious terms), there are no merciless close-ups to further undermine his endangered masculinity and ability to control an unruly woman. The inflexible authoritarian treatment of the female protagonist through such malevolent close-ups is instead meant to serve as a visual reinforcement of the hero’s punitive sarcasm or malicious tricks, an attempt at making the castigated woman appear less sympathetic and glamorous for the audiences. The disciplinary preference for close-ups that highlight the heroine’s frustration or ridicule in these screwball comedies is accompanied by similarly derisive long takes, devoted especially to slapstick sequences featuring the heroine (e.g., as she stumbles, falls etc.) but also to scenes of performative excess (e.g., while frivolously flirting) that sometimes point to an awkward theatricality and an ultimately naïve, inexperienced seduction strategy.

Various reviews of Boda accidentada (e.g., in Digame, Radiocinema, or in Primer Plano by Ubalde Pazos) nevertheless indict not only the female lead’s “excessive gesticulation”, but also that of several other characters, which seemingly appear as “juguetes cómicos ya pasados de
moda”, that is, reminding of the silent comedian comedies at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ubalde Pazos actually condemns, among other aspects, the vaudeville settings, characters and music from Boda accidentada. This kind of critique, quite recurring in respect to the 1940s Spanish comedies by both contemporaneous and later reviewers and film historians, seems to be oblivious of the two main strains of film comedy of the time: the early, spectacle- or vaudeville-based tradition, is not constructed upon narrative integration, favoring the generation of laughter, while the later type, of comedy, stemming from the “legitimate theater”, seeks verisimilitude and narrative integration, appealing to a more respectable middle-class audience (Neale and Krutnik 2). While the silent comedian comedy of the 1920s is a transitional phase in the narrativization of the earlier vaudeville-bent tradition, it still offers many slapstick scenes of the human body out of control as well as more sight gags, both primarily meant to generate laughter and thus entertain the audiences. By being less visually and narratively constrictive, these vaudeville devices also allow more margins of alternative interpretations, a subversive feature of the prewar Spanish revue and género chico as well, two commonly indicted genres that also permeated the screwball comedies of postwar Spain.¹ In any case, this riotous type of humor, linked to the Hollywood silent comedy, the Spanish sainete, astrakán or revue, was tirelessly condemned in the most compliant journals, women’s or film magazines of the time, as this hegemonic media astutely acknowledged the potentially rebellious, alternative potential of these comic discourses in respect to the desired disciplinary role models to be enforced. It is also very revealing that one of the reasons for which Boda accidentada was vituperated by Ubalde Pazos was its accused similarity with prewar Republican films, alluded through the temporal frame mentioned (i.e., “película demasiado semejante a las que se hacían en España entre 1932 y

¹ According to Emeterio Díez Puertas (332), the farcical slapstick (e.g., a character’s repeated clubbing) permeated “los sainetes burguesificados” of the castizo stage as a result of the Spanish producers’ and spectators’ repeated and popular exposure to Hollywood silent comedies.
1936”), an aesthetic similarity that was probably (and astutely) considered responsible for many subversive associations beyond the formal aspects of the comedy. Along similar lines, another screwball target of film criticism was the playful, the gross, the grotesque, and the absurd (i.e., “perogrullada”, “los gestos burdos”, “la vulgaridad”, “el chiste malo, viejo, retorcido”, “la contestación desrazonable”, “comicidad chabacana”, “todos los absurdos más chuscos”, “disparatado, absurdo, de una gracia antiguamente astracanesca”, “las situaciones desatinadas, ilógicas, en las que lo descabellado se junta con lo irracional para provocar la risa enfermiza en el espectador”). Needless to say, the condemned comic traits of screwball comedies did indeed attract many spectators (hence a salutary, widespread impact), judging by the reluctant mentions of the films’ public success in the pages of the same publications, which patronizingly referred to the movie as “un espectáculo divertido para el público de mayorías”.

Whereas the vaudeville-based performative excess and the playful or absurd humor generated a virulent reprobation on the part of the more conservative journalists and critics, what is exalted instead are “decoro”, “armonía”, “lo ameno”, “lo gracioso”, “el humor sano y benevolente” that does not induce noisy, incontrollable roars of laughter. Taking all these criteria into consideration, it is unsurprising that *Un marido a precio fijo* was thoroughly commended as an exemplary story of female domestication by the *Primer Plano* reviewer Antonio Mas-Guindal: even if this screwball comedy was not devoid of female excess and impersonation, whose subversive importance must have been trivialized, the film was praised for its “amenidad y simpatía” and for its lack of any aspect deemed “ñoño ni inmoral” (in a narrative only minimally accompanied by sequences of slapstick or sight gags).¹ On the other hand, the critic condescendingly referred to the *novela rosa* plot of the original novel, written for “mentalidades

¹ The exemplary character of this screwball comedy, which favors the eventual domestication of the heroine (however unconvincing), is also substantiated by the second prize that *Un marido a precio fijo* received from El Sindicato Nacional del Espectáculo.
de adolescencia […] contienen esa diversidad de ambientes esas aventuras extraordinarias y misteriosas con las que tanto sueñan las muchachas de vida quieta e imaginación rápida.” No more observations will be made once again about the implicitly critical wish-fulfilling yearnings of the bovarya, which is indirectly and understandably condemned by the conservative Primer Plano reviewer, but his judicious comments regarding the conspicuous difference between Luisa María Linares’ romance novels and other Spanish folletines should be passingly mentioned: if the latter are patronizingly referred to as “localistas y cursí”, her novelas rosa are deemed positively imprinted by foreign narratives. While the foreign models are still criticized for their display of stereotyped situations and characters and of a plot often characterized by “absurdo por el exceso e ilógico para la deducción”, Luisa María Linares’ fiction seems to beneficially put forth an alternative perspective of settings, gender roles and romance models, whose potentially emancipating impact was greatly enhanced by its cinematic adaptation. As Antonio Más-Guindal also observes, the screwball comedy echoes “el modo jugoso hollywoodiano”, thus further reinforcing the refreshing sense of difference brought about by the fictional world.

Leaving aside the punitive narrative interest in frequently showing a dumb, “artificial” female protagonist (especially in Katie’s case in Boda accidentada or Julieta’s in Doce lunas de miel), the audience’ sensation of affectation in respect to such female lead is also indebted to these actresses’ rather rigid body language in various important cinematic moments, when they should strive for a more plastic interpretation. A more efficient facial and body language, to a great extent responsible for the hugely entertaining aspect of these screwball comedies, is generally exhibited by various secondary actors coming from the autochthonous theatrical stage (e.g., Mary Santpere in Boda accidentada, José Isbert in Te quiero para mí and La vida empieza a medianoche). Mary Santpere’s taller and unattractive figure made her interpret many roles of
domineering wife, for instance, a stock figure from the género chico tradition: in Boda accidentada, she interprets such part, that of a stern, emasculating German woman, who repeatedly punishes her puny, absent-minded husband, a professor who “distractedly” flirts and gets married several times. This threatening female figure, which also appears in many 1940s caricatures, is not only based upon a clear incongruence (i.e., between the most likely contemporaneous gender roles and the humorous situation depicted), but it is also meant to pedagogically show the danger of a weak manhood, where the husband is ridiculously dominated by an emasculating woman, even if it does not succeed in completely obliterating the potentially empowering image of a self-assertive, rebellious woman. This incongruous portrayal of contemporaneous gender roles is undoubtedly meant to serve as a disciplinary counter-model and complementary focus to the main domesticating story, in respect to which it both has a didactic function and it acts as parodic, carnivalesque counterpoint (which has a similar satirical function to that initially held by entremeses and sainetes against the dramas de honor of the Golden Age).

The carnivalesque element is even more pronounced in Deliciosamente tontos, the extremely popular screwball comedy from 1945 that features a skillfully delineated female protagonist (played by the local star Amparo Rivelles) that is involved in a romance fitting a “battle of sexes” paradigm. Another noteworthy character is Dimas, the hero’s butler, which is impressively interpreted by the talented theatrical actor Fernando Freyre de Andrade, specialized in this role (i.e., “mayordomo de casa grande”), judging by the numerous butler parts that he played in other Spanish screwball comedies of the time as well (e.g., El hombre que las enamora, Ella, él y sus millones, Ángela es así) or in other contemporaneous romantic comedies (e.g., El hombre de los muñecos, La culpa del otro). The impersonation of this character-type, stemming from the fertile hybridization between the long-standing autochthonous figure of the criado and
the Hollywood screwball variety of the butler, greatly enriches the comic register of these
comedies. Freyre de Andrade’s sneers, grimaces and long faces are especially efficient, as they
histrionically accompany and implicitly ridicule his own lofty assertions (e.g., “Yo, Señor, soy
un escéptico en el amor”) or his hackneyed rhetoric as he playfully assumes his master’s (i.e.,
Ernesto’s) identity in front of Mari, the Cuban emancipated woman with whom Ernesto got
married by proxy. When Dimas prosaically and phlegmatically comments upon Ernesto’s
apparent love at first sight in front of Mari’s picture or upon romantic love (as is exemplified by
Romeo’s and Julieta’s love story, nostalgically exalted by his master), these remarks are meant to
sarcastically counterbalance his master’s melodramatic rhetoric, whose narrative hegemony is
comically undermined. Mari’s similar ironies in respect to her proxy husband’s cloying
declarations are actually very close to Dimas’ subversive words, a similitude that parallels the
effective construction of these two characters, Mari and Dimas, much more interesting than
Ernesto, the male protagonist.²

Quite awkwardly interpreted by the popular Alfredo Mayo, one of the most fashionable
and best paid local stars of the Spanish postwar, Ernesto’s melodramatic part was apparently not
enjoyed by the actor, who declared to the magazine Digame in 1942 that he disliked playing
romantic characters, which could easily appear ridiculous, a statement that is very suggestive of
Alfredo Mayo’s fear of becoming associated with a weak masculinity, encumbered with
emotions. In Deliciosamente tontos, Ernesto does appear pompous, self-conscious and overall

¹ It is interesting to see how the posters of this comedy clearly seek to downplay the comic element, particularly the
carnivalesque one, embodied by Freyre de Andrade’s character, and to highlight the melodramatic rhetoric, which
can be also potentially explained by Alfredo Mayo’s and Amparo Rivelle’s star status of “preferred film couple” at
that time (especially for the female spectators), according to various audience polls of the age. Only in one surviving
poster does Fernando Freyre de Andrade appear in a mildly comic stance, whose humorous allusion is probably
indebted more to his local star image than to the actual poster depiction.
² Several critics (e.g., Román Gubern, Peter Evans) mention the film director’s (i.e., Juan de Orduña) predilection
for strong female protagonists, manifest also in his historical melodramas of the late 1940s, which they dubiously
ascribe to Orduña’s alleged Oedipal problems.
unconvincing—and his contrived pose was judiciously observed by the Primer Plano reviewer of the movie as well. When he finds himself in front of Mari’s admirers on the ship, Ernesto seems to oscillate between sudden displays of a domineering masculinity (similar to Niko’s in Boda accidentada or to Miguel’s in Un marido a precio fijo) and an affected sentimental rhetoric, often connected to effeminacy in men. In Ernesto’s case, the main reason for his ostentatious spectacle of an authoritarian masculinity is to be found in his personal insecurity, which is more explicit than in other screwball comedies of similar tendency. As he openly confesses to Dimas, Ernesto feels the need to “test” his wife to make sure her decision to marry him is motivated by love and not by sheer materialism. He thus resorts to making Dimas appear as her emotionally repellent proxy husband and to impersonating himself as a seductive, generous but poor man on the ship, with whom Mari eventually falls in love (to the point she finally decides to abandon her would-be husband, Dimas, in order to live with Ernesto, the man she truly loves). Furthermore, the hero resentfully acknowledges his inferiority complex in respect to his proxy wife, which was mostly due to her unmistakable intellectual capacities (e.g., “escribe genial, tiene gran facilidad de pluma en las cartas”).

This clear imbalance between the two protagonists is also narratively confirmed through various dialogs and scenes in which both of them or Mari and her uncle star. These sequences highlight a witty, emancipated and self-confident woman, who is not afraid to argue against her uncle’s disciplinary desire to tame her public manifestations and against Ernesto’s domineering tendencies or occasional hackneyed declarations.¹ Mari’s emancipated modern tendencies are conspicuously displayed as she repeatedly insists on her desire of self-government (i.e., “quiero

¹ When her tutor urges her to behave more formally on the ship, as it befits a (recently) married woman, and not to go to the swimming pool (i.e., not to expose her flesh), Mari ironically replies: “no sabía que el agua fuera mala para el matrimonio”. When Ernesto melodramatically asks her if she would like to “caminar hacia las tinieblas y perderse en el mar”, Mari sarcastically retorts “¡Más chapuzones? ¡No, por favor!”, alluding to a previous sequence, when Ernesto, a former swimming champion, jumped into the water to rescue her lapdog, which had fallen into the ocean.
vivir como mejor me parezca”), which is rhetorically founded upon the right of her youth and of her being of age and which is conveniently transformed towards the end of the comedy in the melodramatic determination to reject the enforced materialist union and to stay faithful to the man she loves—a decision that, as she finds out, is actually unproblematic, as her real proxy husband and the man she feels attracted to are one and the same person. As she gradually falls in love with the fake Dimas (i.e., Ernesto) on the ship that carries her from Cuba to Spain, this screwball heroine confesses Ernesto that she is neither materialist nor despises a romantic outlook on life, yet she declares herself afraid of love. We thus witness a disciplinary change of the female protagonist from an outspoken rebellious independence to a more downplayed desire of autonomy, a transformation that is enabled by romance and which eventually leads to the disheartening image of an obedient and rather dull heroine, which lost her promising witty and emancipated profile. Her alleged self-government at the end of the movie, reduced to her trumpeted free choice of marriage, does not actually cut her off from her family (i.e., her uncle and tutor), as is her very uncle who insists on her marriage with Ernesto so that they can inherit her quirky antecessor’s fortune: unlike what happens with Hollywood screwball heroines, Mari’s personal desires in the end are conveniently convergent with her family’s interests. Besides, marriage for love and not for money is one of her ancestor’s romantic legacies, not only an eventual opportune expression of her personal defiance, making the female protagonist respect a family wish and tradition—there were other previous members of her lineage that decided to maintain their romantic commitments, even if, in their case, that meant a renunciation of the family fortune. This legacy is admittedly ambivalent, condemning materialism but awarding a considerable fortune to an “authentic” romantic love. The friendly, companionate relationship that usually triumphs in Hollywood screwball comedies has no place in Deliciosamente tontos,
which, like other Spanish movies belonging to the screwball of commitment focused upon women, disciplinarily focuses on the heroine’s eventual obedience to her domineering husband, who is utterly unconvincing in his ostentatious attempts of proving his superiority over his wife.

If Mari, skillfully interpreted by Amparo Rivelles, is among the Spanish screwball heroines that is very close to the Hollywood screwball female protagonists in self-confidence and witty sarcasm, her final domestication and tedious tendency to sermonize seriously undermine her promising figure. After Ernesto confesses the reason for his impersonation, Mari makes a pedantic, melodramatic statement (i.e., “creía que el dinero vencería, pero el amor triunfó”), followed by Ernesto’s emphatic words, meant to round off the didactic function of the movie: “Hoy somos todos tan románticos como ayer, aunque nos empeñemos en disimularlo.”¹ This dubious sermonizing remark is not only unconvincing in the bleak Spanish setting of postwar autarchy, when Deliciosamente tontos was successfully released, but also within the narrative development of the comedy: the couple’s romance cannot overcome the insidious memory of Mari’s initial materialism in her decision of proxy marriage nor can it obliterate the convenient financial resolution of the film. The protagonists’ didacticism is perhaps best subverted, however, by the secondary characters of this screwball comedy, which seem to have the last word as they appear in the very last moments of the movie. After Ernesto’s and Mari’s affected declarations and romantic kiss, the heroine’s uncle and tutor (almost bankrupt) and his friend undermine this idyllic moment and their previous sermon by their enthusiastic howling sounds at the thought of the actual material consequences of the wedding (i.e., “¡Ahora sí que cobramos herencia!”). As they conclude their pragmatic assessment of the situation, the butler Dimas

¹ Ernesto’s and Mari’s pompous assertions might resonate with the chorus of a well-known zarzuela song of the age, which pretentiously trumpeted that “el amor no se compra con dinero” (Vázquez Montalbán 47), a lofty melodramatic attempt of counterbalancing the more pragmatic daily outlook of the vast majority of the population, a perspective that was largely based on cynicism and “material myths” (50).
displays one of his typical grotesque sneers, which now accompanies his sarcastic remark (i.e., “Pero, ¡qué deliciosamente tontos era Romeo y Julieta!, ¿eh?”). His peculiar grin gradually becomes more disturbing until it degenerates into an uncanny, ghastly laughter that is still heard in the background as the screen becomes black and the word “fin” appears. This radical, carnivalesque subversion of the comedy’s explicit moralizing tendency generated a widespread outrage in the movie reviewers of the time: the Primer Plano critic, for instance, violently attacks “el sesgo chabacano, exagerado” and the leaning towards “lo disparatado y absurdo” of the finale, after a “promising” beginning, “romántico y gracioso”. This disgruntled reviewer, who seems to have upheld a disciplinary conservative stance, also exhibits a mixed attitude towards the female lead, whose interpretation is praised in so far it shows “una natural ingenuidad” but indicted when she is involved in an eccentric, witty dialog that is branded “inexpresivo and artificioso”, improper of the “well-educated persons” in everyday life.

Elvira A, one of the two heroines of Turbante blanco, is much more emancipated, sarcastic and self-confident than Mari, hence the understandable disciplinary attempt of framing her personality as hysterical and pathologically destructive.¹ This perspective seems to interestingly rely upon what Tim Mitchell (1), following Foucault, calls an ‘authoritarian medicalization’ or ‘the medicine of authoritarian intervention’ in the aftermath of the Civil War, which was coupled with a strong misogynistic outlook: according to sociologist Jesús de Miguel’s 1979 study of sixteen medical school manuals and several medical journals published between 1939 and 1975, women were seen as “more or less perverse, particularly vulnerable to

¹ As both heroines have the same name, Elvira, the rebellious, emancipated one will be referred as as Elvira A and the composer’s melodramatic fan will be nicknamed Elvira B.
psychosomatic illnesses.” (Mitchell 8). If Elvira A is conveniently presented as wildly destroying any household item in her hysterical fury or shooting through the neighbors’ windows while chasing pigeons, the other female protagonist, with the same name (i.e., Elvira B), is presented as a hopelessly sentimental and pompous fan of Alejandro, a successful composer. The two women are mistaken by the male protagonists (i.e., Alejandro and Doctor Echarri) as their only distinctive sign seemed to be a white turban, which both wore, and they end up with a different man than the intended one: the spoiled, hysterical young girl (i.e., Elvira A) arrives at the composer’s house even if she was sent by her helpless father at Doctor Echarri’s clinic (which was disguised as a distant relative’s house to avoid any suspicion of medical treatment), while Elvira B, the female admirer who wanted to visit the composer, is instead taken to Doctor Echarri’s undercover clinic for treatment. Not only are both women “cured” (i.e., disciplined) in the end, before they even discover the true identities of the men in whose house they lived, but their eventual love objects are also changed for the better in the process, making this screwball comedy a successful domesticating story of both its heroes and its heroines. All main characters of Turbante blanco also learn to appreciate a more friendly, companionate relationship, a mutual growth that was unsurprisingly indicted in the movie reviews of the time.

Equally condemned was the emancipated Elvira A, the rich, spoiled protagonist whose rebellious personality has driven her weak parents and her previous doctors to exasperation, thus making her father believe that the only possibility of cure lies in a camouflaged medical intervention in a family-like environment. The composer’s house, where she actually arrives by

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1 Interestingly enough, the official movie poster depicts almost all the main characters (i.e., Alejandro, Doctor Echarri and Elvira B) smiling broadly and appearing to be having fun, with the telling exception of Elvira A, the “wildest” protagonist of this comedy, who is disciplinarily rendered as submissively and/ or timidly looking down.

2 Elvira B’s infatuation with the composer and his work is underlined by the fact that she never actually saw Alejandro, but she nonetheless claims to be in love with him. On the other hand, this narrative detail conveniently enables the airport confusion between the two women.
mistake, hardly fits these desired requirements, being a lavish bachelor’s house, where many frivolous women come to join the frequent parties. Moved by both selfishness and jealousy, Elvira A does not hesitate to make her destructive presence felt: not only does she break many expensive china antiques from Alejandro’s house, shoot pigeons (and consequently shatters the neighbors’ windows), but she also vindictively tears some of the composer’s piano scores (as he ignores her) and causes his arrest because of her vandalizing behavior. Despite these bursts of aggressiveness or precisely because of them, Elvira A is much more engaging and refreshing than the dull, repetitive female fan who starts declaiming hackneyed bookish formulas as she reaches Doctor Echarri’s disguised clinic. This tedious melodramatic stance makes him paternalistically consider her harmless (unlike what he was told about the other Elvira) and declare her as suffering from “una perturbación plácida”, linked to her “poetic” interests, or, in more medicalized terms, “una monomania fácil de tratar”, a diagnostic given to a theoretically “sane” woman. This disciplinary classification of Elvira B as mentally ill of a lesser degree is likely to allude, with a kind of dark irony, to an ‘authoritarian medicalization’ that asserts its knowledge/ power over a more subtly rebellious female protagonist, whose adopted melodramatic discourse seems to point to an ingrained bovaryc dissatisfaction with conventional romance models, hence to a rejection of the available social roles and relations. Her eventually successful “cure” thus supposes a deracination of this insubordinate interpretive choice and a gradual learning of the socially sanctioned reading of romantic fulfillment for women, encouraged to uphold a practical, submissive domesticity. As Doctor Echarri, through his prosaic and pragmatic retorts, teaches her to get rid of the sentimental rhetoric she was enthralled with, he also learns from these daily interactions how to express his feelings and let his poetic side surface, a useful lesson for the creation and consolidation of a more companionate relationship.
Elvira A’s feigned indifference and occasional contempt in respect to Alejandro’s artistic work is accompanied by her sensible lectures to the composer about the necessity to adopt a practical outlook to life, a condescending stance which she pedagogically tends to use in order to abruptly dismiss his melodramatic outpours (e.g., about his yearning to live secluded on a distant island, which strongly echoes Peter Warne’s similar desire in It Happened One Night). Whereas his daydreaming is also critical of existing social relations and roles, his (only occasional) endorsement of such commonly indicted wishes is to some extent mitigated by his belonging to the artistic realm: as a composer, Alejandro is more easily permitted to indulge in a melodramatic rhetoric, which, together with the display of emotions, signals a “weaker” masculinity. Despite this increased social lenience towards his sentimental inclinations, he will be opportunely transformed by Elvira A into a more practical man. She also conveniently chases his many women fans away and serves a useful humbling lesson to the presumptuous composer, who was detrimentally accustomed to an unconditional female admiration and an overall success as a womanizer.

Judging by the four protagonists’ gradual transformation, Turbante blanco seems to promote a socially sanctioned moderate position and to avoid any verbal or behavioral extreme, a preference that is also perceived by the Dígame film reviewer, whose chosen subtitle for this screwball comedy is “Película de locos puestos en razón”. It is unsurprising, however, that the alluded domestication only refers to the female protagonists, “una neurasténica y desequilibrada y otra soñadora y romántica”. Both of them, each in her own way, initiate and lead the conquest, whereas the heroes are rather passive, which draws this Spanish screwball comedy closer to the Hollywood pattern, even if only the sarcastic and explosive Elvira A is comparable with the witty, fast-talking American heroines (especially with Susan from Bringing Up Baby). The
peculiar hysterical adagio to her temperamentally personality is eventually tamed neither through a conventional, medicalized approach nor through Alejandro’s domineering attempts but by his music: her incontrollable bursts of destructive rage are instantly paralyzed when she hears a classical piece of high quality. The composer interestingly becomes the only potential domesticator of her wild character through his music, which does not mean that Elvira A completely loses her mischievous inclination or her playful eagerness for pranks as she becomes calmer and more submissive: as in Mari Pepa’s case, from “La revoltosa”, Elvira A is tamed to the extent she preserves enough engaging playfulness to attract the composer but not enough rebelliousness to radically undermine the existing gender roles and romance models of the time, as she did before. Her sudden transformation into a rapt, submissive woman as she hears a fine piece of classical music echoes at least two “high culture” references, one ancient (i.e., Orpheus’ myth as he charmed even the beasts with his lyre), and another one local (i.e., Fernán Caballero’s novel, whose wild, intractable heroine, La Gaviota, could only be tamed through music as well). There are no ascertainable género chico examples about the domestication of an unruly female protagonist through music, much less classical. Based upon humorous sigh gags and fast, witty dialogs, of comic double meaning, Turbante blanco and its protagonists are actually more indebted to the Hollywood screwball than to the autochthonous theatrical tradition, a generic lineage that is very rarely found in the popular screwball comedies directed by Ignacio Iquino.

Whereas Turbante blanco was among the most beloved Spanish screwball comedies and it unsurprisingly generated harsh vituperations for its female protagonists and romance model, Un ladrón de guante blanco, first released in Barcelona in 1946, towards the end of the screwball cycle in Spain (hence its weakened generic affiliation), was a comedy with a more openly didactic ending and initial disclaimer, which might have accounted for its inability to secure a
large audience, while it ensured a relative critical benevolence, even if not at its original release.

According to Josetxo Cerdán (194-95), its original classification was very bad (i.e., “tercera categoría”), which meant that the movie could not be exported nor could it generate the coveted import and dubbing licenses, yet this rank must have been eventually reevaluated and changed upon request, given that the comedy was exported to Italy and it triggered a dubbing license of a British movie for the production company (i.e., the mysterious Productores Asociados Huemir).

The initial classification of Un ladrón de guante blanco is quite surprising, given the official endorsement of the censorship committee, which qualified it as ‘limpia, interesante y graciosa’ (qtd. in Cerdán 194), a description that, on the other hand, seems to have completely disregarded the clearly subversive dream sequences of the film in favor of the taming finale and of the openly moralizing disclaimer from the beginning of the comedy, dedicated to “los jóvenes que, apasionados por lecturas truculentas, se sienten atraídos hacia las más absurdas aventuras”. This avowed pedagogic tendency might have also been responsible for the good reviews of the movie in several film magazines of the time, such as Primer Plano or Dígame, which consider this screwball comedy “divertida y ágil”, commending its satirical intention and pleasant humor for their moral efficiency, even in the absence of ”propósitos trascendentes”.

The moral exemplariness of Un ladrón de guante blanco is quite dubious for a number of reasons, especially if we consider the strong erotic connotations of the heroine’s dream, a provocative aspect that will not be dwelt on, given Josetxo Cerdán’s convincing analysis of these riotous sequences in his anthologized film synopsis (195).1 What this chapter would like to add,

1 Josetxo Cerdán brilliantly analyzes Carmen’s oneiric phantasy as she loses consciousness and sees herself as the bandit “Fandanguillo”’s mistress in a nineteenth-century setting, hence as the stereotypical representation of Carmen’s myth. Furthermore, “Fandanguillo”, the chief of the bandits in her dream, is actually interpreted by the same actor that plays “Guante Blanco”, the chief of the bandits and Carmen’s kidnapper in real life, which subversively points to Carmen’s unsanctioned attraction to a transgressive male figure and not to Jaime, the upright engineer that rescues her and becomes her future husband in the end. As the critic judiciously remarks, such compulsory generic and historical resolution cannot erase the inflammatory allusion to the heroine’s unavowed
however, in respect to Carmen’s dream, that even in this unconstrained ambience, she still exhibits a strong, domineering personality, which is capable of restraining and controlling the fierce bandit “Fandanguillo”, who seems to be happily acquiescent to her wishes, an inverted gender situation (in respect to those existing in postwar Spain) that reminds us of the typically strong screwball heroine, who tends to initiate and lead the courtship process. Frank Capra’s directorial work is indeed exemplary for Ricardo Gascón, the director of this Spanish comedy, according to his own declaration in an interview made during the shooting of the movie and published by Primer Plano in his issue 243, from June 10, 1945. The American director is credited by Ricardo Gascón with a “forma aparentemente sencilla sobre un fondo repleto de humanidad”, yet the confessed intentions for Un ladrón de guante blanco do not point to an explicit desire to follow his generic steps (as Josetxo Cerdán erroneously assumes) but to parody gangster movies and the stereotypical Hollywood (re)production of a romanticized, folkloric Spain (i.e., with nineteenth-century bandits and fiery Gypsy women that dance flamenco).

Despite these obvious parodic elements in Un ladrón de guante blanco, which understandably weaken the screwball elements and syntax in respect to earlier Spanish samples of the genre, the Hollywood screwball comedy still provides a powerful mark, especially through its autochthonous reconfiguration that verges between the playful, mischievous comedies directed by Ignacio Iquino (for whom Ricardo Gascón worked as a scriptwriter), with their carnivalesque farcical character, and the more toned down and didactic screwball in the films directed by Gonzalo Delgrás and Ramón Quadreny (for whom Ricardo Gascón worked as assistant director). Furthermore, the Hollywood screwball discourse is implicitly recalled at the level of actors: Luis Prendes and Silvia Morgan, the Spanish actors who interpret the main characters in Un ladrón de...
guante blanco, arguably attempt to imitate the acting style of two American star images, of James Stewart and Veronica Lake, which had strong connotations with screwball comedy at the time.¹

Veronica Lake in particular used to be tirelessly indicted as a nefarious role model for young Spanish women in the aftermath of the postwar: as it was previously mentioned, quoting some of Carmen Martín Gaite’s memories (133-34), several Spanish advice columnists and movie reviewers denounced even her seemingly innocent loose hair, iconically displayed in the popular Hollywood screwball comedy I Married a Witch. Her “sloppy” outlook was considered both problematically impractical for household chores and morally pernicious, as it was associated with the disquieting “modern woman” image (e.g., extravagant, frivolous, erotically teasing and, above all, full of initiative in respect to men), most probably recalling the “decadent” Republican times. In both appearance and personality traits, Silvia Morgan’s interpretation of the female protagonist in Un ladrón de guante blanco is a very convincing instantiation of the condemned characteristics of Veronica Lake’s screwball heroines: Carmen Rico is a rich and spoiled Spanish banker’s daughter, who was “improperly” educated in Chicago (a more than casual reference, thinking about the willed gangster movie intertext) to be an emancipated, modern woman, accustomed to make her own decisions and have her whims carried out. She is also infatuated with the romanticized folkloric stories about bandits, about whom she recurrently daydreams, especially as she comes to Spain, accompanying her father on his business trip. Ironically enough, however, especially if we think about the initial didactic disclaimer of the movie or about the confessed parodic intentions of the film, Carmen’s rich imagination does not seem to be unfounded: the Spanish bandits (e.g., “Guante Blanco” and his

¹ This resemblance is also observed by Josetxo Cerdán (195), who never actually uses the word “screwball”, preferring to loosely speak about “la comedia americana de los años treinta”.

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band) still exist in modern times and they apparently live in very similar conditions to those of the nineteenth century's romantic stories or of her own suggestive dream. Furthermore, the actual course of the action in this comedy implicitly shows how the “real” Spain allegedly portrayed in Un ladrón de guante blanco seems to provide for Carmen even a more adventurous realm than any fiction. Moreover, the ruses she learns from these publicly indicted readings allow her to better respond to her real-life kidnapping (e.g., as she leaves a track of her kidnappers’ hiding place by throwing a napkin stuck into her shoe from the car that takes her away). The practical utility of the bandit stories she read before are undermined, if at all, only indirectly, by her rescuers’ comic mistakes and ineptitude, which are responsible for the delay of her final liberation as they cannot make sense of the clues she left on the road, a miscommunication that can hardly be contrived to be interpreted as Carmen’s educational problem (i.e., of reading “impractical”, extravagant stories). The actual understanding of “practicality” in this late screwball comedy becomes apparent when connected to the sanctioned social role of submissive domesticity, explicitly exalted towards the end of the movie, a hegemonic model that entails Carmen’s necessary prior domestication, which means that she is no longer allowed to adopt the other, uncommendable “practical” stance, which is not only associated with an indicted fictional escape for the dissatisfied women or young people of the age, but also with a self-assertive, energetic behavior that was conventionally related to masculinity, hence to a subversive gender role in Carmen’s case.

In respect to the male characters of Un ladrón de guante blanco, the extolled role model of “practicality” is unsurprisingly embodied not by the transgressive “Guante Blanco” (to whom Carmen is secretly attracted) but by Jaime, whose professional profile as an engineer enables him to trap the local bandits in the bank they were going to rob through the devise of a complicated
locking mechanism. This kind of “practical” male image is exalted instead of the romanticized bandit figure, while the commonly associated stereotype to engineers, that of a prosaic lack of imagination, is astutely dismantled as Jaime skillfully impersonates a cold-blooded Chicago gangster in front of the provincial-looking Spanish bandits, whom he convinces to go beyond their “petty” crimes and let him lead them to their biggest robbing adventure (i.e., that of a bank). It is through his efficient masquerade of a gangster, a consecrated Hollywood image, hence another foreign fictional model, and through the actor Luis Prendes’ attractive physical aspect, reminding James Stewart’s star image, that Un ladrón de guante blanco apparently pretends to ironically put forth a strong, autochthonous figure of domesticating masculinity, professionally affiliated with engineering. As it happens in different ways in most Spanish screwball, not only in the examples we have already analyzed, but also in the screwball of reaffirmation centered upon women and in the screwball of commitment centered upon men, the presence of such an ultimately unstable mixture is likely to bring more credit and glamor to a foreign fictional model, hegemonically indicted but capable of commanding popular admiration, than to the traditional gender roles explicitly advanced in the end or in the initial disclaimer of the comedy.

The screwball of reaffirmation: Disciplining an unruly wife

Judging by the total number of surviving copies and of estimated lost ones, the disciplining of the married woman was arguably not a favorite theme of Spanish screwball comedies, in contrast to the Hollywood production of screwball, which gradually moved towards “remarriage comedies” in the last years of the 1930s and in the early 1940s. According to Jane
M. Greene, the screwball of remarriage was linked to a more resolute attempt to dodge the existing censorship codes while putting forth more explicit verbal and visual erotic allusions as the presence of sexuality was “naturally” (i.e., socially sanctioned) a part of the narrative situation, focused on a married couple. The erotic innuendoes that occur in the Spanish screwball of reaffirmation centered upon women are understandably much subtler than in the American counterparts yet, based upon various testimonials of people who lived at that time (cfr. Gómez Sierra), it seems that any mildly suggestive scene or wit could have been hyperbolically interpreted as potentially racier in an original, uncensored version: as it was previously mentioned, the generally grim atmosphere of political repression and the audiences’ keen awareness of censorship and propaganda tended to trigger subversive and/or counterhegemonic politicized readings, often much more radical than any potential intentions of the producers.

If the formal prohibition of divorce in postwar Spain prohibited its featuring, even momentary, in any movie in the aftermath of the Civil War (even before in the National territories), the Spanish screwball of reaffirmation do take over an essential motif from the Hollywood remarriage comedy: the romantic reconquest of the married woman, inseparable from a disciplinary tendency, which is radicalized in the Spanish movies. The autochthonous screwball of reaffirmation also adds an additional element occasionally, namely, the transformation of the rebellious, emancipated wife into a submissive housewife, as it happens in Mi fantástica esposa.

While omnipresent in all American screwball comedies of remarriage, the husband’s parallel change is virtually missing in almost all Spanish films except El difunto es un vivo (unsurprisingly the most indicted screwball comedy of this type by the critics). What we witness instead in Mi fantástica esposa or Rápteme usted is either no male transformation at all or a
provisional, feigned change in the husband, responding to his authoritarian desire of disciplining his unruly wife.

In Mi fantástica esposa there is an apparent success in the implausible plan designed by Isidoro, Caruchi’s initially despised husband, in order to make her long for the tranquility of a peaceful home and give up her dreams of extravagant adventures in exotic settings. The movie actually ends in an almost circular manner: Isidoro returns home with a candy box for their anniversary and is affectionately welcome by a domesticated Caruchi, whose behavior is strikingly different from the beginning of the movie, when Isidoro’s similar return home on their anniversary could hardly make her abandon her beloved adventure novels—and when she put them down, it was only for a rebellious denunciation of their tedious marriage routine and of her dull husband. As it happens in other screwball comedies of commitment already analyzed (e.g., Boda accidentada, Un marido a precio fijo), Isidoro’s abusive language and behavior towards his wife are likely to romantically conquer Caruchi by bringing about her seeming masochist tendencies: she becomes more and more enthusiastic with her husband’s “tiger blood” and his abandonment of his former “lizard blood”, as she would scornfully reproach him before. It is difficult to speak about reconquest in this particular reaffirmation comedy, as Caruchi mordantly alludes to an essentially convenient marriage, meant to rescue her from a stifling boarding school environment, where she also dreamt of an adventurous life, shared with a dazzling man, most likely an idealized figure from novelas rosa and adventure books and novels. Once again we are in front of a female protagonist’s subversive dissatisfaction with existing gender roles and romance models, in conjunction with a utopian search of alternatives in fictional models that understandably become more alluring and emotionally gratifying than the narrow, socially sanctioned patterns of personal fulfillment of the time.
This commonly indicted bovaysme is not only undeniably critical of contemporaneous social roles but also questions their apparently necessary function of desirable “reality”, pointing to a seditious distanciation from a constraining paradigm of development. Before the final scene of her submissive, affectionate behavior towards her husband, Caruchi mischievously plays a farce upon him, which not only shows her rebellious, vindictive creativity, but also casts serious doubts on her allegedly successful taming: she declares to be blissfully remorseless about any “crime” she might have perpetrated during her Isidoro-engineered adventurous life and to have taken it in earnest to the extent she would like to follow this transgressive path. As her husband feels hopeless under these unforeseen circumstances, she patronizingly confesses him that she was joking, an attitude that conspicuously contrasts with the unconvincing finale and shatters the more reasonable anticipation of a more companionate relationship. The contrived authoritarian ending thus lingers on the placid image of a contented, submissive housewife, which corresponds to Isidoro’s patriarchal dreams of marriage (e.g., of a wife who lovingly bends down to put her husband’s slippers on as he returns home) and to the hegemonic discourses of the time, both ecclesiastic and civil. As it happens in other screwball comedies of commitment, this rejection of a friendly, companionate relationship does not obliterate, however, the powerful sense of the hero’s fearful complex of inferiority towards his much more resourceful wife.

Caruchi’s image can easily be related not only to the Hollywood screwball heroines, of which she is a much less sophisticated version, but also to the large series of spoiled, emancipated young women who are seemingly unfit for marriage (according to a hegemonic patriarchal conception), a figure that was very frequent, as I previously mentioned, in the prewar theater, particularly in the modernized género chico of the 1920s and 1930s. It is thus interesting to mention here that the plot of Mi fantástica esposa actually belongs to a very popular zarzuela
and revue writer, Francisco Ramos de Castro, who often dealt with the domestication of such emancipated heroines and displayed a conservative stance on modern Spanish life and politics of the first decades of the twentieth century.¹

As it often happened in many American screwball films and in many género chico plays, the blame for Caruchi’s rebellious, capricious character is conveniently ascribed to a lack of “proper” (i.e., authoritarian) education and, in particular, to her flirtatious, frivolous mother. Incapable of providing her daughter with a dignified, compliant model of female modesty and submission, Caruchi’s mother, a cosmopolitan opera singer, also has the implicit loose connotations of an “artist” at that time, unlike Isidoro’s mother, a housewife that most likely provides her son’s spousal model. If other Spanish screwball comedies implicitly blame a weak paternal figure (e.g., Un marido a precio fijo, Turbante blanco, Un ladrón de guante blanco), which is later “redressed” by a disciplinary future husband, this presence is absent in Mi fantástica esposa: there is no mention about Caruchi’s father, who could have been one of her mother’s numerous “admirers”.

Isidoro’s parents cannot, however, provide an unproblematic image of traditional gender roles for their son: his father bluntly confesses that he has been completely dominated by his wife, who has exercised “el mando absoluto” since their first year of marriage, after they first serious argument. Under these inauspicious circumstances, fearful of a similar power balance, Isidoro lets himself be persuaded by a friend to provisionally abandon his daily work routine at the bank in order to adopt a mock adventurous life, meant to teach his temperamental wife a lesson. Judging by what Isidoro’s friend asserts about Caruchi (i.e., “joven y guapa, con mucha

¹ Francisco Ramos de Castro also contributed to the libretto of the popular zarzuela “Me llaman la presumida”, written in 1935, and similarly depicting a domesticating love story of a “conceited” young woman, battling between a hedonistic, independent existence and a conservative married life (cfr. [http://www.zarzuela.net/syn/mellaman.htm](http://www.zarzuela.net/syn/mellaman.htm)). The plot also seems actually quite analogous to that of “La revoltosa”.

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vida interior”), it is very easy to ascribe her compensatory imaginary life to the tedious ambience of the home and to her dull husband, who is interpreted by the actor Fernando Fernández de Córdoba, who was almost fifty at the time and whose physical aspect was far from attractive (i.e., very stout and slightly bald). Here it is perhaps interesting to remark that the surviving poster of this screwball comedy strangely shows a different actor, much younger and slimmer, than the one who actually appears in the movie, which might point to a shrewd marketing strategy: not many potential female spectators would have been convinced to come to a romantic reaffirmation comedy featuring such an unattractive actor in the main male role and a young, beautiful actress (Antoñita Colomé) as the female star. The actress is depicted as a woman who is holding an open book, apparently the source of her daydreaming aspect, yet her look is rather haggard and absent as her shy-looking, supplicating husband is holding a small candy box in front of her uninterested face. This image that does not capture the couple’s initial relationship very well, as it portrays, on the one hand, a more melancholy heroine, deprived of energetic, sarcastic outbursts against her husband, and, on the other, a more endearing and timid male protagonist, who does not seem to possess such an authoritarian tendency of transforming Caruchi into a commending model of submissive and contended domesticity. Her actual close-ups in the movie are rather unflattering, especially during her engineered intrepid life, frequently showing her powerless frustration of being unable to stand up to her dreamed adventurer role or even her almost dumb incomprehension of the excessive calamities that befall her.

Within a postwar sociopolitical context of reiterated exhortations to large families, Caruchi’s and Isidoro’s marriage is, however, conspicuously devoid of children, despite the reference to their many marital years together. It is only at the end, as they conclude their fake adventurous life, that Caruchi mentions an incipient pregnancy, which seems consonant with an
implied reconstruction of the relationship between the two protagonists: the provisional change of routine apparently entailed not only a novel, frenzied pace of living (typical of some alleged thieves who are always rushing to get away), but also more passionate outbursts between the spouses, which heavily contrasts with the initial portrayal of a dull, weak and frustrating masculinity (i.e., with a “lizard blood”) and which might have had an important role in Caruchi’s later domestication and alleged appreciation of her husband. This moralizing finale of Mi fantástica esposa unsurprisingly generated good reviews in the more compliant film magazines of the time (e.g., Primer Plano, Digame, Cámara), which all praise the husband’s disciplinary efforts—the Digame review even bears the illustrative subtitle “Una medicina eficaz” and it commends the movie plot as the comic “tragedy” of “un marido bonachón e infelizote”, “un honrado empleado que nota ciertos desvíos de su mujercita de excesiva imaginación”, a description whose pejorative Spanish diminutive used for “wife” plainly exemplifies the critic’s misogynistic take on this screwball comedy.

The children are also manifestly absent from the marriage depicted in Rápteme usted, released in 1940, yet, in contrast to Mi fantástica esposa, there is no suggestion to any pregnancy towards of the end of the comedy, which dwells on the domestication of another young, temperamental wife, Áurea, interpreted by the famous cupletista Celia Gámez, who was associated with both the prewar revue and a strong vamp image. She and other female secondary characters occasionally display surprisingly revealing cleavages and bare legs, which would have been unthinkable in later Spanish movies, when the system of censorship was much better organized and the ecclesiastical censors’ number and power steadily increased.1

1 These suggestive images are even present in the movie poster, which seem to suggest a different kind of movie (i.e., a musical), which was also very popular at that time. The poster also conspicuously omits any written reference to Celia Gámez, who was an undeniable star at the time, possibly because of her morally controversial persona, while alluding to her presence in the comedy through an elaborate diva posture and the music scores above her
Áurea’s portrait is sarcastically sketched from the very beginning, when she appears as a whining, impulsive and frivolous woman who, despite her dubious dramatic gifts (e.g., wild, shrieking gesticulations and declamations), decides to leave her husband and return to her initial profession as an actress, to which she attributes freedom and emancipation as well as a flattering suite of constant admirers. Her husband’s calm, resigned attitude and his phlegmatic, ironical comments at Áurea’s vociferous victim pose are narratively engineered to make this hero more sympathetic to the audience. Furthermore, his caustic witticisms are also implicitly highlighted in contrast to the numerous simple-minded characters that feature in the slapstick sequences of the movie and that resonate with the farcical register of both Hollywood silent comedy and the prewar Spanish género chico and revue (under American influence).

The heroine’s indirectly indicted frivolity and shallowness is narratively made manifest especially through her uncritical admiration for any lavishly melodramatic acting style, whether belonging to cinema or to autochthonous theater (e.g., the scene of Doña Inés’ kidnapping in Don Juan Tenorio), an interestingly trivialized case of female bovarysme whose subversive underpinnings I will not analyze again. Suffice it to briefly mention here that the recurrent close-ups on Áurea’s histrionic poses and on her facile infatuation with the melodramatic rhetoric must have been meant to indirectly subvert such discourse and its (de)formative modeling power on female readers and spectators in particular, especially if they “gullibly” give in to such nefarious hermeneutics and forget their marital duties, undermining their “authentic” personal fulfillment in real life. Trying to appropriate these hegemonically condemned romance models into her own

image. Alongside these elements, there are various positive excerpts about the film (some decontextualized for marketing purposes from an overall negative review) and an advertising of the movie in general terms as “¡El más ingenioso asunto, armonías incomparables, ritmo desbordante y maravilla de gracia!”’. Another poster, which appeared in Primer Plano, also advertises this screwball comedy as “supercomedia musical”, “de ambiente moderno”, “con el dinamismo del cine americano” y “la fastuosidad del cine europeo”, hence not precisely along the most trumpeted political slogans of the age, but according to the marketing interest of the industrial-comemrcial public sphere to reach a wide audience.
life, Áurea organizes her own kidnapping in order to find a way out of her domestic boredom, to attract her seemingly aloof husband’s attention and to ensure ample publicity amidst a sarcastically portrayed public opinion, avid of sensationalist news. Upon realizing that she was indeed kidnapped (following her husband’s secret request) and that she can no longer control this impersonation, Áurea momentarily breaks down only to completely forget her confinement as she finds various clothes and jewels that command her attention. It is a moment of undeniable narrative punishment of the rebellious protagonist, whose frivolity and superficiality trigger a compensatory increase in the audience’s sympathy towards Áurea’s husband, whose domesticating efforts are contrived to appear as justified towards the end of the movie, when she submissively falls in her husband’s arms and agrees to leave for America and restart their life in a different environment, a prospect not deprived of subversive connotations in the grim ambience of the postwar autarchy.

In contrast to what happens in Mi fantástica esposa, the taming finale of Rápteme usted does not entail a transformation of the riotous female character into a model of domesticity, which can be attributed to the different social background of this comedy (i.e., middle-upper class, which could easily afford ample household help) in respect to that of Mi fantastica esposa (i.e., the small bourgeoisie, who had to live with Isidoro’s parents). What seems to be important to achieve in Rápteme usted is Áurea’s didactic transformation into an affectionate wife, with no whims or unfounded vanity, and who can acknowledge both her prior mistakes and her husband’s authentic love and superior judgment. This screwball comedy thus highlights a frivolous wife’s romantic reconquest while showing the dangers of a delayed spousal disciplining of an unruly woman, seditiously insisting upon self-government.

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1 This caustic portrayal of social life and public opinion, apparently more similar to the stereotypical depiction of the carefree American high society or of Republican times, is discordantly different from the hegemonic image of the public sphere of the time, an inherently subversive picture as long as there are no particular temporal clues provided.
The most efficient countermodel to the exemplary male protagonist in Rápteme usted is the chief of the detective agency that both Áurea and her husband hire: incapable of standing up to his domineering, capricious wife, this weak example of masculinity appears ridiculous, which adds up to his sheer ineptitude as a professional. His exaggerated dumb perplexity, together with the ludicrous obtuseness of the other detectives, of Áurea’s admirer and of almost all female characters of the comedy seem to serve the purpose of making Áurea’s husband sympathetically stand out (i.e., for his witty intelligence, his dignified composure, his “masculine” force of character etc.). He also fares much better even in terms of facial and body language: conveniently presented through middle and long shots and in a kind of a mysterious chiaroscuro, Áurea’s husband (never named in the comedy) has an undeniable commanding narrative perspective, in contrast to most other characters, whose excessively theatrical poses and replies strongly resonate with the vaudeville rhetoric of the Hollywood silent comedy. These discursive features, together with the frequent musical elements of Rápteme usted, are hardly surprising in a comedy whose director and scriptwriter, Claudio de la Torre, was strongly connected to the Hollywood company Paramount in the early 1930s, both as a director in its Paris studios and later as a manager of the Spain distributing branch, at a time when Paramount was both producing and distributing many musicals and vaudeville comedies. At a more autochthonous level, this screwball comedy also resonates with the Spanish revue ambience, a feature that was strongly underscored by the popular Celia Gámez’ presence, whose notorious femme fatale aura is conspicuously (and disciplinarily) undermined by such a self-ridiculing role. Furthermore, as in the case of the heroines from Mi fantástica esposa, Boda accidentada, Un marido a precio fijo, Doce lunas de miel, Áurea’s unflattering close-ups are meant to comically reinforce the female
lead’s humiliation and thus make her disciplinarily unsympathetic to the audience, a pedagogic attempt whose success was dubious given Celia Gámez’ powerful star persona.

Unlike what happens in many screwball comedies, in Rápteme usted there is no mention of Áurea’s parents and of their responsibility for their frivolous daughter’s education, even if there is a sarcastic presentation of Doña Amalia, the chief detective’s domineering wife, in her quality of an unfit, capricious model for her naive daughter. The sardonic authoritarian portrayal of domineering mothers and/or mothers-in-law (always the problematic heroines’ mothers, never the heroes’), is actually one of the most unequivocal legacies of the prewar género chico and revue on the Spanish screwball comedies. It is conspicuously featured especially in El difunto es un vivo, which is full of merciless jokes that the hero, Inocencio, makes about his otherwise viperine mother-in-law. This burlesque inversion of traditional gender roles (i.e., a ‘feminized’ or childlike man and a ‘masculinized’ woman) is an indirect acknowledgement of women’s greater power in the domestic sphere and relies on oppressive, misogynistic images of women, who are seen as directly responsible for men’s problematic assertion of their ‘proper’ masculine behavior. On the other hand, as Henry Jenkins cogently shows (250), the portrayal of women as “domestic tyrants represents the dark side of the heroic women of the sentimental novels”, hence they illuminatingly allude to a kind of male response at “the threat of matriarchal power”.

While any transgression of socially sanctioned patterns of development may be acceptable when it is followed by an eventual containment of the disruptive woman, the very image of female resistance to a stern patriarchal molding can also broaden the behavioral options for women, providing alternative possibilities and questioning a rigid social structure. The

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1 The hero’s biting remarks about his mother-in-law include references to her as “dama apergaminada”, “el único animal que no faltaba en el arca de Noé, mejor haberlo dejado allí a desaparecer.” While he gives orders to the house servants about what to do with the many animals that are in the house, at one point he looks at her and casually says “los loros—a la jaula”. When her wife is outraged because of the multitude of such disparaging remarks and exclaims “¡Es mi madre!”, the protagonist wryly retorts: “Desgraciadamente—si no, no sería mi suegra.”
humorous inversion of dominant social roles also provides a kind of implicit “recognition of this kind of instability or potential inversion within the social structure” itself (Jenkins 250), where gender roles were radically shifting, as it also happened in early twentieth-century Spain, particularly during Republican times, when Hollywood movies provided such a powerful catalyst for new identity models. As it was mentioned before, in postwar Spain there was a strong hegemonic desire to institutionally “redress” the “corrupting” gender politics of Republican times, seen as a nefarious secular break with the “authentic” Spanish tradition. One of the most urgent political attempts of the new state was thus to abolish all emancipating rights that women obtained during the Second Republic and to forcefully subordinate them to men by a relegation to domesticity, a disciplinary effort that was inseparable from a widespread male fear of women’s potential equality. Both before and in the aftermath of the Civil War, the existence of a weak, henpecked man in a vaudeville setting would inevitably trigger the expectation of an ultimate vindication of a strong masculinity, a desire of a (predominantly) male audience, which used to be consistently gratified towards the ending of the theatrical or cinematic narrative, as it happens in the screwball comedy El difunto es un vivo as well, as we shall presently see.

From the very beginning, the film highlights the venomous antagonism between Inocencio, a representatively weak, effeminate man, and his mother-in-law, with whom he shares the house, a housing arrangement that here does not seem to allude to the widespread postwar problem of lodging, given that Inocencio seems to belong to an affluent middle-upper class—the mother-in-law’s enforced living with the couple is not, therefore, indebted to their lack of means but to a burdensome moral obligation of providing for the wife’s mother. As it happens in Mi fantástica esposa, Inocencio is both older and conspicuously less attractive than his beautiful, frivolous wife, Elsa, who seems to have married him for his fortune. As in the case of Cándido,
from *Boda accidentada*, Inocencio’s name is quite revealing for his kind, childlike and naïve character, which also serves to typologically identify him from the very beginning, a clear legacy of the *género chico* world. Besides, this protagonist is very skillfully interpreted by the talented Antonio Vico, an actor who came from the prewar Spanish stage and who fully deserves the credits his acting obtained in the movie reviews of the time (e.g., *Primer Plano*, *Radiocinema*, *Dígame*), which otherwise furiously indict the “absurdity” and “facile” jokes of the film as well as its strong theatrical character, a criticisms that is more readily directed against a subversive farcical vein from the *género chico* or vaudeville tradition, as influenced by the Hollywood silent comedy and its slapstick sequences.¹

Inocencio is an avowed vegetarian, who has transformed his house into a kind of humanitarian refuge for all kinds of animals, which he even sits down at his table, a very unlikely occurrence in contemporaneous Spain that can further reinforce his ridiculously weak, effeminate profile, especially as he seems to dedicate more time to caring for his animals than for his wife, who is understandably bored and irritated. As in *Mi fantástica esposa*, Inocencio’s reconquest of Elsa, linked to a milder marital domestication, is more an actual first conquest, given his wife’s potentially pragmatic marriage intentions, an understandably sympathetic motivation in Spain’s postwar autarchy. What this screwball comedy puts forth, however, is also the possibility of romantic love, beyond any financial considerations, yet inseparable from a disciplinary bent (i.e., the taming of a frivolous, condescending wife into a loving, appreciative one). The vast majority of the movie is dedicated to Elsa’s (re)conquest by Inocencio, who also learns to outgrow his unkempt appearance and his disinterest in socializing and to give up his

¹ Strangely enough, the comedy poster alludes to what might be a mock ghost movie. Antonio Vico, who interprets the main protagonist, appear as slyly looking ahead, smiling and pointing with his right index to one of his eyes, as if calling for the spectators’ attention to the confusing details of the plot. Behind him, there is a large looming ghost figure, more typical of children’s stories than of an actual ghost film. No detail seems to indicate the presence of a screwball or even romantic comedy.
former punctilious obsessions with fixed schedules and with animal care. The ending of the comedy displays a successful “new man”, who suggests to his recently (re)conquered wife to accompany him to Paris to lead the sophisticated social life that Elsa so ardently desired, leaving aside an equally quarrelsome mother-in-law and her (highlighted) bad influence on their marriage. What is interesting to witness in this comedy is that Inocencio seems to change much more than his wife, who bluntly confesses him that, from her point of view, the only real impediment to a happy life together was his previous behavior.¹ Equally intriguing is a pattern of female domestication that allows Elsa’s final transformation into an affectionate companion and not into a submissive housewife, an undeniable alternative model that is consolidated by the couple’s final decision to live a seemingly glamorous social life in Paris, which was very distant from the stern hegemonic calls to duty and domesticity. It is thus unsurprising that this screwball comedy triggered a vitriolic criticism from most movie reviews of the time, not only for its already mentioned playful humor or vaudeville imprint, but also for the delineation of a female countermodel, viciously characterized in the conservative magazine Dígame as “una deliciosa cabecita para encerrarla en un manicomio”, a strangely unjust portrayal of a screwball heroine that does not seem to be very eccentric or rebellious and whose frivolous condescension of her dull husband is quite comprehensible. On the other hand, if we think about the screwball comedy Turbante blanco, for instance, and about the criticism that its two female protagonists generated, linked to a widespread misogynistic ‘authoritarian medicalization’ in postwar Spain, it is perhaps easier to understand the larger context and medical discourse that directly contributed to the production of the “technical” jargon used in this spiteful review.

¹ The Radiocinema review of the movie, which appeared in the issue 70, ironically criticizes Inocencio’s character for his “escasa humanidad”, which, for the critic, is compensated only by the undeniable artistic talent of Antonio Vico. The previous issue acknowledged, however, the impressive popularity of the comedy with audiences, which provided “clamorosas ovaciones en plena representación” due to its numerous comic moments, capable of instilling the postwar Spanish public with a shrewdly commended “optimism”.

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Inocencio’s change in *El difunto es un vivo* is quite different from the transformation of the male protagonists in the screwball of commitment centered upon men, not so much in terms of his final companionate behavior towards his wife (which is quite comparable with Arturo Salazar’s in *Ella, él y sus millones*), but in so far as it was his own decision both to reconquer Elsa and to change himself to that effect. In contrast, in the screwball comedies centered upon men, it is always a woman who has the initiative to court and transform the male protagonist, who is quite often an idle womanizer, much richer than the heroine. Isidoro’s self-remodeling into an affectionate, companionate husband, attentive to her wife’s wishes, seems to embody a more modern, egalitarian idea of relationship and marriage, which also appears in the screwball comedy *Ella, él y sus millones*.

**The (other) screwball of commitment: In search of a better man**

The immensely popular *Ella, él y sus millones*, released at the end of 1944, seems to feature a happy (and symbolic) alliance between nobility and the upper bourgeoisie, an alliance that is represented by Arturo’s and Diana’s peculiar marriage: while the countess Diana, coming from an ancient but impoverished noble family, decides to marry Arturo so that her fathers can escape bankruptcy, Arturo Salazar, a young and very rich businessman, originally a fisherman’s son, considers that a prestigious noble title is the only missing element from his many accomplishments. The two protagonists sign a very liberal prenuptial agreement that is

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1 This screwball comedy is based upon Honorio Maura’s 1929 play (i.e., *alta comedia*), aptly termed *Cuento de hadas*, which was contemptibly dismissed as “teatro puro” (in the issue 108 of Radiocinema) or as “teatro de caricatura” (in the issue 220 of Primer Plano). Some of the working titles of the movie were *Mi mujer es un negocio*, *El triunfo del amor*, *Financieramente decoroso* and *En busca de un título*, quite understandably (self-) censored for their explicit cynicism (and, in the case of *El triunfo del amor*, perhaps for its too hackneyed bent). The movie reviews that appeared in Primer Plano, Cámara, Radiocinema and Digame praised its plot, humor, settings and characters, considering it at a par with “American comedies”, its undeniable inspiration, “ese difícil género
unthinkable in the Spanish postwar: the heroine can enjoy a complete freedom in her love life (euphemistically called “vida sentimental” in the film), unencumbered by any interference from Arturo’s part as long as she “does not make a fool of him” (i.e., “no le pone en ridículo”). The didactic correction to such an unseemly legal stipulation comes from the young and attractive countess’ part, quite well interpreted by the local star Josita Hernán, who does not seem to use this contract as an excuse to give in to a morally objectionable life but who, on the very contrary, will resolutely strive to make Arturo fall in love with her (i.e., she astutely asks Joaquín, an old friend and admirer, to help her provoke her husband’s jealousy). This efficient initiative is also meant to disprove the young businessman’s avowed determination “not to mix romance and business” (i.e., “no mezclar el corazón con los negocios”), which Arturo self-confidently trumpets the day of the wedding. The plot and the ending of this comedy seem to insist, in contrast, that the two spheres can indeed be successfully united through romance to everyone’s interest—a mere business union between the two classes would have appeared too crudely realistic and cynical.¹

Arturo’s transformation seems to contradict the predominant pattern of masculinity that the other screwball comedies display: whereas the latter highlight a male protagonist whose hiding or dissimulation of emotions is equated with a strong masculinity, Ella, él y sus millones is focused upon the hero’s self-discovery of his ultimate “humanity” through his discovery and display of powerful feelings, particularly love and jealousy. Leaving aside the vested sociopolitical interest in such a change, which was mentioned before, another reason for this

¹It is interesting to see, in this respect, how some of the advertising slogans of the movie also proclaimed “el fracaso de las matemáticas en el amor”, downplaying the actual social and economic motivations in favor of an (abstract) calculation (i.e., mathematics), devoid of more concrete references.
inconsistency can be perhaps found in the primary object of the disciplinary effort: whereas all the other screwball comedies that were previously analyzed center upon the domestication of women (before or after the marriage), the pedagogical action of this movie is clearly directed towards a man (i.e., Arturo), whose “sentimental education” is skillfully carried out by Diana. To some extent this didactic aim might also be meant to indirectly prevent the heroine from acquiring too much independence and power, as the prenuptial agreement stipulates: once her husband learns to “reaccionar como hombre, no como una máquina de negocios”, she will enjoy considerably less freedom of action than before, which is narratively contrived to appear as what she really wanted and attempt to bring about. Her female ego is thus engineered to be ultimately responsible for Arturo’s transformation from a cold, indifferent husband into a more authoritarian one. Furthermore, the heroine brings about her own disciplinary loss of independence, which does not prevent her from representing a potentially empowering figure for the female spectators of *El, él y sus millones*, a role-modeling capacity that is also alluded at in one of the advertising slogans of the film (i.e., “lo que puede cuando una mujer quiere”). While it is true that this emphasis on women’s determination and power to change a man corresponds more to a kind of “domestic” and not public feminism (the latter being quite impossible at the time the movie was produced and released), this screwball comedy nonetheless provides contemporaneous audiences, particularly women, with a very different model of a wife than the hegemonic ones, which harped upon married women’s passivity, silence, and marginality, on their apparent psychological and intellectual weakness, and on their incapacity of autonomous thought and action.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Jo Labanyi in “Resemanticizing Feminine Surrender: Cross-Gender Identification in the Writings of Spanish Female Fascist Activists”, in “Romancing the Early Franco Regime: the Novelas Románticas of Concha Linares-Becerra and Luisa-María Linares”, or in “Negociando la modernidad a través del pasado: el cine de época del primer franquismo”, and Sonia Núñez Puente in “The Romance Novel and Pop Culture in the Early Franco Regime in
Arturo’s change is triggered by Diana’s shrewd introduction of a third person, Joaquin, who becomes an inseparable participant in the married couple’s voyages, which eventually brings about the apparently aloof hero’s outburst of a violent jealousy, implicitly equated to a strong masculinity. As in the case of *Un marido a precio fijo*, this personal “awakening” takes place in the middle of a kind of an “unrefined” nature (i.e., first in a mountain hut, then in Africa), more likely to be consonant with the manifestation of powerful, basic feelings: it is as if everyday life in a city, with its “artificial” social obligations and a “cold”, “impersonal” business realm, acted as detrimental catalysts for Arturo, contributing to his emotional castration. As he learns to (violently) express his emotions and to declare his love to Diana, they break their prenuptial agreement, which symbolically marks the end of the heroine’s potential independence, and begin their new life together by an alluded consummation of the marriage (i.e., their slippers are now outside the door of the same room). There is no reason to infer that this changed relationship would entail the female protagonist’s relegation to a submissive domesticity, a possibility that is invalidated not only by Diana’s active, resourceful character or by the numerous allusions to an affectionate, companionate relationship (much more egalitarian than in most Spanish screwball comedies), but also by the heroine’s social class and upbringing.

The actress Josita Hernán succeeds in ascribing a moderate Hollywood spark to the female character she interprets, which seems to be characterized, to a great extent, by a witty and astute sophistication and a versatile capacity to rapidly adjust to changing circumstances as she provokes Arturo’s awakening of masculinity. Her verbal retaliations make her easily triumph over the absentminded and emotionally inept male protagonist, whose passivity is perhaps best exemplified by his decision to delegate even the search of a noble wife onto a friend (who was Spain: Towards the Construction of Other Discourses of Femininity” are among the very few scholars who beneficially dispute a monolithic view of the early Franco regime in respect to the available role models available to women.
Diana’s brother-in-law). Even if this witty, fast-talking heroine shrewdly and efficiently initiates all the actions meant to transform the impassible Arturo into a “better man”, the actress is sadly lacking a more plastic body language that would allow her to avoid the frequent impressions of awkward stiffness. This incompetent rigidity also applies to Rafael Durán, who interprets the male protagonist, yet his acting appears less reproachable given the clumsy, phlegmatic character that he embodies. The actor’s most unfortunate gesture is his repeated, seemingly uncontrollable raising of just one eyebrow, which transforms several moments of potential erotic tension into unnecessarily dramatic scenes, verging onto the ridiculous.¹

The actors that are fundamentally responsible for the best humor sequences of Ella, él y sus millones are instead those who interpret the secondary characters and who all come from the prewar theatrical and revue stage.² José Isbert brilliantly embodies Diana’s father, an extravagant duke named Ramón de Hinojares, who is affectionately dominated by his frivolous, absentminded wife, Adelaida (excellently interpreted by Guadalupe Muñoz Sampedro) and by his astute children, who can always obtain what they want from him. Not a strong paternal model, the engaging duke appears comically obsessed with the “historical truth” about a Gothic king, Don Favila, eaten by a bear, a figure whose historical existence he impassionately attempts to prove and which is the pretext of a never finished pompous discourse of inauguration as Ramón was elected to the Spanish Royal Academy.³ Adelaida de Hinojares, his wife, is not an

¹ Rafael Durán confessed in several contemporaneous interviews that this gesture is indeed an uncontrollable personal spasm (which many female admirers apparently found endearing).
² Except for the ending, the melodramatic rhetoric is almost absent from this film, yet almost all movie posters emphasized only the melodramatic discourse—there is only one available advertising poster, which also appeared in Primer Plano, for instance, that highlighted any comic elements, and which featured José Isbert in two of his humorous stances, in one accompanied by Guadalupe Muñoz Sampedro. Both Fernando Freyre de Andrade and María Isbert, which greatly contribute to the humorous success of the movie, are conspicuously absent from these advertising posters.
³ His fragments of speech are subversively interspersed with much of the lofty contemporaneous jargon to be found in historical texts and news bulletins tackling the same exalted period. As his secretary is surprised that he chose to introduce the explicit words “applauses” or “ovations” within his inaugural speech, the duke bluntly retorts that
exemplary maternal mother either: distracted by trivial problems that are transformed into disproportionate tragedies, she appears as unable to maintain any household authority or to focus on her (adult) children’s problems, who have every reason to feel ignored.¹ Fernando Freyre de Andrade embodies a butler again, bearing the same name (Dimas) as in Deliciosamente tontos, which was directed by the same Juan de Orduña, who used the script coauthored by the same writers (i.e., Manuel Tamayo Castro and Alfredo Echegaray) who also scripted Ella, él y sus millones.² As it was the case in Deliciosamente tontos, Dimas’ plastic facial and body expression (i.e., grimaces, sneers) as well as his deflating prosaic observations are irreverently mocking his aristocratic masters’ rhetorical mannerisms, absentminded frivolity, and overall chaotic eccentricity. María Isbert skillfully interprets the part of duke’s naïve, daydreaming secretary, who sympathetically sighs as she reads novelas rosa during the numerous interruptions of Ramón’s bombastic inaugural discourse. The laughter that these melancholy sighs and daydreaming postures provoke in the audiences undeniably stems from incongruity, namely from playing with the cultural stereotypes according to which a tall, ugly and awkward woman is more likely to interpret the ridiculous spinster’s character, not the lofty melodramatic heroine who finds and marries her Prince Charming in the end. Whereas most spectators’ condescending laughter actually castigates the secretary’s socially unsanctioned dreams of personal fulfillment, labeling her as cursi, this female figure, like other similar screwball heroines (e.g., from Mi

¹ When her beloved canary escapes from its cage, the search that she frantically puts into motion triggers a destructive chaos throughout the entire mansion, disrupting everyone’s activities without any concern for their importance—during this search, the duchess also carelessly ignores Ana María’s (her married daughter) whining pleas for attention (she wanted to unburden her marital misery, comically treated because of its recurrent and excessive dramatization).

² Manuel Tamayo Castro was the well-known Manuel Tamayo y Baus’ nephew, while Alfredo Echegaray was José Echegaray’s grandson. Their genealogical ties with their both famous and popular ancestors seem to have been in the artistic realm as well, where they developed joint movie plots that show a significant continuum with their predecessors’ endearment for género chico, alta comedia, and melodrama.
fantástica esposa, Turbante blanco, El ladrón de guante blanco) can also subversively point to a constraining social environment, against whose unwritten rules she implicitly rebels by searching for other (i.e., fictional) venues of compensation for her bleak prospect of happiness in the real life, an issue that has been recurrently touched upon before.

All these secondary characters clearly capitalized on their already existing star persona and popularity with the audiences, which permitted them to easily instill humorous effects to virtually any cue they uttered, always accompanied by a rich variety of facial and body postures—they never bring about the disquieting sensation of artificiality or stiffness, as it often happens in the protagonists’ case. It can thus be said that the comic efficiency of Ella, él y sus millones is largely indebted to the secondary characters, which also star the slapstick sequence of the movie (e.g., the extravagant duke’s “accidents”, suffered because of his family’s typical carelessness): unlike what happens in most Hollywood screwball comedies, where the slapstick scenes were an important, erotically connoted part of the main couple’s acting, this Spanish film prefers to avoid any stronger sense of ridicule associated with the protagonists, especially as in this movie it is the man and not the woman who is the main object of domestication.

Despite this more “proper” delineation of comic roles in Ella, él y sus millones, this screwball comedy is professionally done and it fortunately lacks the more openly didactic tendency of other comedies (i.e., Una chica de opereta, Ángela es así, El hombre que las enamora) that also belong to the screwball of commitment centered upon men. Only Cinco lobitos and Eres un caso are refreshingly subtler in their disciplinary leanings, while they are also the most comic samples of this Spanish cycle of screwball, which casts the female protagonist as initiating the romantic conquest and the transformation of a man in apparent need of reform. Thematically, these comedies are very close to the disciplinary social discourse of the already
mentioned prewar género chico plays (perhaps best exemplified by Arniches’s “sainetes burguesificados” or the brothers Quintero’s zarzuelas), which no longer feature picturesque lower-class characters but verge instead towards a kind of melodramatic, middle-class-based moral reform through love and “common sense”.\footnote{It is useful to note here that Ángela es así is based upon one of Arniches’ plays, Cinco lobitos upon one of the brothers Quintero’s comedies, while the script of Eres un caso is coauthored by Enrique Sierra, a well-known prewar zarzuela and revue writer, and Manuel Vela, who might be the son of the popular Joaquín Vela, the author of many revues, comedies and zarzuelas in the first three decades of the twentieth century. \textit{Una chica de opereta} was a popular novela rosa by Concha Linares and \textit{Ella, él y sus millones} and \textit{El hombre que las enamora} originate in plots that are quite similar to many prewar altas comedias, which does not mean that they were not influenced by the peculiar disciplinary ambience that is so conspicuous in the prewar Spanish revue and género chico.} When it is dramatically embodied in women, who are pictured as the active, moralizing figures of the plot, this exalted “common sense” is often used to change a wayward, idle womanizer into a dependable husband, a resolution that is sometimes coupled with unconfessed material benefits for the reforming woman.

A modernized screen translation by Ladislao Vajda in 1945, Cinco lobitos derives from one of the brothers Quintero’s plays from 1934 and enjoyed considerable box-office success due to its astute reliance on some enduring comical types and dialogs, especially those belonging to the secondary characters. The movie humorously highlights the change of two kinds of men: on the one hand, there is the stern accountant Pedro, a machine-like character resembling Arturo Salazar, and, on the other, there are the loafing, presumptuous servants from Don Félix’ house. We also arguably witness a third male transformation in Cinco lobitos, which can be equated to Don Félix’ recovery of trust in women, both personally and professionally.

Utterly disappointed by the sudden departure of his fiancée, Paquita, to Lisboa, who left without any notice, Don Félix, the owner of the Holgado construction company, decides to vindictively fire all his female employees and to substitute them with men. He will gradually learn to understand the detrimental, impractical consequences of his rash decision due to Marisa, the female lead of this comedy, and to her four sly sisters, who make themselves appear as the
only available replacement when Don Félix furiously decides to discharge his four idle servants for their repeated misdemeanors and inefficiency. The five sisters have recently founded the Lobo Agency, specializing in household services, through which they successfully demonstrate their professional competence to the embittered Don Félix. The farcical name of the alleged agency and the diminutivized noun from the comedy title (i.e., “lobitos”), in clear reference to these five women, brings about a kind of masculinization of the female characters, alluding to the positive connotations of the Spanish word “lobo” (i.e., shrewd, experienced etc.). This designation also seeks to contain them (as emancipated women claiming an egalitarian professional treatment) by means of the diminutivized noun, which adds an affectionate, paternalist undertone that aims to disciplinarily suggest their ultimate immaturity and inexperience, hence denying any egalitarian pretension. The feminine version of this noun (i.e., “loba”) could not be used because of its strong pejorative connotations of prostitute, which the movie astutely avoided, even if they might resonate in the spectators’ minds, which were prepared to look for double meanings not only by the prewar stage and revue, but also by the very totalitarian experience of the Spanish postwar, which undeniably increased subversive, politicized interpretations. In any case, the title of the screwball comedy, with its implicitly contained emancipation (i.e., masculinization) of the female characters, is illustrative for the entire plot, which, on the one hand, shows the women’s resourcefulness and professional efficiency, by no means inferior to the men’s, and, on the other, conveniently underlines their eager availability to abandon this “cold” professional “appearance” (once again dubiously opposed to a “deeper”, more “authentic” level) and to sacrifice everything for the man they love. The four sisters who become servants in Don Félix’ house shrewdly know how to win the confidence of the fired domestic employees, thus triggering the end of the numerous vindictive
ploys through which these male workers attempted to destroy the sisters’ credibility in Don Félix’ eyes. It is useful to mention here that these women succeed to astutely undermine the former servants’ sabotage plans by means of some “typically feminine” ruses, which mainly include an irresistible flirting and apparently earnest requests for the “more experienced” servants’ advice, which makes these men feel useful and appreciated (thus deflating their initially vindictive wishes). The gratifying results of the four sisters’ cunning strategies are the four male servants’ profound change: they are no longer idle, dishonest and wasteful, but responsible men, thus opportunistically reformed to perform their alluded future role of family heads. The comic development of the film plot shows how, towards the end of the film, only the men work, while their future wives mockingly-admiringly watch them and still get Don Félix’ praise for household tasks they no longer perform, a seemingly “unjust” reversal of roles that is once again based upon a humorous incongruence in respect to the contemporaneous social division of gender roles. Moreover, the audience was also exposed to a particularly subversive innuendo through the eldest sister’s casual remark about her “former husbands”, a plural that must have sounded very discordant in a post-Civil War context of trumpeted Catholic morality and no possibility of divorce.¹

A somewhat similar transformative pattern of the male character occurs in Pedro’s case, whom Marisa initially helps as an assistant accountant: as Marisa skillfully knows how to make herself virtually indispensable for Don Félix’ household accounts and business negotiations, Pedro becomes merely ornamental. Aptly nicknamed “la jefe” by her sisters, in respect to whom she acts like a family head (hence usurping a “properly” patriarchal role), the heroine astutely

¹ The other potential interpretation, that she was a widow, is not less disturbing, given the context of her statement (i.e., while massaging and lifting Don Félix in a very brutal manner, which makes him look pitifully powerless), as it could have also suggested that she had some foul connection with their mysterious deaths, presumably as a punishment for their lack of malleability. The character is brilliantly interpreted by Julia Lajos.
wins Pedro’s confidence, however, by respectfully alluding to his more extensive work experience and by pretending she needs his professional advice, which makes Pedro feel useful and appreciated. As it happens with the four sisters and Don Félix’ former employees, Marisa and Pedro are also gradually falling in love with each other, which brings about his positive transformation into a kind, cheerful, and considerate man, no longer afraid or unable to show his emotions, a personal growth that echoes many Hollywood screwball heroes unhealthily engrossed in their work, but who gradually learn to overcome their emotional castration due to the resourceful and witty female protagonists.¹

Both Pedro’s and the male employees’ welcome changes also draw this movie closer to the didactic tendency of the prewar “sainetes burguesificados” that highlighted a man’s moral reformation through a practical woman’s love, resourcefulness and “common sense”. Cinco lobitos is, nonetheless, a screwball comedy of greater ambiguity and a not so authoritarian domesticating tendency as other films from the same cycle (i.e., Una chica de opereta, El hombre que las enamora y Ángela es así) or from the Spanish screwball in general, more prone to a strong disciplinary tendency. On the one hand, irrespective of the final abandonment of their professions once they plan to get married, Marisa and her sisters actually succeed in proving their calculating intelligence and professional efficiency, two qualities that have been traditionally associated with the masculine realm—and even more so in the hegemonic public sphere of postwar Spain. It is easy to argue that the women’s ingenuity, multiple competence,

¹ Despite this powerful comedic connection with the Hollywood screwball, it is once again the melodramatic rhetoric that dominates the advertising poster of Cinco lobitos (conveniently featuring only Marisa and Pedro, not her sisters and their fiancés as well), even if it only emerges more strongly in the last moments of the movie and not deprived of comic undertones. The sole other (brief) melodramatic moment is when Pedro’s mother, the only example of domesticity and unwavering maternal sacrifice in the film, appeals to Marisa’s compassion in dealing with her son, urging her not to build her future on the destruction of Pedro’s prospects of career advancement. His mother might otherwise be the female model who is primarily responsible for Pedro’s uneasiness in professionally competing with a woman that, in Marisa’s case, is strikingly different in so far as she is not relegated to a subordinate, domestic realm.
and overall outstanding performance in this comedy are actually dismissed as self-standing qualities because they are narratively used to enable men’s eventual moral reformation, namely, their transformation into responsible family heads and successful professionals. While it is true that this film articulates a discourse of “domestic feminism”, which encourages women to have a limited moral authority at home, the considerable redefinition of gender roles in the 1930s, when the original play was first produced, also brings about the possibility of a politically empowering reading, especially for the female spectators of the play and movie, who can easily notice how Marisa and her sisters gradually appear not only as equally competent as Pedro and, respectively, Don Félix’ male servants, but also undeniably superior. This more subversive reading is openly insinuated from the beginning of the movie, by means of the apparently naïve and presumptuous feminist assertions that the sisters utter (e.g., “el hombre ha fracasado, todo lo que hace él puede hacerlo una mujer”, “en las mujeres se puede confiar mucho más que en los hombres”) and that are shortly afterwards validated by the plot.¹ Their self-confident contentions are also reinforced by the male characters’ mixed attitude of envy and admiration and by their disgruntled, apprehensive acknowledgment of the women’s underestimated capabilities (e.g., “el diablo son ellas, las despedidas, no tan débiles como se creería”).²

The sisters’ final abandonment of their employment, inscribed as stemming from their love and dedication to their future husbands, with which they have competed, is a conservative narrative choice that cannot erase, however, the empowering effect of the women’s playful, versatile impersonations or the powerful sensation that they are much better qualified than their

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¹ Another very amusing line is what Marisa contemptuously tells Pedro, who parades an authoritarian position (of Don Félix’ personal secretary and accountant) and does not let her speak to the manager: “Es Usted un grosero, un desalmado y… [with an ostentatious disdain] un hombre”.
² It is interesting to see how this distressed acknowledgment is made using a religious vocabulary that compares women with the incarnation of evil and scheming (a not so novel ascription, partly resuscitated during and after the Civil War), which seems to imply that men see themselves as the “innocent victims” and, possibly, as morally permitted to use any strategy to win the unstated confrontation.
love objects. The men’s reconquered masculinity (i.e., by feeling empowered, useful and appreciated) is likely to be seen as a kind of charitable gift shrewdly bestowed on them by the five sisters, who appear in a stronger power position, capable of dazzling the male characters with their professional efficiency, their cunning actions and with their fast, mordantly witty retorts. Together with their resourceful initiatives and their plastic facial and body language, these ingenious female comments powerfully echo the main features of the Hollywood screwball comedy and are fundamentally responsible for the best humor of Cinco lobitos, with a subversive emancipating function. No male response in this movie is actually comparable in sarcasm or creativity to the women’s replies—men are not so much the subject as the object of laughter in this comedy, due to the farcical mixture of gullibility and (unfounded) condescension with which they approach the much more astute sisters and which makes them easily end up in ridiculous situations.

The caustic humor and liberal ambiguity from Cinco lobitos look even more subversive if we compare it with the tedious didacticism of three other screwball comedies of commitment centered upon men (i.e., Una chica de opereta, El hombre que las enamora and Ángela es así), which unsurprisingly received very good reviews in the journals and film magazines of the time for being “moralmente alegres” and displaying “simpatía”, “gracia”, “buen humor”, “optimismo” and “decoro”, despite their lack of (artistic) “pretensions”. Most Spanish words employed to commend these films (e.g., “simpatía”, “gracia”, “decoro”, “optimismo”) were recurrently used in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War by various pedagogic discourses of the age (e.g., in

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1 Carmen Martín Gaite mentions how female employment in postwar Spain was hegemonically seen as a “modernist trend” that needed to be eradicated, as it dangerously accustomed women to a self-confident independence and to superfluous needs and desires that would later prevent them from becoming contented and submissive housewives (47-48). The disciplinary attempt of eradicating female work was didactically inscribed as salutary (in a context with few jobs available anyway) also through the shrewd publication of various interviews with working unmarried women, who seemed to bemoan this “modern life” pressure on women and to confess their yearning to leave work after they get married and become “reina[s] y señora[s]” of their own home (48).
schools, churches, media etc.), especially by the sentimental columns of the contemporaneous women’s magazines in order to promote a certain type of femininity, unassertive and good-humored, that would seemingly fare well on the marriage market of the time.

The heavy sermonizing tendency of these comedies is fortunately compensated by entrenched humorous character-types, interpreted by secondary actors, who star the slapstick sequences and utter witty comments. One such case is the established butler role played again by Fernando Freyre de Andrade (both in El hombre que las enamora and Ángela es así), who displays his usual repertoire of comically efficient facial expressions and sarcastically prosaic or melodramatic remarks, which are generally meant to provide a playful counterpoint to his masters’ excess, either in mindless frivolity or in unqualified gullibility. Another humorous secondary character, efficiently embodied by the tall, lanky, and physically unattractive Mary Santpere in Ángela es así, is that of the middle-aged, unmarried French governess who is often shown in ridiculously rapt stances and using hackneyed phrases as she falls in love with the butler, a romance that ironically parallels Ángela’s interested conquest of her distant uncle.

In contrast to these talented interpretations, Josita Hernán pedantically plays Ángela’s part, which is full of explicitly moralizing harangues, directed to her idle, womanizing uncle and to Mar, his sophisticated, materialist girlfriend, who plays a seductive vamp role.¹ Her dull sententiousness is unfortunately coupled with an unconvincing impersonation of an eighteen-

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¹ The only major difference between Ángela and Mar (somewhat older), both interestedly pursuing Gonzalo, seems to be in the latter’s sophistication, which gives rise to a morally clothed envious competition and implicit self-advertising in Ángela, who sententiously tells her uncle privately: “a ti no te pueden gustar estas mujeres tan pintadas, tío, que fuman, tienes mejor gusto.” One of the advertising posters for this movie, suggesting a melodramatic rhetoric, chooses to focus on Ángela, Gustavo and Mar, the characters whose narrative positioning in a love triangle and in a field of power is visually enhanced even by means of their geometric arrangement in the poster: one could easily draw a triangle between the three portraits, with Ángela, the domesticating heroine, dominating (even in terms of size) the upper middle part of the image, and Mar and Gustavo strategically placed in the lower margins, one to the left and another one to the right.
year old naïve orphan, an age and role that are glaringly inappropriate for a visibly older actress.\(^1\) Fernando Fernández de Córdoba, the stout, middle-aged actor who also interpreted Isidoro, the domesticating husband from *Mi fantástica esposa*, now plays Gonzalo’s part, of a manipulated lawyer and bachelor who is incapable to stand up to his distant niece’s conquest plan: Ángela makes herself at home in Gonzalo’s house without even being invited on a visit and proceeds to forcefully organizing her uncle’s private life. Allegedly seeking Gonzalo’s best interest, the moralizing niece seems to be more attracted instead to the prospect of a rich husband and thus to a complete abandonment of the boarding school abroad, where she understandably feels very lonely (as an orphan without any close relative except Gonzalo), a situation that is implicitly coupled with her meager opportunities on the competitive marriage market of the time. Resolute to struggle for a better social status, which no one else could ensure for her, Ángela is full of initiatives and ruses in her interested desire to make Gonzalo her husband, who, in his turn, eventually welcomes the possibility of ending his bohemian, frivolous bachelor life for the sake of a “serene passion”, inseparable from “selfishness”, as he openly confesses to his younger rival, Manolo (whom Ángela shrewdly uses to provoke Gonzalo’s jealousy). This ultimately didactic assertion echoes Carmen Martín Gaite’s evocation of how bachelorhood was viewed in postwar Spain, namely as a “elección libre y egoísta de la felicidad” (46), in contrast to the perspective on spinsterhood, which was seen as a personal failure: “el hombre se quedaba solo

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\(^1\) Josita Hernán was probably given Ángela’s part for her great popularity at the time, particularly in this kind of roles, often melodramatic (e.g., as in *La chica del gato* and *La tonta del bote*, her main path to fame, or *Muñequita*), embodying a mixture of pragmatism, common sense and (alleged) innocence. The reliance of this screwball comedy on her star persona is also evident in one of the advertising posters for this movie, which focuses only on her image and name to promote the film.
porque quería, la mujer porque no tenía más remedio” (45), hence Ángela’s sustained efforts to avoid such a potential state and to marry Gonzalo.¹

His peculiar “passion” is inscribed to come after a weary, disillusioned abandonment of former affairs in favor of a placid family life together with a younger, attractive girl, with undeniable housewife qualities, who even insists on staying with him and pampering him. Like Marisa’s sisters from Cinco lobitos, but inscribed in a more pedantic story, Ángela also embodies a kind of “domestic feminism”, which empowered women in the sphere of the home, by allowing them to enjoy a limited authority over men by “defending” them from immoral lures. According to Henry Jenkins (249-50), this “domestic feminism” entered the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sentimental fiction (and probably Arniches’ dramatic work in Spain as well) under the form of female protest against women’s social position and of advice for “ideal marriages” in stories that featured “women’s effort to reform and redeem their transgressing husbands” through their domestic influence. These resolute women labored to transform the home into a kind of alluring paradise and refuge, while it also symbolically stood for “a moral battleground between domestic values and manly pleasures”. On the other hand, these accounts of increasing female power, highlighting the disciplinary social constraints on men’s philandering tendencies, also subversively put forth strong, cunning heroines that offered a domesticated, rechanneled form of the more radical sociopolitical and economic feminist demands of the early twentieth century, both in Spain and abroad. It is hence unsurprising that Ángela es así, a comic-sentimental answer to earlier radical shifts in gender roles, which was in consonance with the postwar hegemonic exhortations to domesticity, enjoyed such a widespread critical endorsement in the film reviews of the time.

¹ The indirect countermodel is Ángela’s governess, who fits the contemporaneous image of spinster, even if she will also eventually marry Gonzalo’s butler in the end, another bachelor (and, as such, his master’s lower-class, parodic double).
If we think about the Hollywood screwball heroines’ engaging personalities and witty, devious ruses to conquer a guileless, emotionally inexperienced man, Ángela’s tireless initiatives of domestic seduction can only parodically resonate with such strong, emancipated and independent women. Her necessary self-reliance is justified by her status as an impecunious orphan, a situation not deprived of melodramatic connotations, inviting to a sympathetic attitude, which is consistently undermined by her blatantly interested manipulation of her rich, older uncle, who cannot convincingly be portrayed as a real love interest for her, given the actor’s appearance.Ángela’s sermonizing stances, united to her pragmatically-oriented flirting and romantic insinuations, can instead resonate with what Vázquez Montalbán aptly named that “filosofía de la vida cínica” and “daily prostitution” (50), which the bleak postwar, autarchic setting triggered in the name of survival.

A similarly moralizing female protagonist, Silvia, also interpreted by Josita Hernán, appears in the screwball comedy Una chica de opereta, a screen adaptation of one of Concha Linares Becerra’s novelas rosa, which focuses on the domestication of the inveterate womanizer Gustavo, a successful baritone, by his secretary and future wife. As she is interpreting an ugly governess’ part in an operetta, she is offered the secretary job by Don Fabián, Gustavo’s sensible manager, as he is looking for a professionally efficient and physically unattractive secretary (hence romantically harmless for Gustavo). Silvia’s elaborate disguise makes her look indeed

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1 The comedy inadvertently uses two contradictory characterizations of Gonzalo in respect to his age. One indirect reference is the one he employs himself in front of the younger Manolo, to whom he defends his dream of a “serene passion”, which can be easily circumscribed to a mere “egoísmos de viejos”, that is, of a mature, disillusioned bachelor. The other example, strikingly contradicting the character’s/actor’s appearance and the previous remarks, are at the beginning of the movie, when one of Gonzalo’s friends laments his nefarious liaison with Mar (who was just shown throwing a hysterical fit as Gonzalo would not buy her a country estate): “tolerar esto es una vergüenza […] tan rico y joven y se consume por su culpa”. This sequence is clearly meant to act as a moralizing counterexample and as a preamble and justification for Ángela’s future conquest, a hypothesis that is strengthened by Gonzalo’s retort to his friend (and implicit confession of weakness), which states his inability to make a (narratively desired) moral change himself: “No sé cómo se metió en mi vida y me falta voluntad para deshacerme de ella”.

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like a stern, prototypical image of the unattractive spinster of the time: very formal and old-fashioned clothes and hairstyle, a farcically exaggerate mouth contour (which makes her lips look much bigger and condescendingly pursed), and black, big-rimmed glasses with very thick lenses that partially hide her eyes and face.\(^1\) Her usually stiff body language might thus be better motivated narratively in *Una chica de opereta* than in other comedies—at least here it is accompanied by comically caustic replies, with which she explicitly or implicitly condemns Gustavo’s frivolity and the numerous female admirers that always hovered around him, thus commending Don Fabián’s appreciation and respect.\(^2\) Given Silvia’s gradually increasing interest in the popular baritone and taking into consideration Gustavo’s alluring fame and fortune, this ultimately moralizing indictment is not deprived of pragmatic reasons on Silvia’s part even as it conveniently fits her main task for which she was hired as the baritone’s private secretary (i.e., to keep away Gustavo’s numerous female admirers so that he can focus on his contracts, avoiding either marriage or more fleeting distractions).

Despite her body rigidity and the stronger melodramatic and didactic tendencies of the film in the beginning and at the end, Silvia’s fast-talking, witty character succeeds in drawing this movie closer to the Hollywood screwball pattern through her retorts and comments and through her resourceful initiatives and eccentric domineering position. It is interesting to see how

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\(^1\) One of the advertising posters of the movie, which promotes this film not so much as a comedy but as an adaptation of a popular romance novel by Concha Linares Becerra, shows a slightly more flattering image of her disguised face, side by side with her glamorous “real” aspect (both images appear reflected in the kind of large, thick glasses I mentioned before). Above these glasses we see her in the hero’s arms (both of them elegantly dressed, as if for ballroom dancing) and we read: “la novela de una chica moderna, inteligente y valiente, que parecía fea y resultó bonita”; a description I will soon comment upon in the body of the text. The other poster of the movie (published in *Primer Plano*, for instance) also subtly alludes to her disguise, showing a caricature in which a young woman, wearing glasses, vigorously slaps a man, who is shown almost losing consciousness and falling down, an image that is subversively relevant for the balance of power in the comedy. This humorous stance is accompanied by film release details, a publicizing mention of Josita Hernán’s star presence (i.e., “la última creación de la simpática estrella española Josita Hernán”) and of her most famous prior movies. On the opposite side of this poster, we see the smiling faces of the two protagonists and the actors’ names (starting with Josita Hernán’s) near a page of musical scores and an allusion to the film’s status of adaptation of a Concha Linares Becerra *novela rosa*.

\(^2\) Don Fabián is skillfully interpreted by José Isbert, who displays a more subdued comic interpretation, however, than in other screwball comedies, narratively ascribed to his frugal, sober and matter-of-fact character.
her personality traits as Gustavo’s assistant paradoxically, implied in the images and words of an advertising movie poster (i.e., “una chica moderna, inteligente y valiente, que parecía fea y resultó bonita”), fit both into the satirized countermodel of the spinster in postwar Spain and into the emancipated, educated figure of the secretary from many novelas rosa, which put forth a kind of Cinderella trajectory that brought about many moral outcries over “la imaginación femenina propicia a inflamarse” (Martín Gaite 147). The former, downgrading allusion to a spinster apparently entailed not only or not necessarily a blatant unattractiveness, but also a temperamental, self-assertive, and critical tendency that ran against the disciplinary model of femininity hegemonically extolled (i.e., of emotional and intellectual fragility, naiveté and submission): “Generalmente, más que a una descarada fealdad, se aludía a un gesto, a una actitud. […] cierta intemperancia de carácter, […] intransigencia o […] inconformismo. Analizar las cosas con crudeza o satíricamente no parecía muy aconsejable” (38). The latter association with the popular image of the secretary is inseparable from a certain air of modernity (i.e., a working, educated woman, who was intelligent and professionally efficient) and represented another publicly indicted countermodel whose existence was habitually ascribed to the nefarious Hollywood influence, especially in her coquette, seductive form, allegedly threatening for the marriage power balance as well. The story behind Una chica de opereta, as well as the Linares sisters’ romance novels and many Spanish screwball comedies, highlighted indeed an alluring female model through the delineation of a heroine that had all the previously

1 The sentimental columns of the age apparently maintained that men felt uneasy in front of a reproachful woman or of one who had initiative, and attracted by a woman who was ‘callada y silenciosa, que nos considera maestros de su vida y acepta el consejo y la lección con la humildad de quien se sabe inferior en talento.’ (qtd. from the women’s magazine Medina in Martín Gaite 68) Needless to say, both Silvia and the other screwball heroines are very far away from this submissive paradigm.

2 According to Carmen Martín Gaite’s assessment of the Linares sisters’ novelas rosa (145-46), this coquette, attractive and sensitive secretary was not only an efficient, intelligent assistant in carrying out orders, but she was also apparently capable of drawing her employer’s attention and even of making him open up to her. This confessional turn elevated her to a distinct, irreplaceable position in his eyes, as he felt finally “understood” and cared for, which finally led to a marriage that was clearly not based on traditional gender roles.
mentioned intellectual and professional qualities, linked to a modern female image, while it also indirectly advocated for a different model of romance, based on a friendly, companionate relationship, a utopian projection that was implicitly denouncing the constraining role models of the time and the sociopolitical establishment that staunchly endorsed them. Silvia provides an interesting case, as she possesses the intellectual and professional qualities of this modern, emancipated woman, yet her seductive power is rendered harmless through the disguise that draws her closer to a derisive spinster appearance. On the other hand, as she eventually reveals her physical attractiveness, unassertive gentleness and singing talent through a convenient narrative turn (i.e., generously offering to replace the sick prima donna who had to join Gustavo in a very important concert), Silvia seems to completely give up her superior, sarcastic stance in respect to the baritone. Her final union to him, in both marriage and career, conveniently entails both material improvement and social ascent for her. Even if this melodramatic finale is made to fit into a desired disciplinary paradigm for the idle, womanizing male protagonist, modestly interpreted by Luis Prendes, it also provides a powerful role model alternative through the implied companionate marriage of the main characters and through Silvia’s alluded future career as an opera singer while married, on an equal footing to her husband. Whereas this eventual balance of power no longer allows Silvia to stand out in a conspicuously and subversively superior intellectual and moral position in respect to the male protagonist (a stance that is also hinted at in the advertising image that depicts her fiercely punching Gustavo), it generously enables her to match his professional success and to be an equal marriage companion, giving no indication of an enforced future domesticity or of an authoritarian demand of female submission.

Unlike this more refreshing alternative, El hombre que las enamora, which was José María Castellví’s last directed movie, focuses on a more authoritarian plot development and
resolution, more similar to that of Boda accidentada or Un marido a precio fijo, in so far as it dwells on a kind of “battle of the sexes”: this love-hatred relationship between Eduardo and María Elena is initially meant to transform the gambling, womanizing Eduardo into a dependable husband but it ultimately seems to highlight more the emancipated, sarcastic heroine’s exemplary humiliation and enforced remodeling into a submissive wife. This disciplinary turn is embedded in a rather eccentric plot: the widower Fernando is incapable of getting married because all his fiancées change their mind the day of the wedding as they realize they are actually in love with Eduardo, Fernando’s spoiled, arrogant son, who does not actually attempt to seduce them at all. Under such unpropitious circumstances, the ridiculed father devises an unseemly plan: he sends Eduardo to Africa on a long business trip and, in the meantime, he conspires to secretly make him fall in love with María Elena (Eduardo’s forgotten playmate from childhood) by introducing a triangular touch to the romance, namely, by pretending it is him who wants to marry the young woman. As his son returns broke from a dissipate life in European casinos (while pretending to have been in Africa), he appears eager to obey his father’s wishes to marry the chosen Beatriz, a fake name for a woman who is seemingly abroad until before the wedding and who is actually María Elena (her true identity is meant to be revealed after Eduardo falls in love with her and decides to marry her).

Fernando’a alleged fiancée appears as a frustratingly emancipated, sarcastic and self-assured person, who seriously undermines Eduardo’s inflated self-esteem as an irresistible seducer: when he irascibly and fearfully confesses that they might end up falling in love by

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1 As his father tries to persuade him to set up his own home (i.e., “sentar la cabeza”) to escape his unfair competition, Eduardo sarcastically replies that his unwilling conquests at least showed the fiancées’ ultimate interest in Fernando’s money, thus enabling his father to get rid of potentially materialist wives, who did not actually love him, an assertion that, despite its arrogance, is most probably true and that also indirectly points to that “filosofía de la vida cinica” and daily “prostitution” of the postwar Spanish autarchy, which I mentioned before, quoting Vázquez Montalbán (50).
spending so much time together, María Elena patronizingly laughs at such “ludicrous” possibility. Furthermore, while Fernando is secretly dating a middle-aged neighbor, Rosa, he (apparently carelessly) leaves the two young people alone, which provides many opportunities for María Elena to playfully flirt, have initiatives, and to mordantly tease Eduardo for his obvious awkward tenseness in front of her (i.e., “¿Tienes miedo?”). Moreover, as he tries to openly confess his (interested) aversion to his father’s alleged wedding to such a younger and frivolous woman like María Elena, she abruptly dismisses his moralizing speech by telling him that, as Eduardo refuses to marry in order to preserve his full freedom, he is in no moral standing to lecture his father about the wedding or what might be best for him. Angered by such curt, self-confident replies and by her overall insouciant, sarcastic attitude, Eduardo plans to leave her father’s house and to return only after the projected wedding. Even more than Ernesto in Deliciosamente tontos, Eduardo feels painfully inferior to María Elena’s redoubtable display of intelligence and wit, which he grudgingly and insecurely ascribes to an emancipating modernity with “corrupting” effects on women’s desirable modesty and submissiveness, an inside-narrative assertion that acknowledges and consolidates an alternative female role model in El hombre que las enamora, a model that cannot be erased by the harsh authoritarian ending of the movie.

As his faithful servant, Ceferino, voices his suspicions that María Elena might be the same person as the mysterious Beatriz (his intended fiancée and future wife), Eduardo vindictively decides to teach both her and his father a humiliating lesson.¹ He thus proceeds to assiduously courting Rosa, his father’s until then secret fiancée (who will also refuse to marry

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¹ Ceferino is once again played by Fernando Freyre de Andrade, who skillfully interprets the prototypical part of the pragmatic and phlegmatic butler who often humorously undermines his master’s pretense through his sarcastically circumspect retorts and comments even as he recurrently proves his unquestionable loyalty (e.g., by investigating about María Elena’s real identity or by reading her stolen diary and subsequently informing his master about his findings). Freyre de Andrade’s undeniable comic contribution to the movie is joined by other secondary characters, Alberto Romea (playing the father’s role) and Guadalupe Muñoz Sampedro (playing his sanctimonious sister’s role).
Fernando in the end), and to bluntly refusing to marry María Elena as he is finally told the truth about her identity as Beatriz and about their projected union. As he dramatically rambles against her calculating hypocrisy (i.e., “sangre fría”) and contemptible “modernity”, María Elena starts crying contritely and asks for Eduardo’s forgiveness, timidly confessing that it was her love not her “callous business interests” (as Eduardo accused her) what determined her to play along in order to seduce him. Once again are we in front of an indicted female impersonation, which is narratively contrived to look false and shallow, that is, being unable to reach a (posited) deep, “true nature”, belonging to a woman that is modest, dull and submissive, who has only waited for a rivaling male match to show how she “really” is. Unsurprisingly under such circumstances, María Elena’s tears, a visible, traditional sign of female virtue and authentic (i.e., unthinking) emotions, trigger Eduardo’s condescending absolution (i.e., “las lágrimas son tu perdón”) and a jubilating relief at her seemingly unassuming, sincere way of being, which eventually restores his severely undermined self-esteem.

This comedy disciplinarily highlights in the end not so much Eduardo’s reformation through marriage (even if it seemed to provide a convincingly propelling plot advancement), as María Elena’s exemplary domestication: it seems that this emancipated female protagonist, like many Spanish screwball heroines, is primarily punished for her ostentatious display of a series of personal characteristics that are conventionally associated with men (e.g., initiative, a witty sarcasm, an aloof self-confidence, a sharp, calculating intelligence etc.). María Elena’s subversive possession of such traits disrupts the hegemonic outlook on romance and marriage as well as the traditional division of gender roles, thus narratively motivating both the female lead’s final masochist attitude and the hero’s aggressively domineering revenge (as he felt his alleged
male superiority questioned).\(^1\) This conservative, authoritarian ending of El hombre que las enamora or of other similar screwball comedies of the Spanish postwar severely curtail any intimation of a friendly, companionate relationship and marriage, even if it cannot obliterate the alternative, emancipating female model or the subversive allusions to marriage that it previously puts forth. The latter aspect was astutely acknowledged by the contemporaneous censors who evaluated the comedy script and who belligerently criticized ‘ese prurito que se observa en las obras de Torrado de pintar la familia como un conjunto de personas viciosas, depravadas o casquivanas. Se dan casos, quien lo duda, de familias de ese tipo, peor lo normal, lo general, es muy distinto.’ (qtd. in Fernández Colorado 177)\(^2\) Equally offensive was the depiction of premarital romance as brief and exciting and, as such, subversively contrasted to an alluded dull marital life, implicit in Eduardo’s sudden disinterest in María Elena (and other previous conquests) once she no longer resists him. This undermining narrative subtext must have also been perceived by the censorship committee, which, according to Luis Fernández Colorado, counseled a purging of the original script of all “malicious” intention as it was deemed unacceptable to ‘exaltar, en cierto modo, determinadas libertades de trato y relación o de costumbres poco en consonancia con un modo recto y decoroso de entender la vida.’ (qtd. in Fernández Colorado 177)

\(^1\) The two available posters of the comedy once again highlight a melodramatic rhetoric, featuring only Eduardo and María Elena in stances that do not make any allusion to the ongoing “battle of the sexes” dynamic of the film, preferring to focus instead upon the hero in a protective, affectionate posture near a heroine in a daydreaming attitude. There is also a revealing small picture (in the background of a poster) where Eduardo is sitting on the steps of a large stairs, physically looking down upon María Elena, who stands at the bottom of the stairs. This particular poster bears an inscription that indirectly and abstractly mentions a narrative conflict, yet victimizing the male protagonist (i.e., “las desventuras de un hombre afortunado”). The only potentially comic element is a small Cupid on the other movie poster, which might point to the unpredictable touch of their romance.

\(^2\) As Luis Fernández Colorado judiciously observes in his synoptic presentation of the movie (177), Adolfo Torrado, one of the authors of the theatrical comedy that lay at the basis of El hombre que las enamora, was considered suspicious especially as he wrote this and other plays in partnership with the publicly uncredited Leandro Navarro, an exiled Republican writer.
The comic thematic union of, on the one hand, an idle womanizer’s disciplinary marriage, and, on the other, of a previously defiant heroine’s exemplary punishment, also appeared in the director’s José María Castellví’s previous comedic work, La linda Beatriz and Julieta y Romeo, which can also be apparently ascribed to the Spanish screwball genre and whose copies are unfortunately lost today. Furthermore, judging by the conspicuous misogyny and suggestive displays of lax extramarital liaisons from other movies, directed by Castellví during Republican times (e.g., the vaudeville musical ¡Abajo los hombres!, from 1935), it seems that this director intentionally indulged in the subversive gender roles and romance models from El hombre que las enamora while it concomitantly sought to discipline an overly assertive heroine and to restore the male protagonist’s undermined self-esteem, which felicitously coincided with the conservative hegemonic tendency of the Spanish autarchy, when this screwball comedy was produced.

Neither the mischievous allusions nor the compliant authoritarian finale seemed to have brought the reviewers’ endorsement: according to Luis Fernández Colorado (177), the comedy was considered a mere inferior imitation of ‘las desenfadadas comedias americanas’ by Vicente Moro from the Barcelona journal La Prensa. Even this negative review implicitly acknowledges, however, through the ascertained imprint of Hollywood screwball, the underlying alternative attitude that El hombre que las enamora subversively offers in respect to the hegemonic discourses of the public sphere of the time, a differential model that was astutely observed by the script censors.

Eres un caso, a 1945 screwball comedy directed by Ramón Quadreny, offers an even more subversive outlook in respect to the socially sanctioned gender roles, romance and marriage. This perspective must have largely been indebted to its scriptwriters, Enrique Sierra
and Manuel Vela, who were associated with many popular prewar revues, a probable
background information for many postwar spectators given the marketing choice for the movie
poster, which included their names (under the shorthand “Vela y Sierra”) below the very title of
the film. This inherently subversive link of continuity between the prewar and the postwar revue
is enhanced by the refreshing role model alternatives that Eres un caso provides: unlike El
hombre que las enamora, this comedy ends with a relatively mellow disciplining of Inocencio,
the wayward male protagonist, by a shrewd, emancipated heroine, Elvira, who is allowed to have
the initiative and lead the action until the end of the movie. The film finale ensures the young
companionate couple’s carefree stay in Barcelona at his naïve tutors’ expense and far away from
the stifling authoritarian ambience of the hero’s home. This unpropitious milieu is dominated by
a sanctimonious, meticulous old aunt and an apparently similar uncle, which seem to be
primarily responsible for Inocencio’s awkward, immature masculinity and subsequent feverish
search of excitement.\(^1\) As he is embarking upon his friend’s devious plan, which conveniently
allows him to go out every night and enjoy regular nightlife frenzies “unawares”, “Ino”,
skillfully interpreted by a young Fernando Fernán Gómez, astutely assumes a seemingly split
personality that cannot allegedly be reproved for fear of worse, long-lasting consequences. As he
grows more and more enthralled with this indulging habit, to his aunt’s great distress, his uncle
cunningly sees the possibility of accompanying him by night while claiming mere parental
concern for his “sick” nephew, a stratagem that enables this older, apparently austere and
respectable man to also give in to a secretly desired, albeit brief, hedonism.

\(^1\) The film comically shows, for instance, how Inocencio, unversed in socializing or nightlife, candidly orders a soda
in his first outing to the shady cabaret, where his womanizing friend, Fernando, takes him. He afterwards severely
chokes on the strong alcoholic drink he is eventually given (apparently the first one in his life) and dances very
clumsily with the young women he timidly invites. Furthermore, his naïveté and social incompetence is inevitably
implied by his name, Inocencio, which is meant to rapidly characterize him and to ascribe him to an already
established, comic character-type, easily identifiable by the audience.
The male characters’ impersonation and unavowed rebellion against a rigid, affected everyday existence as well as the visually and narratively ambivalent slapstick moments and sight gags of this comedy seem to cast Inocencio (in particular) and his uncle, like the protagonists of many comedian comedies, as rebels in respect to coercive institutions and social situations, which are indirectly criticized for their oppressive, dehumanizing power on the individual. This castrating social influence is unsurprisingly embodied by the inflexible, misogynistic figure of Inocencio’s aunt, whose narratively exaggerated subjection to rules is perhaps best exemplified by her disgruntled mortification at her nephew’s “unimaginable” four-minute delay to dinner. As she first finds out about Inocencio’s night escapades, she is so outraged that they close their business (i.e., a department store) “por disgusto familiar”, he is confined to his room (until his friend, Fernando, shrewdly liberates him with his mock medical discourse about a split personality disorder) and almost disinherited. Her matriarchal power is successfully curbed not only by her nephew’s ruse but also by her husband’s subterfuge, especially at the end, which not only shows Inocencio’s final escape through marriage from her control but also his uncle’s would-be succumbing to the same identity disorder, a fake illness that could easily lend itself to a further allegorical reading in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War.

While Inocencio’s uncle is nonetheless mildly punished eventually for his socially unstable recurrent indulgence in a double life (i.e., he ends up in plaster on a hospital bed, which seems to conclude his nighttime escapades), Inocencio is also gently disciplined by his future wife, Elvira, whose astute, calculating intelligence makes her rapidly become aware of the truth behind his engineered outings. As she mischievously makes him believe he is actually mentally imbalanced (i.e., by putting empty bottles and other entertainment traces in his room the only time he does not go out), Inocencio considers himself the deserving beneficiary of a divine
punishment for his morally and socially questionable dissimulation. His newly surfaced repressed guilt prepares a fertile ground for Elvira’s final disciplinary lesson, which not only efficiently domesticates her future husband, but also ensures their grateful escape from an oppressive family environment: she hires a (stereotypically depicted) group of male flamenco singers and bailaores while pretending to commission them in order to humor Inocencio’s rebellious side, in apparent need of untrammelled entertainment. They end up serenading and openly courting her, an undesired competition that provokes Inocencio’s jealousy and seeming crime of passion (i.e., he is led to believe that he had killed the flamenco leader of the group in a fit of jealousy). Relieved to find out that he has not actually killed the fiery bailaor and that he does not have to flee the police, Inocencio seems to find his happiness in a companionate marriage with Elvira in Barcelona, leaving his tyrannical relatives behind but enjoying their lavish financial support.

Despite the male protagonist’s eventual domestication, the movie finale provides a refreshing alternative in respect to the more authoritarian endings of most Spanish screwball comedies: not only is there an allusion to a more egalitarian relationship between Inocencio and Elvira, but a woman is permitted to exercise an unencumbered self-government and to have an unrestrained command over her partner. Furthermore, Elvira clearly states her interest in the considerable fortune of Inocencio’s tutors, which, at least initially, constitutes the confessed reason for her desired marriage with the hero. She thus resorts to the impersonation of an unassertive, antiquated young woman in order to please Inocencio’s domineering aunt while privately admitting that she unabashedly dissimulates, following her grandmother’s model, who similarly pretended to fit into the contemporaneous socially sanctioned model of female modesty in order to seduce Elvira’s grandfather and obtain his fortune. The female lead seems to
consequently perpetuate a long-standing female tradition of social masquerade for materialist purposes, an attitude that, however muffled in the hegemonic public sphere of the time, must have resonated well with the majority of the film audience in a grim autarchic Spain. It is actually never unequivocal whether Elvira eventually falls in love with Inocencio as well or she wrenches him from his family environment because of her mere attraction to his fortune and her interested willingness to stay away from the other powerful female figure of the movie (i.e., his aunt). In any case, Elvira is subversively distanced from the stereotypical female figure hegemonically extolled in postwar Spain. Her appearance on the advertising poster of Eres un caso, verging in between a daydreaming and a self-righteous posture, does not do much justice to her playful, emancipated personality but, on the very contrary, it disciplinarily transforms her into an unobtrusive, moralizing female figure. In contrast, Inocencio’s apparently intoxicated, naïve look (which implicitly provides the reason for her seemingly reproachful attitude) chooses to focus only on this manifestation of his character, disregarding his initial presentation as an uncommonly persuasive salesman for his uncle’s department store, who is capable of selling any item, however defective or misfit, through his dazzling rhetoric. His undeniable professional competence, which enables him to shrewdly manipulate any customer, thus appears in a sharp opposition to the naïve, awkward side of his personality. Inocencio is actually an ambiguous, self-contradictory character, who is professionally successful but emotionally immature and strangely deprived of other effective socializing skills, which makes him easily fall prey both to his aunt’s domestic tyranny and to Elvira’s astute domesticating ploys. A fundamentally weak masculine figure despite his marketing achievements, Inocencio’s timid, infantilized profile is quite far away from the strong, assertive male personality that was publicly endorsed at the time, a discrepancy that triggers the suspicion as to what extent this pitiful character might have served
the didactic purpose of a masculine countermodel (in terms of both his awkward, weak personality and his compensatory profligate, but not less artless, life). This potential pedagogic tendency notwithstanding, *Eres un caso* remains a remarkable screwball comedy of the Spanish postwar through its refreshing alternatives to more disciplinary samples of the same cycles and to the traditional gender roles and marriage models advertised in the hegemonic public sphere of the time.
Chapter II. “New humor” and playful defamiliarizations:

(Counter)education and laughter in the postwar disparate comedies

This chapter will examine a larger corpus of postwar Spanish comedies, spanning almost two decades and contributing to a post-Civil War continuity with a peculiarly vanguard, “nonsensical” type of humor of the 1920s, which becomes gradually darker and more materialist towards the 1960s. These comedies, analyzed under the convenient Spanish label of disparate for reasons that will be later discussed, have never been jointly assessed as a distinct generic corpus, another conspicuous critical absence that, as in the case of the Spanish screwball, this thesis seeks to remedy. At the same time, some of the disparate comedies examined in this chapter, especially those of the first half of the 1940s, have unmistakable converging elements with the Spanish screwball that was previously investigated (e.g., an eccentric, fast-talking heroine, an unconventional romance in a leisurely setting etc.). These generic connections are, to a great extent, indebted to a common cinematic influence (i.e., Hollywood screwball, especially Capra’s and Lubitsch’ comedies), in its turn shaped by various other cultural intertexts (e.g., slapstick and comedian comedy, the burlesque and the vaudeville traditions, the flapper comedy, the theatrical comedy of manners, the anarchistic comedy etc.). While it is not yet the place to talk more about the affinities and differences between these two genres, it should be briefly remarked that, even if they share many traits and genealogical ties, they diverge in the syntactic treatment of these common elements: while the screwball axis is shaped by the main love story (whether of commitment or reaffirmation), all disparate comedies seem to place romance in a subsidiary position. This lack of prioritization can be linked to two main standpoints embraced by the humorous plots’ authors: on the one hand, a more radically disenchanted and even cynical
view of marriage and family and, on the other, a parodic attitude towards the defining
characteristics of melodrama (i.e., an excessive display of emotions and a moral universe divided
along Manichaean lines).

The movies under discussion in this chapter are essentially related to “the other
generation of 27” (made up of Miguel Mihura, José López Rubio, Edgar Neville, Enrique Jardiel
Poncela and Tono), a 1983 foundational label given by José López Rubio in his inaugural
discourse in front of the Spanish Royal Academy.¹ The pre-Civil War formative years (i.e., the
1920s and the 1930s) of these multifaceted artists were marked by the early twentieth-century
vanguard movements, the new burgeoning mass market for entertainment, the crisis of the
Spanish stage, the rising film industry in Spain (of which they were all part to some extent), and
their own active presence, except Mihura’s, in the Hollywood film production during the
transition to sound, at the beginning of the 1930s.² All five experimented with theater before the
Civil War and became well established on the Spanish stage under Franco’s regime, being also
inextricably linked to the vanguard renovation of the Spanish humor in the 1920s (not only
through their novels, plays, and short narratives but also through their participation, sometimes
collaborative, in such popular prewar magazines as Buen Humor and Gutiérrez). After 1941,
they were all associated with the popular postwar comic magazine La Codorniz, initially directed

¹ The well-known literary pseudonym of “Tono” will be used in this chapter to refer to the Spanish humorist whose
actual name was Antonio de Lara Gavilán.
² Even if a hip accident prevented Miguel Mihura from actually going to Hollywood like the other four, he was
closely linked to the American film industry, as he started working for CIFESA and the CEA studios since 1934, in
the position of a Spanish dialog adaptor and a dubbing supervisor of many Hollywood comedies produced by
Columbia. Particularly important to mention for this chapter are several screwball comedies (Lara and Rodríguez
26), which began to be produced during this very period in Hollywood and whose playful humor and zany
protagonists must have influenced his own writings as well. He also adapted to Spanish some film dialogs belonging
to the vaudeville-based “anarchistic comedies” of the Marx Brothers, such as Diplomaniacs or A Night at the Opera
(Green From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage, 10), whose peculiar humor was also essential for the later development
of his own theatrical and cinematic dialogs.
by Miguel Mihura, which had an essential alternative educational impact on the Spanish younger population of postwar Spain.

The importance of the disparate comedies under analysis in this chapter is also noteworthy in so far as they undeniably influenced some other postwar comedies of a parodic bent that could be connected to a kind of critical social costumbrism (i.e., _Si te hubieses casado conmigo_, _La vida por delante_, _La vida alrededor_, _La vida privada de Fulano de tal_, _Atraco a las tres_, _Sabían demasiado_). Even if these related comedies do not bear any visible, direct relation with the humorists under discussion, they display some stylistical-genealogical affinities with the disparate, given that, in most cases, their directors and scriptwriters worked with the humorists’ texts at some prior point and collaborated in the pages of _La Codorniz_. These films thus participated in a similar kind of humor, very popular at the time, and, contrary to romanticized auteurist interpretations, they also emerged due to the industrial laws of successful cycle production and imitation, which were already mentioned in the first chapter: film companies favor the production in cycles, consolidating (if it is the same company that initiated the cycle) or imitating (in the case of rival companies) the most profitable and popular cinematic pattern in terms of subject matter, plot, setting, and/or characters (Altman, “Reusable Packaging” 15).

Some of the playful comedies examined in this chapter are connected to Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, one of the five humorists’ confessed “masters”, who was inseparably united to their existential and professional trajectory, if we leave aside the theatrical component, a genre that was not employed by Fernández Flórez. Not only did he coincide with the younger humorists in the pages of many prewar and postwar magazines (i.e., _Buen Humor_, _Gutiérrez_, _La Codorniz_, _Cámara_, _ABC_, etc.), but he similarly participated in the Spanish film industry before

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1 As these other comedies are not properly disparates, but were merely influenced by this discourse, their analysis lies beyond the specific scope of this chapter and thesis.
and after the Civil War, working, like Mihura, as a dialog adaptor of various British and American movies and as a script and additional dialog writer for movies, based on his own or someone else’s work. He was also one of the writers who enjoyed an impressive number of screen adaptations of his narratives and he even collaborated with Edgar Neville (who directed a screen adaptation of his novel, *El malvado Carabel* in 1935) and with Miguel Mihura (who, in 1942, wrote the additional dialogs of *Intriga*, a comedy based on Fernández Flórez’ earlier novel, *Un cadaver en el comedor*).

Since the 1990s, the humorists who are essential for the introduction and consolidation of the *disparate* have also started to become critically reappraised as writers and filmmakers, an institutionalizing trend significantly occurring after José López Rubio’s 1983 speech, in which he referred to him and the other four humorists as a group under the umbrella name of “the other generation of 27”. This identifying tag has proved extremely productive for their individual and collective assessment, making it worthy of more detailed subsequent consideration. On the other hand, this recent interest in their figures and multifaceted cultural production from a revisionist, usually historicized, perspective refreshingly attempts to counter the leftist ideological indictment of their work in the 1970s, within a context of anti-Francoist intellectual struggle that was shaped by Althusserian approaches to cinema and mass culture, a cultural lens that marked the Western academia of the age as well, as was already mentioned in the Introduction and in the first chapter. The five humorists’ simplistic identification with an understandably abhorred dictatorship (itself monolithically envisioned) was triggered by their hasty endorsement of the Nationalist side slightly before the end of the Civil War and by their ambiguous collaboration with the new regime, to a large extent motivated by self-defensive reasons and also by their
visceral repudiation of the escalating political denunciations, imprisonments and executions they personally experienced in Republican Madrid during the Civil War.¹

Probably one of the most succinct diagnostic of their ideological ambiguity, which will be examined in this chapter, is implied in the exiled Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s affectionate reference to his former disciples as “señoritos de la República”. This label was also employed by Fernando Fernán Gómez (whose theatrical career was otherwise greatly indebted to Enrique Jardiel Poncela), who characterized them as “señoritos, y no lo digo muy peyorativamente. No tenían absolutamente nada que ver con el franquismo en su ideología […] Edgar Neville había sido de todo. Y al acabar la guerra se encontraron con que ellos eran los franquistas del momento, la intelectualidad franquista, pero en moral y en costumbres, que es lo que cuenta al fin y al cabo en la vida, eran todo lo contrario al hombre del Pardo. […] eran señoritos alegres, frívolos, divertidos. Nada religiosos […] Eran libertarios y libertinos en su modo de vivir.”

(Galán La buena memoria de Fernando Fernán Gómez y Eduardo Haro Tecglen, 116-17)² The same Fernán Gómez saw a similar ambivalence in Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, who was

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¹ Some of them, such as Edgar Neville and Miguel Mihura, confessed their deep aversion to the Soviet parades through Madrid and to their frequent interpellations by rough militiamen in the street. Wenceslao Fernández Flórez had similar reasons of personal reticence, greatly enhanced, in his case, by actual threats to his life after the outbreak of the Civil War and by the necessity to flee Madrid after taking refuge in the Dutch embassy, whose personnel eventually obtained his safe pass to the Nationalist zone. Enrique Jardiel Poncela, in his turn, not only spent some memorable time in a Madrid political prison (i.e., checa) in 1936, because of a dubious denunciation, but would also openly manifest his aristocratic disdain to the “embruteceidos” proletarian spectators of Republican Spain, “incapable” of appreciating more poetic and sophisticated plays and films, an assessment that will be discussed in the body of this chapter. It is interesting to mention here that while Eduardo Haro Tecglen considered Neville “a bourgeois Republican”, whose postwar cinema displayed many signs of continuity with the prewar times (Galán La buena memoria de Fernando Fernán Gómez y Eduardo Haro Tecglen 143), Emeterio Díez qualifies him as “cynical” due to his seemingly opportunist (and self-defensive) ideological affiliations after 1936 (“La represión franquista en el ámbito profesional del cine” 69-70). On the verge of losing his life for saving some right-wing intellectuals after the military coup of July 18, he applied for membership in the Izquierda Republicana and became friends with the State Secretary of the time, which ensured him a job in the Spanish embassy of London, where he might have acted as a Nationalist spy. As the victory of the Nationalist side becomes more and more evident, Neville becomes a Falangist member and joins the Nationalist troops, becoming a war reporter and making propaganda documentaries (e.g., Juventudes de España, La Ciudad Universitaria, Vivan los hombres libres). It is only after 1940 that he is more or less “purged” of his previous Republican links, a political cleansing that, especially in the harsh autarkic ambience of postwar Spain, did not exempt his plays and films from censorship nor of occasional displays of political mistrust, as we shall see with more detail in the discussion of his perspective on sainete.

² Luis García Berlanga and Pedro Almodóvar made similar assessments of these humorists in various interviews.
otherwise defined as a “subversive conservative” by Guillermo Díaz Plaja and who self-ironically considered himself a “heterodox socialist” and a “right-wing free thinker”: “Lo curioso es que él también era un hombre absolutamente de derechas, pero con una literatura absolutamente disolvente, de izquierdas, libertaria, antimilitarista, defensora del amor libre” (Galán 114). After this nuanced outline, he adds that both Fernández Flórez and Jardiel were among those who believed that being right-wing meant “[v]ivir cómodamente en un mundo muy alegre, muy divertido” (115).

Fernando Fernán Gómez’ complex portrayals seem to point to the ambivalent place of what Bourdieu calls “the conservative intellectuals” in respect to the political and cultural spheres. Within these two realms there is a considerable mistrust and/ or reluctance to such figures on account of the conservative intellectuals’ slippery positioning within the two fields (Les règles de l’art 456-61). On the one hand, these conservatives are deemed too “intellectual” for the dominant political circles, which suspect their “cultivated” distance, their moral nonconformism, and their lack of “spontaneous” political adhesion. At the same time, they are considered too “bourgeois” for the leftist intellectuals who started to possess a significant symbolic capital in the Spanish cultural field after the 1950s and who easily condemned the conservative intellectuals’ cosmopolite sophistication and their aesthete cynicism in moral terms, decrying their lack of political commitment with “social reality”.¹ This unstable positioning could not only ascribe them an appearance of political neutrality but could also be to a great extent responsible for a powerful sensation of alienation and constraining limitation in each sphere (i.e., political and artistic-intellectual). This potential frustration, together with a clear growing disenchantment with the Francoist regime, could have thus enhanced the humorists’

¹ It is tempting to speculate whether Bourdieu’s diagnostic entails that the conservative intellectuals might be, in some respects, more likely than other intellectuals to adopt divergent, sometimes contradictory, perspectives for self-definition and polemical reasons in these different fields.
bemused misanthropy and their fierce rejection of any ideological labels to their persons or
cultural products, a confessed yet problematic defense of personal freedom that will be later
analyzed.

Bourdieu’s complex assessment also brings us to a necessary review of some of the most
important trends in the critical reception of the six humorists after the Civil War, a survey that is
primarily meant to shed some light on the changing positioning of their figures and of their work
in the Spanish cultural field and which was already sketched in the Introduction of this thesis.

To be or not to be escapist: A brief genealogy of some major critical-political evaluations

If we look at the film and theater criticism in the immediate postwar as well as into
several censorship reports of individual dramatic manuscripts, there appears to be no single
unifying trend in the reception of the six humorists. What we witness instead are several lines of
interpretation, either belonging to the same critic or censor, or to the same film magazine or
censorship apparatus at a certain time or period. This diversity of opinions is another proof for
both “the inner contradictions” of the Francoist regime, which was far from being monolithic,
and for the censors’ “disorientation”, who never appealed to any specifically codified regulations
but seemed to express personal opinions, which often led to blatant contradictions among the
readers of the same manuscript, as Berta Muñoz Caliz convincingly shows (‘La censura y el
teatro de humor” 151). In 1939, in the immediate aftermath of the Nationalist victory, the official
institutions of censorship were in a state of generalized confusion, which led to hasty approvals
of many scripts, films, or plays that would be later censored (i.e., especially after 1942, when the
Catholic Church acquired a more prominent place in the existing state institutions) but that could
initially enter the public sphere unadulterated, on account of their authors’ sincere or insincere affinity and/ or open endorsement of the Nationalists’ coup. The 1940 movie reviews of Tono’s and Mihura’s Un bigote para dos, for instance, praise this “disparatada” comedy with words that in later reviews, especially after the political changes of the regime that took place around 1942, would have been accompanied by harsh indictments: Digame advertises this playful parody as “una película de gracia estúpida, que es la gracia mayor de todas las gracias” (4), Primer Plano endorses it as “[e]l mayor acontecimiento de la comicidad”, “de intención picante de útil aplicación de lo disparatado”, while Radiocinema acclaims it as a “película estúpida de Tono y Mihura, un verdadero acontecimiento artístico […] , película bufá”, mentioning Carlos Fernández de Cuenca’s laudatory words in Ya, where this critic celebrated what would have been morally and politically unseemly later, namely, “[e]l chiste grueso, el equívoco desorbitado, la alusión fabulosa […] Algo así como los hermanos Marx en el gesto, son Tono y Mihura en la frase.”

As the Catholic officials grew in power after 1942 and the “old Falangists” were banished and replaced with opportunistic, mediocre members of the Falange, there is an enhanced censorship attention given especially to the moral and religious aspects, which led, for example, to the suppression of many fragments or entire plays previously approved, as it happened in the

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1 Berta Muñoz Cáliz interestingly shows how in 1939 many censors merely signed the dramatic text’s authorization to be published or represented without even drafting a report to justify their approval, hence most probably without even reading the play as long as its author was simplistically considered politically safe (“La censura y el teatro de humor” 151).

2 The recurrent presence of the qualifying adjective “estúpido” in reference to this comedy (both in movie reviews and in its advertising posters) was undoubtedly meant to capitalize upon the tremendous success of Tono’s section, called “Diálogos estúpidos”, from La Ametralladora, the humor magazine that he directed with Mihura during the Civil War and which is widely considered as the closest precursor of the “first” Codorniz, directed by Miguel Mihura. As we shall see later on, even if La Ametralladora was founded with a clear propagandistic function, after Mihura and Tono assumed its leadership in 1937 they gave it a decidedly playful, abstract turn of humor, frequently verging on the absurd, that not only made it very popular but also often triggered irritated accusations of “frivolity” from various Nationalist high officials, who would have liked to see more direct nominal abuse of Republican leaders (Llera “Documentos inéditos”, González-Grano de Oro La Otra Generación del 27). Mihura also later admitted of having used some of their jokes, caricatures and narratives that were previously published in some prewar humor magazines like Gutiérrez (since 1927 until the early 1930s) and that did not entail any conspicuous political positioning (González-Grano de Oro La Otra Generación del 27 369-97).
case of Tono and Mihura and especially of Jardiel Poncela (Muñoz Cáliz, El teatro crítico español durante el franquismo 45-47). As Berta Muñoz Cáliz shows in both her doctoral thesis and her article on theatrical censorship (often compared with film censorship in its workings), the vague political label of “conservative” or “close” to the regime did not later exempt the plays from censorship prohibitions and/or subsequent problems of publishing, staging or filmmaking. On the other hand, many censorship reports explicitly defended their occasional leniency in respect to various moral, religious, or political issues by asserting that humor (especially a playful, nonsensical one that was usually labeled disparate) inherently absolves the narrative from both actual reflection and a “serious moral judgment” (Muñoz Cáliz “La censura y el teatro de humor” 142). This perspective undoubtedly reminds us of the more general allowance of comedies, even under a totalitarian regime, to tread in sensitive areas because of their implicit label that, as humor for mass entertainment, they are not to be taken as seriously as they would be in other generic register. This generous margin of freedom undeniably enabled postwar Spanish comedies, however, to have political relevance beyond their sanctioned break from everyday rules and conventions: as seemingly “light”, apolitical forms of mass entertainment, they could more easily and creatively bypass the general censorship injunctions of moral and political compliance while they also allowed the Spanish audiences to have access to visible alternatives to the accepted social patterns. This enabling access acted as a potential catalyst for new behavioral roles and could ultimately show the “contingency and arbitrariness” of the socially legitimate symbols of the time through the defamiliarization and incongruity that humor as “anti-rite” brings about (Douglas 96).

It is also important to note here that the naturalized nonsensical humor of La Codorniz, apparently innocuous, eventually acted in the humorists’ favor, not only as a preparatory horizon
of expectations for the spectators and critics (who could thus better relate to the peculiar humor of the postwar disparate comedies) but also as a legitimized hermeneutic framing in the critics’ and censors’ eyes after roughly 1944, when the adjective “codornicesco/a” was often applied as a quick convenient shorthand to many comedies linked to the humorists under discussion in this chapter. This hasty application frequently entailed the exclusion of a potentially harsher judgment for dubious moral, religious or political innuendoes: once labeled as “codornicesco”, the play or film could be deemed morally and politically “innocent” (i.e., “ingenuidad codornicesca”) and “sin trascendencia”, hence as a merely escapist, harmless mass entertainment that did not warrant a painstaking censorship labor. Furthermore, while acknowledging the creativity and technical craftsmanship of such apparently safe comedies, many postwar critics and censors denied their artistic or literary merit, a stereotyped interpretation that would be ironically paralleled by the humorists’ furious denial of the label “codornicesco” applied to their comedies, as this was inextricably linked to a lack of artistic distinction in the cultural field.

Not all critics and censors were so gullible, however, as to believe that both La Codorniz and these comedies constituted a politically harmless, escapist entertainment. As Carmen Martín Gaite mentions, there were numerous public indictments of this popular magazine in the 1940s, as its apparently light, playful humor was accused of pessimism and even nihilism, likely to “perniciously” impact the younger postwar generations and to trigger a malicious, even if mindlessly ignored, moral “corruption” in the long run (77). While there cannot be more space devoted here to the essential counter-educational role of this humor magazine in postwar Spain, it should be briefly remarked here that Carmen Martín Gaite implicitly dwells especially on that “anti-rite” function of humor that La Codorniz had in a bleak autarkic setting. She actually sums up the most important function of this publication, that of salutary defamiliarization, as:
“demoler los tópicos que amenazaban con asfixiarnos […] ayudarnos a poner los dogmas oficiales en tela de juicio” (74). Furthermore, Carmen Martín Gaite’s personal recollections and overall investigation strengthens one of the main arguments of this chapter and thesis, that La Codorniz not only contributed to the individual politicization of the postwar younger people, but also to the creation of (politically) communities on the basis of a certain sense of complicity, stemming from a shared readership and a common object of laughter, which acted as identifying signs of dissidence and modern thinking, even as social icebreakers and romantic magnets. Moreover, it is interesting to see how she often draws closer the alternative educational role exercised by this humor magazine to that triggered by a certain kind of postwar Spanish and American cinema (e.g., screwball), which was similarly linked to a sense of modernity and community.

Analogous public outcries, on the one hand, and, on the other, refreshing airs of defamiliarization were unleashed by the nonsensical Spanish comedies analyzed in this chapter under the label of disparate and that are associated with the humorists who contributed to the establishment of La Codorniz. The 1944 play and movie like Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario had a wide-reaching impact in the public sphere of the time (e.g., there were passionate defenses and refutations even in the medical journals), which, according to Mihura’s declarations from 1947, tended to be polarized along the same lines that diverged in the appreciation of La Codorniz (Alás-Brun 78). The screen comedy, clearly connected to the magazine even in its advertising posters (i.e., as “La Codorniz en el cine/ en la cinta”) was especially indicted for its “absurd”, “disparatado” humor, lacking “humanity” (hence seemingly for the same characteristics that previously warranted the public and reviewer success of Un bigote para dos), which apparently led it to mere “vulgaridades cómicas”. Several angry Primer Plano editorialists,
such as Javier F. Olondriz, Bartolomé Mostaza in “Un estilo español de cine” or the anonymous writer of “El imperio de lo espiritual en el cine”, resolutely argue against a Spanish cinema that, especially in the case of some seemingly “light” comedies, put forth nefarious behavioral models under the treacherous guise of “intrascendencia” and harmless entertainment. The indicted film characteristics involved the display of a general “frivolous” stance as well as a direct or indirect reliance upon “earthly”, materialist and/ or “anarchist” values at the expense of “spiritual” (i.e., Christian/ Catholic) ones. This conspicuous prioritization of frivolity and materialism is shrewdly linked to a dreaded continuity with the vilified Republican times and to a corrupting, foreign-based modernity, notably impacted by the Hollywood film industry.

The harsh criticism of such apparently innocuous movies, with feared long-term educational influence upon the Spanish population (and particularly “venomous” for the younger generation), is frequently paralleled by the furious charge against any socially irreverent comic moments taken from the castizo register of sainete, often employed by filmmakers such as Edgar Neville or Fernando Fernán Gómez in their movies. Whereas such recourse to an autochthonous genre was creatively fused with many other influences, both local and foreign, its use was passionately politicized and frequently overstated by film critics both at that time and later. On the one hand, contemporaneous editorialists such as Luciano de Madrid from Primer Plano fires against the lingering presence of the sainete in Neville’s films and in the 1940s Spanish cinema in general, suspecting its political connections to the “decadence” of the Second Republic and the “national-socialist filth”. The critic’s uneasiness about this political continuity of sainete and zarzuela was to a great extent indebted, on the one hand, to the disquieting sense of “miserabilismo” and social protest associated to these genres in prewar times and, on the other, to the actual Republican attempt to use such popular castizo registers to forge a national (i.e.,
“authentically Spanish”) film industry.¹ On the other hand, many contemporary Spanish film critics and historians (e.g., Santos Zunzunegui, Julio Pérez Perucha, José Luis Castro de Paz) have celebrated, after the 1990s, the *sainete* and the *zarzuela* as politically progressive, quintessentially Spanish aesthetic forms. As such, these film discourses became part of a fiercely defended national cultural heritage that has never been more than superficially influenced by international movements (Zunzunegui “Epílogo” 491), a critical trend already mentioned in the first chapter and which will soon be revisited. This sustained effort of national cultural reinscription unsurprisingly paralleled, on the one hand, by an endorsement of auteurism and, on the other, by a genealogical attempt of recuperating and disseminating a specific composite cultural tradition, related to a politically commendable historical period in terms of progressive, democratic politics of leftist orientation, as is the case of the Spanish Second Republic.

Another postwar reception aspect that is worth noticing in so far as the *disparate* comedies are concerned is that they are frequently charged with “theatricality” (e.g., “comedia fotografiada”) or with excessive “literariness”, which shrewdly enables the film critics to artistically dismiss the cinematographic quality of the comedy and its more dubious moral and

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¹ The *sainete* and its irreverent humour are opposed to the triumphing post-war “exemplarity” and “new” values: “el riesgo sin gracia de que el humorismo de este director [i.e., Edgar Neville] constituya un ataque a muchas cosas que están del lado de acá de la historia y del lado de allá del sainete. […] no hubo honrado tipo de sainete que el 18 de julio no se enfrentara, vistiendo el mono de miliciano, con la Historia alzada en armas. […] ya no hay sainetes que valgan. Hay Historia, como ejemplaridad. […] lloró mucha gente con el gran sainete de la milicianaza una vez”. The political label of social denunciation attached to the *sainete* can actually better explain the attraction of the genre for filmmakers such as Fernando Fernán Gómez, whose movies (especially comedies) after mid-1950s were greatly influenced by the 1955 Conversaciones Cinematográficas Nacionales from Salamanca, which clamored for a Spanish (social) “realism” that was politically committed, following the model of Italian Neorealism. Taking into consideration the prevalent label of “escapist” so dimissively and easily applied to the humorists under discussion, it is quite ironical that, in an undoubted battle of national cultural legitimation, Fernán Gómez singularly considered Wenceslao Fernández Flórez as a laudable Spanish precursor of Italian Neorealism because of his description of “el español medio, de ciudad”: “Buena parte de lo que el neorrealismo italiano aportó al cine, lo teníamos nosotros aquí en los libros de Fernández Flórez. El español medio, de ciudad, estaba allí retratado con más espontaneidad, más verismo que en el teatro de Aréniches y Benavente. Sus personajes eran menos singulares que los de Baroja, pero más cercanos a nosotros; podíamos encontrar en ellos a nuestros vecinos y, a veces, reconocernos nosotros mismos.” (qtd. in Fernández 2)
political innuendos while sometimes praising the original text and its writer, who might have been considered too close to the regime to be attacked for his “corrupting” influence.¹ This was often the case for the comedies linked to Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, whose canonized cultural status in the 1940s (as a member of the Royal Spanish Academy and a member of the censorship board) triggered a large number of screen adaptations of his “cinematographic” prewar novels, despite their recurrent display of a harsh social criticism, heterodox religious views and questionable moral values in respect to those hegemonically advanced. The rhetoric of the “unworthy”/“unjust” film adaptation of an otherwise respected contemporaneous writer was not, however, the only device of silencing any critical aspect of the comedy and conveniently trivializing the screen version. Another resort of bypassing uncomfortable moral, religious and political innuendoes was the film reviewers’ recognition of the actors’ skills and the use of very vague terms of neutral praise for the comedy (e.g., “humanidad”, “ternura”, “emoción”, “poesía”, “simpatía”), alongside the obligatory mention of “universalidad” and the occasional label of “sin trascendencia”, whose double-meaning and (generally underestimated) postwar importance has already been commented upon in the first chapter.² The resulting review shrewdly gave no clear indication of the plot and even less of its subversive humor, a critical trend that was unsurprisingly continued by politically compliant movie reviewers in the 1950s in respect to such disparate comedies as Habitación para tres, El sistema Pelegrín, ¡Viva lo imposible!, Los ladrones somos gente honrada, or Un marido de ida y vuelta, some of which are sometimes accused of excessive “theatricality” or “literariness”.

¹ This perspective also recurrently appears in the Francoist film historian Fernando Méndez Leite’s 1965 assessment of postwar Spanish cinema, where he often criticizes the disparate comedies for being “teatro fotografiado”, unable to “do justice” to the original play’s “ingenio”, “gracia”, “hilaridad”, “inventiva”, and/or “originalidad”. These disjunctive remarks are especially frequent in his analyses of the 1940s film comedies that adapted Jardiel’s plays. ² Some of the 1940s disparate comedies preferably described in these vague terms were La vida en un hilo, El destino se disculpa, La luna vale un millón, Mi adorado Juan, or the tremendously dark El hombre que se quiso matar.
The liberal Catholics that wrote for *Film Ideal* (e.g., José María Pérez Lozano, Juan Cobos, Félix Martialay, or the well-known José María García Escudero) and the “dissident”, leftist intellectuals who usually anonymously reviewed contemporaneous movies and plays from a socially committed stance in the pages of *Índice de Arte y Letras* are among those public intellectuals that are jointly responsible for the consolidation of the binary classification “escapist”/“(Neo)realist” in respect to the 1950s Spanish cinema and for the dismissal of almost all movies produced in the 1940s for their “evasionism” and alleged “propagandistic” bent.

Probably the most influential figure that directly contributed to this enduring cultural canonization was José María García Escudero, whose institutional power (as Director General de Cinematografía y Teatro) and inextricable links to the rise of the “New Spanish Cinema” ascribed a long lasting impact to his book, *La historia en cien palabras del cine español*, in which he defines all cinema prior to 1954 as “coward” and “escapist”, particularly the comedy, which he simplistically labels as theatrical and as consisting of “el smoking y lo cursi”. His sweeping judgments of the postwar Spanish cinema and his passionate endorsement of a committed social realism (following the exalted model of the Italian neorealism) were taken over in the 1955 *Conversaciones Cinematográficas Nacionales* from Salamanca, organized by several filmmakers, movie critics, journalists, and writers. This film conference, which marks a fundamental landmark legitimizing (Neo)realist cinema as the only valuable artistic and political discourse, fostered many discussions about the necessity of a critical cinema of testimony, focusing on the “real problems of the country” (*De Salamanca a ninguna parte*) and denouncing the socio-political, economic and cultural problems of a Spain that was still authoritarian, even if its autarchy was ended and significant economic reforms began to be implemented.
The same leftist film reviewers that condescendingly dismissed most disparate comedies of the 1950s and early 1960s as “escapist” and “commercial”, relegating them to the disdained sphere of mass entertainment, also opposed them to the lofty, high-culture standard of politically committed “auteur movies” and seemed to display a visceral aversion towards any harsher humor, which could not be domesticated by an emotionally and politically uplifting narrative development and/or ending. A survey of the theatrical and cinematic reviews and editorials from this period enables us to see how precarious was the initial critical ranking of most samples of dark comedy (e.g., El pisito, El cochecito, El verdugo) or of the absurd theater (e.g., the 1955 Spanish versions of Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” and of two plays by Eugen Ionescu, whose actual titles remain a mystery). Equally problematic for clear-cut sociopolitical categorizations were any play or film that displayed a lack of final poetic justice (e.g., Calle Mayor) and/or a disquieting mix of genres, especially when a discordant comic register would undermine the melodramatic moments of desired sublime pathos and compassionate identification with the downtrodden characters (e.g., Cielo negro, ¡Viva lo imposible!, Los jueves, milagro). Interestingly enough, many dark comedies and absurd plays were labeled as “disparates”, “codornicescos”, “astracanadas”, according to an autochthonous horizon of expectations that already equated such generic qualifications with a type of light, playful entertainment, verging on the incongruous and on the absurd and accused of political escapism by the committed leftist critics and intellectuals.

The politically and morally condescending label of “escapist” became even more radicalized within the 1960s leftist jargon of theater and film criticism, whose increased vehemence can be better understood if we place it against Neville’s, Mihura’s, Jardiel Poncela’s and López Rubio’s artistic canonization in the hegemonic public sphere of the time, a trend that

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1 These two plays might have been La cantatrice chauve and Les chaises.
was evident also in the rise of monographic articles (in compliant film and cultural magazines such as Primer Plano or Film Ideal) or in the positive featuring of some of the postwar comedies linked to their names in Fernando Méndez-Leite’s Historia del cine español from 1965.

The enhanced ideological polarization between the political and the cultural fields in postwar Spain, within a context of a right-wing totalitarian regime, can undeniably shed some light on how the anti-Francoist intellectual opposition that emerged in the 1950s and continued into the 1970s ascribed a powerful symbolic capital to dissident Marxist intellectuals. Their critical prestige rose even more after the end of Francoism and was strengthened, in some cases, by the academic institutionalization of many such dissident intellectuals, as was the paradigmatic case of Román Gubern in the field of film criticism and history. His qualifications of the entire Spanish cinema of the 1940s as a kind of Lukácsian “reflex” of an alleged “monolitismo ideológico del discurso franquista”, an assessment that he maintained even after the 1990s (Historia del cine español 178), makes him pejoratively indict all the movies produced in this period as “escapist” (“Mirando hacia otro lado” 57), particularly when they are comedies and, as it was often the case, when such postwar comedies are screen adaptations of previously existing plays or novels. Condemned for their lack of critical observation of the “desgarrada realidad social” in the aftermath of the Civil War, such film adaptations are dismissed as a whole because of their would-be lack of “original” ideas and due to their “unproblematic” recourse to politically safe texts, meaning that the adapted texts already had a prior censorship sanction, an assertion that clearly disregarded the particular injunctions of censorship on the actual work. This indiscriminate evaluation is occasionally further substantiated by the conservative political leaning of some of its authors, like Enrique Jardiel Poncela, who is rapidly branded as “grato al régimen” (61), despite his innumerable problems with censorship, not only in the case of the film
scripts that adapted his work but also in so far as his published or staged texts are concerned. While it is redundant to again touch upon the complex makeup of the postwar Spanish film industry, its lines of continuities with the prewar cinema, or its intricate relations with censorship, which were examined more extensively in the first chapter of this thesis, it should be added here that such hasty generalizations of the Spanish cinema of the 1940s (often globally labeled as “el cine español oficial”) and, in particular, of the film comedies of the immediate postwar (especially in the case of adaptations) are enunciated from the perspective of an entrenched devotion to the Spanish Neorealism in the movie arena and to social realism in the literary sphere, the only praiseworthy trends that are credited, if not with the exalted “rebellion” of Italian Neorealism, at least with a “seed” of “cultural restlessness” and “nonconformism” against the seeming “embellishing rhetoric” of an alleged Spanish “official cinema” that would chiefly encompass the entire 1940s (Un cine para el cadalso 80).

It is interesting to see how recurring ideological indictments of “escapism” were also brought against the humorists’ postwar plays, an interpretive simplification that, in the case of theater criticism, was similarly made from the commended standpoint of a socially “committed” stance, in this case ascribed to the playwrights Alfonso Sastre and Antonio Buero Vallejo. The theater critic who most contributed at the institutionalization of this dismissive label of “escapist” is most probably José Monleón through his 1971 book, Treinta años de teatro de derecha, whose main tenets he insistently takes over in his 1994 conference, “Teatro cómico y teatro de humor en la posguerra civil española”, published in 2001. Faithful to an essentially

1 Similar disparaging tags were applied in the 1970s to their plays by Leopoldo Rodriguez Alcalde, who associated them with the “bad taste” of the “masses”, which cannot seem to escape their propensity to “evasionism” (134). Along similar lines, in the 1980s, Gerald Brown qualified Mihura’s humor and that of his collaborators of an “escapist triviality” (173), typical of the “bourgeois vulgarity of the commercial theater” (239), Angel Berenguer, dismissed Jardiel’s theater as “Benaventín” for its vituperated interest in “success and popularity” (53), while César Oliva disdainfully referred to Jardiel’s theater as “alta comedia” (El teatro desde 1936 114), to the theater of the “Codorniz group” as “escapist” and “evasive” (117), “sin trascendencia” (a pejorative evaluation ironically
monolithic perspective, of complete totalitarian control that would not allow any alternative public views in the first postwar years (32-33), he places this period under the rule of “un Pensamiento Único –regido por el ideario del bando “nacional”, elevado a Norma intocable e imperecedera tras la prueba decisiva de la Victoria”. This envisioned panoptic ambience generated, in Monleón’s opinion, only two possible “visions”, set in irreconcilable difference: one that was politically compliant (which he integrates in the loosely defined “right-wing theater”) and another one that was dissident (20), although it is unclear how it could actually exist in such allegedly unforgiving circumstances. The introduction of the would-be “escapist” trend in postwar theater leads him nonetheless to three potential stances, but he quickly makes the disclaimer that the explicitly propagandistic standpoint had few followers, which enables him to distinguish two main dramatic tendencies: the disdained evasionist one, as “a gratuitous exercise of the imaginary”, and the commended realist one, as an allegorical revelation of a hidden “truth”, “a poetry of knowledge” that can raise the spectators’ (political) consciousness (20-21), but which could only publicly emerge later, towards the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, not in the immediate years of postwar. While he ascribes Mihura, Neville, Jardiel Poncela and López Rubio to the “escapist” direction, he operates further binary divisions that enhance the initial classification of postwar theater as either “evasionist” or reminding many conservative accusations from the opposing political spectrum in the early postwar), like all “bourgeois comedy” (117-20). As Montserrat Alás-Brun succinctly registers (“La comedia de humor en el contexto del teatro español de posguerra” 285), there have also been some positive revisionist tendencies in the 1980s and 1990s about Jardiel Poncela (e.g., María José Conde Guerri El teatro de Enrique Jardiel Poncela, the anthology Jardiel Poncela. Teatro, vanguardia y humor, Paul Seaver El primer periodo de Enrique Jardiel Poncela), Miguel Mihura (e.g., Emilio de Miguel Martínez El teatro de Miguel Mihura), and López Rubio (e.g., Marion Peter Holt José López Rubio). Also worth mentioning is the new perspective that governs some more recent criticism about Edgar Neville (e.g., Maria Luisa Burguera Nadal Edgar Neville: Entre el humor y la nostalgia) and Tono (e.g., José Luis Aguirre “El humor de ‘Tono’”). These laudable revisionist tendencies of their theater in the last decades are paralleled by María Pilar Coute Cantero’s doctoral thesis, published in 2002 (i.e., Texto literario y texto fílmico), and some older valuable studies on Wenceslao Fernández Flórez (e.g., José Carlos Mainer Análisis de una insatisfacción: las novelas de W. Fernández Flórez, Albert Philip Mature Wenceslao Fernández Flórez y su novela). There is a renewed similar interest in their relations with cinema, an issue that will be further discussed in the body of the this chapter.
“realist”. On the one hand, the “escapist” plays are ascribed to the realm of “fantasy” and, as such, to other mistrusted mass culture products (e.g., Walt Disney’s cartoons and Agatha Christie’s thrillers). Monleón does not deprive, however, this notably “inferior”, commercially successful “comic theater” of acknowledged “ingenio, sentido de construcción teatral y buen oficio”, yet he considers is a trivial, “domesticated humor” (15). The lofty “realist” plays, on the other hand, are credited with “imagination” (associated with the “liberating”, high-culture references of Cervantes, Chekhov and Genet) and, in some cases, are integrated into a “humor theater” that he defines according to Pirandello’s understanding of humor as “the feeling of the contrary”, capable of operating a split in “reality” by means of the faculty of reflection, a dissociation that would eventually presuppose a “revelation” of the “authentic” “reality” (33).

While this is not yet the time to review Pirandello’s conception of umorismo and how it is significant to the Spanish humorists’ own formative understanding of humor, it is interesting to see how Monleón’s endorsed “realist” canon of “humor theater” truncates Pirandello’s argument by not mentioning its links to romantic irony and its much bleaker version of “reality” nor Pirandello’s insistence on the final component of compassion as inseparable from “true” humor, which never “denounces” its object, due to an awareness of the common plight of all humanity, linked to a kind of fin de siècle metaphysical wasteland. In Monleón’s convenient version (18-20), Pirandello’s humor can thus be unproblematically connected to Brecht’s political consciousness-raising theories, and notably to his Verfremdung interventionist theory, while all the praised theatrical samples are otherwise related to Monleón’s own “democratizing” concept of realism, which he attributes to those who supported the Spanish Republic in the Civil War or were consecrated leftist dissidents during Franco’s regime.¹

¹ Some of the examples of such commended realist “humor theater” that José Monleón gives are Vallé Inclán’s “Los cuernos de Doña Friolera”, Arniches’ “La Señorita de Trévelez”, García Lorca’s “Doña Rosita la soltera”, or Carlos...
Monleón’s binary understanding of postwar theater, which makes him politically and morally condemn Mihura, Neville, López Rubio and Jardiel Poncela and their plays for their alleged “escapist” tendency, is inseparable from that canonizing sense of distinction of most leftist cultural critics, film historians included, according to whom all praiseworthy national works can eventually be fit within a particular ideological vision of progressive politics, which is best embodied in the idealized Republican times. Furthermore, this perspective also tends to rely on an underlying fear and contempt of commercially popular mass culture, which occasionally surfaces in Monleón’s text as well, when he passingly dismisses the four humorists’ cultural merits on account of their box-office success (16-17) and of their lucid acknowledgment of the business necessity to take into consideration the contemporaneous audiences’ tastes (27).

All Manichaean divisions in Monleón’s criticism (i.e., between “comic” and “humor theater”, between “escapist” and “realist” theater, or between “fantasy” and “imagination”) are actually high-culture differentiations that can be subsumed to traditional split between theater as art and theater as entertainment, subject to the demands of the market. This careful delimitation is actually consistent with various postwar and prewar debates that, as in the case of cinema, tend to leave aside the essential function of the industrial-commercial sphere, which is an inescapable condition of possibility for any circulation of meaning, whether conservative or dissident, as we saw in the previous chapter as well. As Miriam Hansen cogently argues, any cultural reception and interpretation depends on this industrial-commercial sphere, which always oscillates between the (hegemonic) political necessity of “cultural respectability and legitimacy” and the

Muñiz’ “El tintero” and “Las viejas difíciles”. It might be interesting to passingly remark here, however, that the endorsed Carlos Muñiz has ironically confessed the invaluable impact of Enrique Jardiel Poncela on his own dramatic production. While he does credit Mihura’s “Tres sombreros de copa” with membership in his elitist “humor theater”, it is amusing to remark that this critical benevolence is accompanied by the obligatory mention that it was written in 1932, “precisamente en un periodo social presidido por la esperanza” (26), a politically optimistic sense of causality that could not have been shared less by the disenchanted Mihura when he wrote this play, according to his own declarations (Reyes 19)
economic need to provide “a maximum of inclusion” for many different audiences or consumers (“Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres” 200-01). On the other hand, as Bourdieu skillfully analyzes in Les règles de l’art, the internal rules of the artistic field deny distinction to the cultural products and producers that enjoy popularity and commercial success or are benevolently sanctioned by the dominant political field (141). This inner law of the artistic field in respect to the economic and the political spheres is, of course, a symbolic self-legitimating strategy of a field that seeks to assert its autonomy, an attempt that is paralleled by an analogous exegetic field, whose critical judgments enjoy intellectual distinction in so far as they abide by the internal rules of the artistic field and resist the constraining tendencies of the hegemonically political and economic spheres. Even the cultural producer’s bohemian disregard of the injunctions of the market can be effectively carried out only on the basis of an already existing economic capital (143-45), a prior “inheritance” that does not actually guarantee, however, as we shall later see, the artist’s or the critic’s independence from various “mundane” temptations (e.g., political conformism, popularity) or from the seductions of the artistic field itself to follow the latest, most fashionable trends.

As it is unnecessary to expand here several considerations to which an ample space will be devoted in the sections that discuss the different positionings of the humorists in the cultural field before and after the Civil War, the paradigmatic example of Monleón’s indictment of “escapism” can be best closed with a reference to his cursory remark (“Teatro cómico y teatro de humor” 17), according to which his passionate hermeneutics at the beginning of the 1970s, retaken in his 1994 conference, was, to a great extent, an act of “critical rebellion” against the gradual canonization of Mihura’s, Neville’s, Jardiel Poncela’s and López Rubio’s plays as
“humor theater” and as an indicator of the intellectual vigor of the postwar Spanish stage.\textsuperscript{1} His moral-political reclaim of the “realist” theater, together with the ascription of these four authors to an “escapist” “comic theater”, is thus analogous to similar assessments in the sphere of film criticism and history in the 1970s, the so-called “relatos crueles” (Alonso García 587) or “relatos malvados” (592), many of which also refer to the comedies analyzed in this chapter when making their sweeping analyses. Their main critical and political enemy was actually the previous film history and historiography, embodied by Juan Antonio Cabero, Fernando Méndez-Leite, and Fernando Vizcaíno Casas, whose intellectual merit was denied in the 1970s because of their conservative political affiliation. The political and hermeneutic dismissal of such conservatives as film historians actually took the form of a double repudiation: of the films, scriptwriters and directors they reviewed and considered valuable, and of the hegemonic Francoist politics at the time such movies were produced.\textsuperscript{2}

Even if this belligerent political tone of the 1970s and its associated interpretive clichés have continued to emerge to a greater or lesser extent even in the 1990s and beyond, particularly through the vision of a Spanish cinema as a Lukácsian “reflex” of a monolithically envisioned regime, some essential revisions in the Spanish film historiography fortunately emerged in the 1980s—and here will be mentioned only those studies that have directly contributed to the gradual reassessment of the postwar Spanish cinema that also comprises the comedies discussed

\textsuperscript{1} El teatro de humor en España is the volume that perhaps best epitomizes the humorists’ canonization in the 1960s, which was later ideologically contested. This critical anthology, to which, ironically, Monleón also contributed with an article on Alfonso Paso, officially consecrates Mihura, Tono, Neville, López Rubio, Neville, and especially Jardiel as the best representatives of a postwar Spanish “humor theater”. Particularly noteworthy is García Pavón’s foundational statement in his article on Jardiel: “El teatro de humor ha supuesto el único vanguardismo auténtico del arte dramático español.” (89) Nicolás González Ruiz (“El teatro de humor del siglo XX hasta Jardiel Poncela”), Alfredo Marquerie (“Novedad en el teatro de Jardiel”), and Gonzalo Torrente Ballester (“El teatro serio de un humorista”) are some other critics who endorse this dramatic canonization.

\textsuperscript{2} Such fiery political criticism is also visible in the recurrence of words such as “banquillo” (e.g., Antonio Castro El cine español en el banquillo) or “cadalso” (Román Gubern and Domènec Font. Un cine para el cadalso) in the 1970s, indiscriminately applied to most Spanish cinema produced during Franco’s regime.
in this chapter.\(^1\) Of particular importance was Félix Fanés’ pioneering research on CIFESA, mentioned in the previous chapter, a work that felicitously subverted the equation “Spanish cinema = cinema produced under Francoism = CIFESA = cinema of Francoist national exaltation” (Zumalde Arregi 446), while other important works of these decade are some monographic works, often coordinated by Julio Pérez Perucha, which are devoted to several postwar Spanish filmmakers (e.g., Luis Marquina, Edgar Neville, Fernando Fernán Gómez).\(^2\)

The monographic tendency continues in the 1990s (e.g., Román Gubern Benito Perojo, the anthologies Wenceslao Fernández Flórez y el cine español, Antonio Casal, comicidad y melancolía, Fernando Fernán Gómez: El hombre que quiso ser Gary Cooper), a decade that has marked the beginning of one of the most fertile periods in the historiography of Spanish cinema, a time that was coincidental with the establishment of the Spanish Associations of Film Historians (AEHC). The official constitution of this association is essential not only for the important symposia, their published proceedings, or the revisionist studies that it has promoted and sponsored (e.g., Antología crítica del cine español, Huella de luz. Películas para un centenario, Un siglo de cine español), but also for the professional consolidation of the field of Spanish film history and criticism, which gradually became more closely associated with the Spanish academia. Many of these film historians, especially Julio Pérez Perucha, Santos Zunzunegui and José Luis Castro de Paz, felicitously revigorated the field by attacking the prior critical-political tendency to Manicheanly label postwar Spanish movies (e.g., as “good” or “bad”, “dissident” or “escapist”, “progressive” or “reactionary”), a trend that has been paralleled

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1 The ensuing chronological recapitulation of Spanish film historiography and criticism is greatly indebted to Imanol Zumalde Arregi’s compelling review, “Asignatura pendiente. Pequeño breviario de la historiografía del cine español”.

2 These studies (e.g., El cine de Luis Marquina, El cinema de Edgar Neville) were either the published proceedings of the symposia organized to pay tribute to unjustly forgotten Spanish postwar directors (during the Festivals of Mediterranean Cinema in Valencia) or the printed selection of an international conference dedicated to an important figure of the postwar Spanish cinema (e.g., Fernando Fernán Gómez: Acteur, réalisateur et écrivain espagnol).
by an insufficient attention paid to the formal aspects of these films, which would have led to more complex accounts. The revisionist critical interventions of the 1990s, such as Antología crítica del cine español, Historias de España, Un cinema herido, La herida de las sombras, thus passionately endorse a formal analysis of the postwar Spanish cinema (i.e., “la puesta en forma”) through semiotic and psychoanalytical approaches that seem to reinforce, in their turn, the legitimacy of such critics’ formative years, imprinted by the theoretical legacies of the 1960s and 1970s. While felicitously overcoming the obsessive “escapist”/“dissident” polarization from prior politicized accounts, this specific methodological prioritization of the 1990s is unfortunately inseparable, however, from stronger or milder nationalist stances, linked to “exceptionalist” accounts of the Spanish cinema, whose distinctive, autochthonous forms have allegedly never been more than superficially influenced by international movements (Zunzunegui “Epílogo” 491).

The vehement defense of a national Spanish cinema of “pure” autochthonous roots is unsurprisingly set against the apparently alienating, homogenizing foreign influences and, in

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1 As the first chapter and the Introduction mentioned, these “authentically” Spanish artistic forms (as it would be the case of Neville’s employment of sainete) would constitute “la veta más rica, original y creativa de nuestro cine” (Zunzunegui El extraño viaje 158), its “españolidad” (99) or “la especificidad cultural de la nación española” (113), which is legitimated by Ortega y Gasset’s elitist cultural analysis (e.g., “Preludio a un Goya”) and by Pedro Salinas’ generalizations on the Spanish art and realism, according to whom the Spanish realism would be “stylized” and, as such, superior to the seemingly superficial, mimetic realisms in other cultural traditions (El extraño viaje 89). This fierce defense of a genuine cultural heritage that is expressed in some nationally specific aesthetic choices is unsurprisingly paralleled by a self-legitimating nationalist charge against the research on Spanish cinema in American universities, which is equated to a handful of less problematizing analyses written by scholars related to that academic world (e.g., Marsha Kinder’s Blood Cinema, Thomas Deveny’s Cain on the Screen, Virginia Higginbotham’s The Spanish Film Under Franco). This passionate nationalist-cultural battle is led not only directly against these foreign film researchers or the American university, but also indirectly, against the prevailing methodological influences in this milieu, whose post-structuralist affiliation (e.g., Foucaultian, cultural studies) is set against the enforced self-legitimation of the Spanish film historians’ own formative years, in the heydays of structuralism and later inflected by psychoanalysis. Particularly vitriolic is Pérez Perucha’s charge against foreign researchers of Spanish cinema, who are compared with the destructive arrival of a “plaga de langosta sobre nuestro patrimonio cinematográfico con la tranquilidad que proporciona saberse integrado en la prestigiosa secta de ‘hispanistas’” (“Trayecto de secano” 46). Notably alarming in this account appears to be the possibility that such menacing foreigners, financially at ease, can eventually write the history of Spanish cinema, leaving “la valoración y el conocimiento del patrimonio cinematográfico español en manos ajenas a nosotros”. This passionate nationalist diatribe seems primarily meant to draw the attention of the Spanish state officials, who are indicted for this “irritating” critical competition due to the meager financial incentives offered to the autochthonous film researchers.
particular, against the would-be repetitive, commercial, and shallow menace of foreign film genres, especially those related to Hollywood.¹ This sustained effort of national cultural reinscription is unsurprisingly paralleled, on the one hand, by an endorsement of auteurism (evident in the flourishing of monographic studies and the related dearth of genre studies) and, on the other, by a genealogical attempt of recuperating and disseminating a specific composite cultural tradition, not only linked to an established intellectual-artistic canon (e.g., the picaresque tradition, a romanticized costumbrism, Goya etc.) but also to a politically commendable historical period in terms of progressive, democratic politics of leftist orientation, that of the Spanish Second Republic.

What might be interesting to briefly address here is also Emeterio Díez’s generalizing remarks about the mid-1990s revisionist reception of “the other generation of 27” in Spain, which he questionably connects to some contemporaneous political attempts of cultural annexation. In a 2002 review of some studies on Edgar Neville (i.e., José María Torrijos’ edition, Edgar Neville. La luz en la mirada and María Luisa Bruguera Nadal’s monographic study, Edgar Neville: entre el humor y la nostalgia), Emeterio Díez considers these analyses representative for most, if not all, Spanish investigation devoted to “the other generation of 27” that has started to emerge in the 1990s and that he sees as oscillating in between an idealized formal study and an unconfessed politicizing (i.e., right-wing) endeavor. The critic attributes this latter aspect to the Partido Popular’s cultural action of patronage (of implicit self-legitimation), an activity that he sees particularly conspicuous after 1994. He cannot, nevertheless, make a similar politicizing

¹ As mentioned in the Introduction, there is very scarce research on Spanish cinema that mentions the dearth of film genre investigation and seeks to remedy this lack (Contemporary Spanish Cinema and Genre, Spanish Popular Cinema)—even the few existing studies tend to focus mostly on the contemporary period, being bound with inevitable questions of mass culture, commercial success and popularity.
claim about the gradual emergence of a monographic interest in these humorists in the 1980s (in a different political context), which he mentions without any other explanation.

Emeterio Díez’s problematic substantiation of a potential right-wing appropriation can be connected to the relatively pervasive tendency to ascribe to the political right any proud discourse of national identity that is founded upon an essentialist reading of various cultural products of the past. This political labeling is understandably widespread, however, in countries like Spain, which had right-wing nationalist authoritarian regimes and harsh autarkic periods. The critic’s politicizing indictment questionably disregards, nevertheless, any nationalist attempts of cultural appropriation on the other side of the political spectrum. He thus seems to ignore that the defense of a national heritage that is ideally expressed in some “high culture” intellectual and artistic traditions “es transversal con respecto a las ideologías políticas” (Camporesi 12) and it can be more generally linked to a relative cultural conservativeness. In the case of Spain, as Valeria Camporesi lucidly remarks (38), the national identity of some postwar cinema has often been retraced to the “progressive” artistic history of the country, which has often functioned as a lofty alternative to the despised, allegedly reactionary and low-culture “españolada”. Díez’s accout cannot thus account for the new research effervescence on both sides of the Atlantic nor for the frequent attempt to link these complex artists with a politically progressive agenda of a different sign (i.e., which is associated with the Spanish Second Republic, an issue that was amply discussed before).

On the other hand, more information is undoubtedly necessary in order to better understand the humorists’ most recent revalorization in Spain and elsewhere, a task that constitutes an important objective of further investigation and that points to the essential value of a multifaceted genealogical analysis of these humorists and of their complex reception. Such
methodological lenses of examining the postwar Spanish comedy and humor as well as their critical reception should also clarify the intriguing cultural and political positioning of the popular television phenomenon known as *Cine de barrio*, which has also disseminated some of the comedies that are present in this dissertation. This show began to be aired by the Spanish national television (i.e., RTVE) in 1995 and seems to be inseparable from a melodramatic-nostalgic return to the Spanish cinema produced under the Francoist regime, a perspective that should perhaps be studied in conjunction with other contemporaneous discourses that pertain to the controversial topic of “historical memory”, a connection that could also shed more light on Emeterio Díez’s observations but that exceeds the limited scope of this thesis.

There is, however, also a differently inflected interest in the potential progressive politics of postwar Spain, based on a Gramscian perspective on mass culture, a theoretical-methodological lens that can be connected to complex, pioneering cinematic analyses in the field of Spanish film studies. Such critical approach has been consistently undertaken by some leading researchers of the British and American academia (e.g., Jo Labanyi, Annabel Martín, Eva Woods, Steven Marsh, Stuart Green), some of whom were already mentioned before.

Of particular interest for the second chapter is Steven Marsh’s groundbreaking study, *Popular Spanish Film Under Franco: Comedy and the Weakening of the State*, which employs Gramsci’s well-known concepts of “hegemony”, “consent” and “the national popular”, through which he also politicizes Bakhtin’s notions of “carnival” and of “heteroglossia”/ “dialogical”, on the one hand, and, on the other, de Certeau’s celebration of the non-discursive practices of resistance of popular culture. Steven Marsh thus attempts to read the Spanish postwar comedy as “undo[ing] the discourse of the nation” (6), even if this comedy was, in his opinion, part of the Civil War victors’ plan to incorporate the masses in an envisioned “national project” (2).
Marsh’s pioneering, persuasive analysis, auteurist in his approach, has some debatable issues, nevertheless, which can be related to his genre comments and to his politicized view. In so far as the latter is concerned, it is questionable that there actually was a clearly delineated “national project” of incorporation of the masses under Francoism—the fundamental lack of centralization of the Spanish postwar autocratic regime, which distinguishes Francoist Spain from both fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, makes any direct translation of other sociopolitical and cultural circumstances and analyses (of the latter countries to the former) unsubstantiated by historical evidence. Furthermore, while any totalitarian regime unwillingly triggers oblique politicized readings of cultural artifacts, it is hard to see a consistent, collective counter-response to an alleged “national project”, a view that seems to put forth an idealized version of popular culture as an oppositional whole (i.e., with a concerted political effort to undermine preferred “official” interpretations), a centralized image that parallels a centralized picture of the regime. Such hermeneutics sometimes runs the risk to conflate the researcher’s personal political commitment and desire for collective dissident action in the past with an idealistically unified commitment of the actual postwar Spanish audiences, while, in the case of Marsh’s study, there are no film reviews or reception data to substantiate his claims about the audiences’ position towards these films. He also seems to put forth a questionable view of comedy as a national genre, that is, “the

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1 He chooses to focus on a selected corpus of movies, dividing his chapters according to their directors (i.e., Edgar Neville, Jerónimo Mihura, Luis García Berlanga, Marco Ferreri, and Fernando Fernán Gómez) and their alleged representative films for his main thesis. It is also difficult to see some of the analyzed movies (i.e., Aventura, La torre de los siete jorobados, Domingo de carnaval and El crimen de la calle Bordadores) as comedies, even if they might have occasional moments of comic relief. The only comedies that he deals with and that will also be analyzed in this chapter are La vida en un hilo and Mi adorado Juan. Another comedy that will be reviewed here and that Marsh investigated from a similar Gramscian perspective is El destino se disculpa (in “Negociando la nación: Tácticas y prácticas del subalterno en la comedia cinematográfica de los años cuarenta”).

2 For more specific details about Spain’s Civil War and postwar regime, its internal conflicts and its different “families”, with divergent interests and viewpoints, following the heterogeneity of the groups associated, for various reasons, with the 1936 military uprising, see, for instance Anthony Beevor. The Battle for Spain or Giuliana DiFebo and Santos Juliá. El franquismo.

3 This problematic opposition and the unified collective images that subtend it are paralleled in Marsh’s book by his occasional references to the interpretive paradigm of “the two Spains” as well as by several questionable readings of some movies as national allegories.
genre that links ‘nation’ and ‘people’” (2), making recourse to a popular genealogical claim in Spanish film studies, according to which comedy is “Spain’s distinguishing national genre — from the picaresque novel to the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar” (2).

Probably the most interesting study that touches upon some of the film comedies related to “the other generation of 27” is Stuart Green’s recent book, From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage: The Humorists of the Madrid Vanguardia and Hollywood Film, an investigation centered upon their theatrical production through the “mediatization” of cinema (i.e., in terms of audio-visual features and narrative strategies). While Green’s outstanding research relies on a large amount of background information about the humorists’ artistic development and about the essential imprint of some Hollywood films and techniques upon their work, he resorts to an in-depth analysis of only two of the comedies that will be discussed in this chapter (i.e., La vida en un hilo and Mi adorado Juan), whose film versions are contrasted, along narratological lines, to their later stage adaptations.

This laudable study centers, however, only upon the 1940s, disregarding the humorists’ comedies of the 1950s and the 1960s, a focus that is also present in his prior article, “Humour and National Identity in Spain: The Failed Americanisation of Spanish Comedy (1939-1945)”, which also prioritizes theatrical comedy for its supply of “the narrative and comic models” employed in cinema (132). The conclusion of the article is that these humorists failed to transform the Spanish stage and screen comedy because their cultural products used an “alienating” foreign humor (i.e., Hollywood-based) that was not popular with the large audiences of postwar Spain. Green’s generalization is based, nevertheless, on the analyses of only two postwar comedies, the movie La vida en un hilo and the play Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario. While it is not yet the time to extensively dwell on the far-reaching effect of the
Spanish humorists’ dramatic, cinematic and journalistic activities (both directly, on the Spanish audiences, and indirectly, on younger dramatists, filmmakers, and humorists), some other controversial issues in Stuart Green’s interesting analysis should be briefly examined here. Contrary to what he claims, all historical evidence seems to point out that the Hollywood generic influences that he judiciously notices in his two examples (i.e., comedian comedy, particularly Chaplin’s, the Marx Brothers’ and Lubitsch comedies) have been immensely popular with the prewar Spanish audiences and have greatly influenced both the Spanish stage and screen before the Civil War. Their impact did not vanish in the postwar, even if it was more subdued for obvious political reasons—American cinema was by far the most popular in postwar Spain, according to Jo Labanyi’s ethnographic project and to Gómez Sierra’s account of the “cine de barrio” audiences.¹ It is important to mention, however, that the Hollywood films that entered Spain after 1939 and greatly influenced the local production were, with the exception of Capra’s and Lubitsch’ movies, understandably different to Green’s mentioned comedic styles. This aesthetic distinction enables us to see that we cannot actually speak about a “failed Americanization” of the Spanish screen (or stage), but, at the very most, of a specific failure, of some peculiar genres, which were ubiquitously outdated with larger audiences. Lubitsch’ sophisticated comedies have never been very popular with large audience in the United States or abroad either—the political situation of postwar Spain or the alleged lack of hermeneutic distinction of the Spanish mass audiences after 1939 do not make postwar Spain an exception for not massively endorsing a more “difficult” comedic strand. Moreover, despite occasional misunderstandings it generated in some less cultivated spectators and despite Edgar Neville’s

¹ These Hollywood genres had an undeniable though not immediately recognizable impact on the Spanish screwball comedy, for instance, as we have seen in the previous chapter, whether directly, due to the Spanish filmmakers’ endearment with such foreign genres, or indirectly, through the influence of these earlier genres on the Hollywood screwball comedy and on the prewar Spanish stage, which both contributed to the eventual shaping of the postwar Spanish screwball rhetoric.
confessed dissatisfaction with the commercial outcome of La vida en un hilo (which Green brings up to consolidate his argument), this film comedy was very successful at the time of its screening according to contemporaneous reviews and interviews with its director (e.g., Sánchez “Una comedia amable con pretensiones de profundidad”). As to Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario, the angry “pateos” that its first representation generated and that Green mentions (138) did not apparently represent the majority of spectators, which were avid fans of La Codorniz and of its peculiar humor, nor did they exempt this play of later successful representations (Fernández Barreira “El humor de La Codorniz ha llegado al teatro”). Besides, as it was mentioned earlier, this playful play also had a wide-reaching impact on the public sphere of the time (e.g., there were passionate defenses and refutations even in the medical journals), which, according to Mihura’s statements in 1947, was polarized along the same lines that diverged in the appreciation of La Codorniz (Alás-Brun 78).

The particular endearment with a temporal frame that stretches from 1939 to the first half of the 1940s, a period that can be, to a large extent, juxtaposed with the first stage of La Codorniz (i.e., directed by Miguel Mihura until 1944 and greatly influenced by him until 1946), is present also in other studies that monographically, as in Emilio González-Grano de Oro, or theatrically, as in Montserrat Alás-Brun, deal with “the other generation of 27”.¹ This choice of a golden period of artistic production is readily linked to the undeniable prewar innovations of such comedies, which are justly commended for their achievements in the bleak autarkic period of the immediate postwar. This cultural distinction is explicitly or implicitly contrasted to a later stage, beyond the 1950s, of alleged dramatic inferiority according to Alás-Brun, probably to a

¹ These references concern especially González-Grano de Oro’s book, La Otra Generación del 27. El Humor Nuevo español y La Codorniz primera, and his earlier article, “La deshumanización del humor y La Codorniz”, as well as Alás-Brun’s published dissertation, De la comedia del disparate al teatro del absurdo (1939-1946), whose main ideas she takes over in her later article, “La comedia de humor en el contexto del teatro español de posguerra”.

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great extent due to the inevitable transformation of their initial ludic humor, which later might have marked a less visible, though not less powerful, difference within the scenery of a more politically permissive period (i.e., the 1950s and 1960s).

It is perhaps the time to make some observations in respect to this inevitable “fall from grace” critical paradigm, manifest in some monographic studies on individual humorists as well. First, the acknowledgment of this prioritization helps problematize existing cultural canons of classification and appreciation (i.e., what and why becomes important to study)—in this particular case, the most worthwhile research objects of postwar cinema and culture appear to be those more easily connected both with a certain aesthetic consistency and with progressive politics, inherently associated with the pre-Civil War period and especially with the idealized Second Republic. While the prewar period that decisively shaped these humorists was the pre-republican one (i.e., roughly the 1920s), the Republican period ironically entailed many publishing and distribution problems due to the increased politicization of the contemporaneous cultural scene, which fostered, however, their enhanced proximity to the theater and to the screen. Second, what might be very interesting to analyze is precisely the evolution of disparate over time and the changes in humor that occurred, which would show how the film comedies that constitute the primary focus in this chapter become gradually darker and more materialist towards the late 1950s and the early 1960s. This dynamic diachronic vision, consonant with the most recent analytic directions in film studies in general and of comedy in particular (see Jenkins and Brunovska Karnick “Introduction: Golden Eras and Blind Spots” 2-3), can also show some previously unconsidered lines of continuity and generic reinscriptions in the Spanish postwar cinema, most notably with the screwball and dark comedy genres, but also with desarrollista comedies or the detective movies of the late forties and early fifties, for instance. Last but not
least, an investigation of this comedic evolution cannot be disjointed from several other areas of contemporaneous cultural and sociopolitical history, of which especially noteworthy to briefly mention here is the similar changes in humor that took place in *La Codorniz* throughout these two decades of consideration.

A complex understanding of the *disparate* comedies that will be analyzed in this chapter is also inseparable from a genealogical review of the humorists’ own conception of humor, theater and cinema and of their ambiguous social and cultural positioning before and after the Civil War.¹ In what follows, their prewar formative ambience will be first examined, in conjunction with various vanguard movements and figures, the unprecedented worldwide rise of Hollywood, and the extraordinary development of mass-market entertainment, which, in its turn, had an extremely important role in the consequential explosion of humor magazines in the first decades of the twentieth century.

“*New humor*, Hollywood, and the search for distinction

José López Rubio’s 1983 institutionalizing tag of “the other generation of 27”, which comprises Tono, Mihura, Jardiel Poncela, Neville and himself as the vanguard innovators of the Spanish humor at the beginning of the twentieth century, has been conveniently taken over by

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¹ Given the primarily genealogical interest of this chapter, which seeks to better understand these humorists’ (self-) positioning in the sociocultural sphere of the age, it will nor enter detailed descriptions of each particular influence (e.g., Surrealism, Pirandello’s *umorismo*, Gómez de la Serna’s or Ortega’s cultural production), which not only exceeds the limited scope of this chapter and thesis but has also been carried out in some already existing monographic studies (devoted to either one or several of the humorists under discussion), most of which have been previously mentioned. This methodological choice also relies on a deep dissatisfaction with current bibliography, in so far as the generally nostalgic and/ or exalted sense of mission (i.e., of recuperation) is most commonly devoid of a necessary critical distance towards the humorists’ declarations about their cultural affinities. Most existing revisionist bibliography thus seeks to celebrate and, therefore, perpetuate the humorists’ own idealized vision of their sociocultural milieu, a self-advertising that is naturally oblivious of any hidden interests in the pursuit of a much coveted aura of distinction.
most revisionist studies after the 1990s focusing on one or all of the five humorists. The syntagm itself is much older and belongs to Pedro Lain Entralgo, as López Rubio otherwise remarks in his inaugural speech, perhaps not without an intention of further strengthening his taxonomic claim.1 While Stuart Green’s reticence in front of this treacherous generational label (and of any simplistic stamp in general) is fully justified, the tag remains illustrative in respect to the humorists’ own aesthetic and political (self)positioning is concerned: it shows López Rubio’s retrospective canonizing claim to be included, together with the other four humorists, within the institutionalized vanguard group of Spanish culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, it conveniently ascribes their artistic maturity and distinction in a prewar period when they could not yet be accused of dubious political ties with the Civil War victors.2 While by no means unproblematic, López Rubio’s astute self-designation has also proved influential for the humorists’ gradual academic institutionalization after the 1990s, triggering a sense of justified recuperation through contagion with a “serious”, already canonized high-culture field (i.e., that of the vanguard Spanish poets associated with the generational label of 27). Keeping all these inextricable critical connections in mind, the label “the other generation of 27” will be occasionally used as an occasional convenient shorthand to refer to the five humorists instead of enumerating their names or of using Stuart Green’s lengthier syntagm (i.e., “the most significant of the humorists of the Madrid vanguardia”).

1 Pedro Lain Entralgo apparently wrote earlier in La Gaceta Literaria: ‘Hay una Generación del 27, la de los poetas, y otra Generación del 27, la de los “renovadores”—los creadores más bien—del humor contemporáneo’ (qtd. in López Rubio “La otra generación del 27” 42).
2 Stuart Green convincingly gives three main arguments against the label “the other generation of 27” (From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage 2), which will be succinctly summed up here. The first contention is that it gives rise to a problematic relationship with the Generation of 27 (debatable in itself), as it “perpetuates a narrow concept of the vanguardia which disregards the contribution made by others” (i.e., the novelists Benjamin Jarnés and José Bergamín). Secondly, Green argues that this tag disregards the contributions made by other humorists that established themselves in the prewar (e.g., K-Hito and Antonio Robles). Thirdly, the necessary adagio (i.e., “the other”) in front of the canonized syntagm “Generation of 27” entails an opposition between the two groups, which is mainly political (i.e., the humorists’ support of the Nationalist rebels as opposed to the death or exile of many vanguard Spanish poets), even if the humorists also suffered the rigors of postwar political and religious censorship.
Born between 1896 and 1905, three of the five humorists appear to have come from similar social backgrounds: a petite bourgeoisie related to the literary professions (e.g., writers, journalists, playwrights, theater managers etc.) and hence to a rapidly expanding Spanish cultural market at the beginning of the twentieth century. The other two humorists were born in more affluent backgrounds: Neville was of aristocratic origin while López Rubio’s family belonged to the haute bourgeoisie. All five as well as the older Wenceslao Fernández Flórez (i.e., born in 1885) coincided in many humor magazines of the 1920s, of which the most notable were *Buen Humor* (founded by Sileno in 1921) and *Gutíérrez* (founded by K-Hito in 1927) and which were constituted with the express purpose of disseminating a new, innovative kind of humor, even if the pages of the former periodical were also opened to the established, “festive” humorists that would be later recurrently parodied by the younger newcomers in search of artistic renovation and popular consecration. The costumbrist satire or “festive humor” was indeed a frequent parodic target in the iconoclast *Gutíérrez* and in various cynical plays and stories by Jardiel Poncela, Mihura and Tono—their most common satiric object was the costumbrism that was heavily imbued with middle-class moral values and sentimentality, a typical gentrification trend that took place in Spain towards the end of the nineteenth-century and the beginning of the 20th, as we already saw in the first chapter. Furthermore, the “festive humor” was associated with a loosely defined (and reviled) “realism” and with the *castizo* genres of *sainete* and *zarzuela*, which, according to Dru Dougherty, were the most popular theatrical spectacles for the urban

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1 There are no significant biographical details available about Tono’s family background—the only things that are known are that he was born and raised in Jaén for the first years of his life, starting very early to contribute articles, illustrations, and drawings to various contemporaneous periodicals. He actually shares this work necessity with Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, who was also forced by his father’s death to start working very early in the Spanish press of the time.

2 The humorists who contributed to the earlier *Buen Humor* belonged to three different generations: one of them, the oldest, was represented by “los festivos” (e.g., Carlos Luis de Cuenca, Perez Zúñiga, Bonnat), a second one was embodied by Ramón, Fernández Flórez and Camba, and the youngest generation was epitomized by Tono, Neville, López Rubio, Mihura, Jardiel Poncela, Antoniorrobles etc.
masses since the 1870s until the beginning of the 1920s (“Theater and Culture, 1868-1936” 214). This enviable popular status of the género chico at the beginning of the 1920s, when the younger humorists attempted to assert themselves on the competitive Spanish cultural scene of the age, must have been another reason for the merciless derision of the “festive humor” and of its affiliated theatrical genres.

The vindicated “new humor”, a label officially coined in the pages of Gutiérrez around the year 1927 but formally present some years earlier as well, coalesced a number of traits (e.g., playful nonsense, surrealism, grotesque “dehumanization”, mechanization, infantilization, misogyny, parodically cynical takes on social and aesthetic clichés etc.) that would later appear in the pages of La Ametralladora or La Codorniz, in the disparate comedies analyzed in this chapter as well as in the plays, novels and short stories of the six humorists. According to Patricia Molins (81), the label of “humorist” was also consolidated in the 1920s literary press, when there was an increased demand for humorous writings: besides the tremendous rise of humor magazines in the aftermath of the First World War, some of which were associated with a strong erotic-misogynistic tendency under the euphemistic name of “revistas galantes” (e.g., Cosquillas, Muchas Gracias), the publishing house Calpe inaugurated the collection “Los humoristas” and Biblioteca Nueva launched the innovative “Colección de grandes novelas humorísticas”, which featured some of Neville’s, Jardiel Poncela’s and López Rubio’s earliest novels. These humor magazines were often linked, in their turn, with powerful publishing houses, which were understandably interested in economic profit (Pelta 35), which must have beneficially acted as a relative safety valve from direct political injunctions. The undeniable

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1 According to Emilio González-Grano de Oro (La Otra Generación del 27 31), the newly initiated section “El humor nuevo” from Gutiérrez first featured a story by Miguel Mihura, titled “Elsa López, la rubia fatal y alambrista (Atroces escenas de la vida de los artistas de circo)”, which was a parodic, dark humorous take (not deprived by Surrealist touches) on some stereotyped melodramatic stories.
expansion of the booming cultural market in the Spain of the 1920s and the 1930s included the three main areas (i.e., the literary press, the rising Spanish cinema and its main competitor, the local theatrical industry) in which the humorists under discussion actively participated, pointing to the powerful interaction between the commercial-industrial sphere and the public sphere(s) of the time.

While the split between experimental and commercial theater increased in the 1920s, amid passionate calls for state intervention and renovation of the Spanish stage, the local film industry had an unmistakable label of commercialism attached to almost all its productions. Vying with the theater for financial investments, large audiences, and consecrated authors (and actors), the Spanish cinema of the 1920s had an essential impact upon the hierarchical delineations of the autochthonous cultural field of production and circulation. Disdainfully associated with mass culture and popular taste, the prewar Spanish screen triggered passionate endorsements or refutations by the contemporaneous artists and intellectuals. As Antonio Díez Mediavilla indicates (20–21), indifference to the new medium was quite rare and usually ascribed to the very first years of cinema in Spain, when it did not yet have such a conspicuous presence in the public sphere of the time, as it began to have starting with the 1920s. The fiercest cinema detractors were, unsurprisingly, some of the consecrated Spanish writers and critics, ascribed to the realm of “high culture” (as was the case of Unamuno), who considered film responsible for the would-be “degeneration” of art, popular culture and the theatrical audiences’ “good taste” (21). Such well-positioned members of the cultural establishment decried the crass commercialism of the movie industry and its interested indulgence in the base passions of the paying masses, as well as the apparent cinematic indifference to or trivialization of respected aesthetic values. On the contrary, film enthusiasts (e.g., Benavente, Azorín, García Lorca, Dalí,
Buñuel, Gómez de la Serna, Jardiel Poncela) hailed the unprecedented expressive and communicative possibilities of the new medium and, in some cases, promoted a fertile complementarity between cinema and other artistic fields of production, especially theater (20). In the case of the novels, plays and short stories belonging to the “other generation of 27”, the impact of cinema is visible not only at the level of explicit references to contemporary films, actors and actresses, but also in the widespread presence of cinema theaters as propitious milieux of (parodically) romantic conquests, or in a more dynamic cinematographic tempos, in the complex plots that require numerous changes of theatrical settings, in special dramatic sound and lighting effects etc.

If the position of the cinema’s enemies was fairly similar in respect to the existing hierarchy of the cultural sphere, the fervent supporters of the motion pictures were either consecrated artists or ambitious newcomers in that field. The intellectually established group of enthusiasts of the big screen was unsurprisingly under repeated attacks by the more conservative members of the high cultural field, a belligerence that was present in the early twentieth century not only in Spain but also in Germany or the United States, where, as Miriam Hansen shows, any collaboration of consecrated members of high culture with the budding movie industry was considered a proof “not of the cinema’s literary ambitions” but of the established artists’ “commercial ambitions” (“Early Silent Cinema” 166). This denial of cultural prestige is undoubtedly linked to the more general law of the artistic field where, as Bourdieu repeatedly noted, the writers’ commercial success and their proximity to the political circles inevitably condemns them to an inferior positioning in the seemingly “disinterested” cultural realm.¹ The

¹ The application of a condescending label of “commercialism” to respected novelists or theatrical authors who participated in the film industry (in particular to Mihura, Jardiel Poncela and Fernández Flórez) would also characterize the Spanish postwar cultural setting, where it would be often paralleled by the politically charged tag of “escapism”, especially starting with the 1950s. The humorists’ film script and/ or dialogue contributions thus tended
hostility of various recognized Spanish artists and intellectuals towards the silver screen and
towards its rapid conquest of the public sphere in the 1920s and 1930s can thus be linked to the
perceived threat triggered by cinema to other artistic enterprises (e.g., the respectable theater)
and to their writers’ public prestige. Going even beyond this understandable anxiety in front of
the increasing instability of the hierarchical relations in the artistic sphere of the time, the
belligerence generated by the rise of cinema in the 1920s is also unquestionably linked to the
ascending power of the market in the cultural field.

The increasing dependence of art on the commercial-industrial sphere and the
corresponding attempts of aesthetic autonomy and distinction in the first decades of the twentieth
century also conditioned the other enthusiastic reaction to the motion pictures, that belonging to
the young, ambitious vanguard artists who sought to radically change the existing cultural
institutions and its relation to the public. While a complex analysis of these multiple vanguard
attempts lies beyond the limited scope of this chapter and thesis, some brief remarks should be
made about the importance of cinema (particularly in its Hollywood model) and of popular
culture for the vanguard movements. As Miriam Hansen skillfully presents (“The Mass
Production of the Senses” 333-34), one of the main appeals of the early Hollywood motion
pictures for most avant-garde artists and intellectuals lay in “lower genres” movies like slapstick
comedies, whose sensorial hyper-stimulation, dizzying tempo, and overall excess and
eccentricity were instrumental in the avant-garde’s attack on the institution of (high) art and the

to be indicted by leftist intellectuals who, as it was already mentioned, harbored considerable mistrust in the
cinematic medium, ascribed to the mass market entertainment and, as such, an object of passionate denunciations of
its alleged economic and political dependence to an abhorred totalitarian regime. The actual consecration of the
leftist taxonomies of the 1950s and 1960s would only occur in the 1970s, in a different sociopolitical background,
which permitted the reversal of the previously hegemonic cultural hierarchies. On the other hand, it could be argued
that the postwar intellectual scene between the 1950s and the 1970s actually had at least two simultaneous ranking
systems: one hegemonic, according to which the humorists were gradually consecrated, and another one,
ideologically antagonistic to the hegemonic, which condemned them on account on their close positioning to the
political and economic fields of the age.
traditional naturalist conventions. Vaudeville performance was a particularly notable source of inspiration for these innovative artists, not so much in the actual formal details, according to Henry Jenkins (What Made Pistachios Nuts? 297), as in “the spirit and content of the variety”, in its “emphasis on concrete or alogical presentation, on the use and combination of all modes and technical means of performance, and on the physical involvement of the spectators and the destruction of the ‘fourth wall’ convention”. Jenkins further observes that Eisenstein “founded his concept of ‘montage of attractions’ upon the emotional intensity produced by the fragmented entertainment of popular music hall, its eccentricity and hyperactivity” (note 8, 297). Besides this undeniable attraction to the “lower genres”, which had an essential impact upon avant-garde productions, Hansen argues that even the classical Hollywood cinema can be formally linked to the avant-garde’s politics of radical transformation. This connection is often disregarded when discussing the Soviet montage aesthetics, for instance, whose politicized use of already existing cinematographic techniques (e.g., continuity editing, spatio-temporal coherence, narrative causality, faster cutting rate, closer framing, breakdown of the diegetic space etc.) seem to have been derived from montage innovations already consolidated in the classical Hollywood cinema (“The Mass Production of the Senses” 333-34).

The Hollywood “lower genres” and the new cinematographic strategies put forth by the American movie industry greatly impacted the humorists labeled as “the other generation of 27”—not only in their actual scripts and film productions but also in their plays, novels, and humorous articles and caricatures, which often made recourse to a fast cinematic pace and montage techniques, movie theater settings, silent comedy visual gags, and numerous parodic
takes on classic popular stars, titles, genres, and specific films etc.¹ Their extensive reliance on cinematic intertexts and visual strategies was undeniably facilitated by their vast spectator experience and knowledge of film conventions in an age when cinema-going (especially related to Hollywood movies) was inextricably associated with youth, fashion, new forms of romance, and a kind of cosmopolitan modernity. Furthermore, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter, after the First World War, American films became very attractive to European local exhibitors and distributors as they could gain “higher profits by showing Hollywood films rather than local productions.” (López 420) This globalizing trend occasioned rising waves of anxiety in front of a would-be “crisis” of European civilization and its values (424), endangered by what was perceived as an American-based commercialized and homogenized mass culture, a perspective that was shared by Unamuno and other conservative cinema detractors in Spain.

As argued in the first chapter, based on Miriam Hansen’s skillful analysis in “The Mass Production of the Senses”, the international appeal and translatability of the Hollywood movie industry was, however, primarily indebted to its capacity to articulate and mediate new ways of relating to modernity, thus essentially contributing to the emergence of new forms of sociability and leisure, to altered social and gender relations, and to an overall different texture of the quotidian. It is essential to note here that the American cinema catalyzed a gradual and crucial sociopolitical change, namely, the democratization of culture: the working classes made up the vast majority of film audiences in the first decades of the twentieth-century, a phenomenon that was doubled by a significant lower-class protagonism in motion pictures, particularly in melodramas. The increased visibility of these vast segments of population, which were absent, “ignored and despised by dominant culture” (342), had an even greater democratizing impact on

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¹ It is Stuart Green who, in his book, From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage, perhaps best analyzes the “mediatization” of cinema on their theatrical production, in terms of both audio-visual features and narrative strategies, a reason for which this issue will be not foregrounded in this chapter and thesis.
cultures that, as in the case of the 1920s Spain or Germany, were more hierarchical than the United States. As Miriam Hansen shows in her analysis of German silent cinema, “hierarchic class structures persisting alongside industrialization and modernization” intensified the perceived egalitarian threat of the new medium, in contrast to the sustained efforts of social integration that took place in the United States at the same time (“Early Silent Cinema” 164). Recurrently and disparagingly labeled as “crowds” in the hegemonic public sphere of the time, the working-class movie spectators of these less democratic societies were especially feared for their “political potential with radical implications”, a possibility that was ambivalently endorsed by many avant-garde artists.

It might be interesting to point out here that Mihura’s, Jardiel Poncela’s, Neville’s and Fernández Flórez’ social and cultural elitism was significantly strengthened after their traumatic Civil War experiences in Republican Madrid, which consolidated their already existing condescending attitude to the lower-classes’ lack of a contemplative relation to art: their perception of the fearful spectacle of the frenzied, uncultivated masses, unable to understand a more poetic, “inverisimilar” humor and demanding an immediate gratification of their senses through entertainment, was enhanced during and after the Civil War by means of disquieting memories of uncouth, violent militiamen and revolutionaries that pursued them and almost frustrated their attempts to rescue their lives from detention and execution. Furthermore, the humorists’ merciless derision of melodrama is not only an elitist generational attack against the perceived anachronism of its formal or sentimental conventions, but also an occasionally interested deconstruction of its political educational value, a less advertised reason of condemnation that surfaced especially in Republican Madrid and during the Civil War. The humorists will thus repeatedly resort to parodies of proletarian melodramas in the increasingly
politicized Gutiérrez of the early 1930s and in the pages of La Ametralladora. Some relevant examples prior to the Civil War include various humorous articles by Mihura in Gutiérrez, such as “Las grandes tragedias de la vida. Sin trabajo y con dos hijos idiotas”, “Varietés en la inclusa”, or the collection “Las mas bellas estampas de la revolución [rusa]”. During the Civil War, the most illustrative samples of such a parodic take are Tono’s and Mihura’s series of short stories about communist Madrid, published in La Ametralladora and later republished as a mock melodramatic nouvelle (i.e., María de la Hoz) in the 1939 collection of “Novela del sábado”, a publishing choice that might have shrewdly and pedagogically meant to target the same less educated, lower-class public that would previously buy inexpensive proletarian melodramas (even if it remains unclear to what extent potential lower-class readers could actually afford to buy a romance book at that particular time). In the following lines, some brief remarks will be made about a related aspect that is particularly striking in respect to the sociopolitical humor of the articles and caricatures published by Tono, Mihura and Neville in La Ametralladora, directed by Mihura after its third issue, since 1937, until the end of the Civil War). These observations are meant, in addition, to shed light on some humorous articulations that are also manifest, as we shall see, in the disparate comedies analyzed later in this chapter.

Judging by the recurrent parodies of proletarian melodrama (e.g., especially the series titled María de la Hoz or “Las más bellas estampas de la revolución”, the latter borrowed from the pages of the early 1930s Gutiérrez) and by the satiric target of most jokes, stories and caricatures, the war enemy that is outlined in La Ametralladora seems to be not so much hated or feared as condescendingly disdained for being uncouth, instinctual, utterly materialist, and generally devoid of cultural distinction. Most comic texts and images are thus meant to epitomize the socially and culturally inferior, “unrefined” attempts of the lower classes (i.e.,
Republican but especially Communist) to imitate bourgeois mores.¹ These ironically deflated endeavors are one of the preferred objects of satire in La Codorniz as well, even if, in this latter case, the target tended to be the postwar nouveaux riches, significantly labeled as cursi, not the lower classes, which responded to a different context. After the Civil War, this emerging social class apparently threatened to constitute the (socially and politically) powerful “other” that triggered the humorists’ attempts to contrastively highlight their own social and cultural distinction.

A favorite object of irreverent, caustic humor is also the alleged obsession with food and material supplies in Republican Madrid during the Civil War, while the leaders of the Republican army or government are often derided not only for their supposed cowardice, incompetence and unfounded arrogance, but also for their pathetic lack of taste, which dooms to failure their perceived attempts of cultural or social distinction.²

¹ Some illustrative examples of this condescending image of the “red” adversary, include various caricatures by Tono, such as that titled “Vida roja”, whose drawing (i.e., of a normal-looking, possibly bourgeois conversation) is satirically politicized by means of the short explanatory text that appears below, featuring the humorously established bourgeois symbol of the fried egg: “¿De manera que su hija se casa? Sí, ya le han regalado el huevo frito de pedida.” Similar narrative-visual interrelations are used in some other caricatures, such as that of a conversation between a young woman’s father and her aspiring husband, which intertwines the formal bourgeois ritual of the marriage proposal with the well-known Republican image of the clenched fist, a combative identification gesture during the Civil War (i.e., “Vengo a pedir el puño de su hija.”). Other instances of this humor are that between a married couple (in which he asks her what she prefers for the neck, a pearl necklace or a soap bar), or that between two lovers, which also employs some dehumanizing shades of Surrealist dark humor:
- Me la comía a usted.
- ¡Qué galante!
- No: si lo digo de verdad.”

Some other jokes, based on a similar type of condescending humor, make recourse to vanguard collage styles (e.g., a mixture of text and fragments of paintings, engravings, picture cards, photos etc.), as was the case of the mocking explanation next to an apparent still nature (i.e., “Huevo frito que se conserva en el Museo del Prado y que está siendo muy visitado”) or to the caricatured painting of a Republican general with a bottle of wine from Málaga (i.e., “General rojo tomando Málaga”), the latter also directed against the alleged vacuous war propaganda of the Republican side.

² The patronizing look on these public figures’ “imported” politics is often noticeable by means of the derisive fashion metaphors with which the Republican leaders’ ideas are compared. Manuel Azaña, often pejoratively termed “Manolita”, is one of the most frequent objects of such condescending jokes, as could be seen in the mock advertising that appeared in the third issue of La Ametralladora: “Madame Azaña. Modisto (hace también de sastre). Últimas novedades en modelos franceses y rusos. Pyjamas creación ‘ideal Cipri’ [i.e., an allusion to Cipriano Rivas Cheriff, another favorite target of such satires]. Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Tarrasa, calle de la Amargura.”
Another recurrent type of humor in *La Ametralladora*, judging by its frequent presence, was unmistakably stamped by misogyny, which came from prewar times and continued in the postwar with *La Codorniz* and in most disparate comedies that will be later discussed. When united with political issues, this misogynist strain meant caustic allusions at the Republican women leaders’ would-be ugliness and lack of refinement (e.g., La Pasionaria, Federica Montseny, Margarita Nelken, Victoria Kent). Their intelligence was not usually questioned, it was merely unmentioned, which puts forth another interested, fundamentally aesthetic prism of judgment that can be subscribed to the humorists’ reliance on some specific social and cultural norms of distinction.¹ These women’s comic downgrading actually oscillate in between the stereotyped satire of the spinster and the parody of the exalted, committed female poses of proletarian melodramas. The Republican women leaders are also occasionally depicted as powerful matriarchal figures that completely dominate the infantilized (masculine) army of the Republican side.

These incongruous feminine images did not appear only in combative political texts, however, but also in various jokes and caricatures that focus on the National side, being present, as humorous misogynist resources, also in some prewar magazines like *Buen Humor* and Gutiérrez or in the postwar *La Codorniz*. When the much advertised contemporaneous image of the “madrinas de guerra” appears in *La Ametralladora*, for instance, it is not through the usual populist, melodramatic rhetoric that was otherwise employed in other Nationalist publications or

¹ This reliance on an aesthetic judgment, correlated with distinction, is also obvious in Mihura’s contrastive assessment of his experience in Republican Madrid, in 1936 and 1937, and in the National territory of San Sebastián (Moreiro Prieto 175). Annoyed by the parades of the Soviet soldiers and of the International Brigades and by the militiamen’s constant interpellations in the street, Mihura claims to have chosen to flee Madrid, at a time when it was already very difficult to move around the city, as he felt more and more estranged and irritated “de consignas que no comprendía, de imposiciones disciplinarias que abominaba y de la vehemencia de un proletariado que sentía ajeno.” He ironically mentions that, once in San Sebastián, a National territory, he also detested “algunas estampas antiestéticas” (e.g., “los inmensos escapularios de las señoras”), but there he felt relieved to at least encounter “gente educada”.

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even in this magazine prior to Mihura’s managerial position. Instead, these female figures are
often of hyperbolic proportions while the soldiers’ size is similar to that of a baby in their arms, a
witty literalization of the concept (i.e., “madrina”) that was consistent not only with one of the
most recurrent humorous strategies of “the other generation of 27” (both before and after the
Civil War) but also with a more widespread comic preference for puerilization, inflected by both
Surrealism and the Freudian psychoanalysis. There were numerous other example of such
domineering maternal figures whose depiction not only further illustrates the puerilization and
literalization techniques associated with the humorists’ prewar comic style, but also seems to
playfully and subversively trivialize men’s lofty war enterprises, which are seen as mindless
children’s games. On the other hand, it can be argued that this kind of condescending images,
normally associated with middle-aged wives, can also be linked to a misogynistic conception that
surfaced in other cultural discourses of the time (e.g., in the militarist melodramas ¡Harka! and
¡A mi la Legión!, belonging to the so-called “cine de cruzada”), which posited women’s
fundamental impossibility to understand and value male heroic action, a conservative standpoint
not devoid of gender anxiety after the Republican attempts of women’s emancipation. In any
case, such comic female figures are also present in the postwar La Codorniz and, as we shall see,
in many of the disparate comedies analyzed in this chapter.

However, not all humor that is present in La Ametralladora is either misogynist or
concerned with issues of social and cultural distinction, two characteristics that were otherwise

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1 It is also very tempting to resort to a psychoanalytical interpretation of the humorists themselves, as almost all
were cynical, misogynist bachelors passionately devoted to their (often domineering) mothers, yet such a potentially
explanatory paradigm would go beyond the scope of this chapter and does not seem essential for the better
understanding of the peculiar humor developed by “the other generation of 27”.
2 An instance of such humor is Mihura’s illustrated jokes in the issue 18 of La Ametralladora, where such a maternal
wife tells her husband who returns from war: “Ya te he dicho cincuenta veces que no quiero que vayas a la guerra.
Luego vuelves con el traje lleno de manchas”. This joke, which appeared in May 6, 1937, is deprived, however, of
any direct visual references to the Civil War or to any of the parties involved, which does not preclude its
contemporaneous relevance.
present in the prewar Buen Humor and Gutiérrez as well and that will resurface in the postwar La Codorniz. Probably the most pervasive sensation experienced as one examines the type of humor that appears in La Ametralladora, particularly striking in an allegedly propagandistic war magazine for the Nationalist soldiers in the Civil War, is its dehumanizing, nonsensical touches (verging on dark undertones), which had the politically disquieting consequence of trivializing and decontextualizing the civil conflict, making violence look abstract, universal, inverisimilar, and even utterly absurd. Playfully comic defamiliarizations of literary, moral, and social stereotypes would thus inevitably distance this magazine from its right-wing creators’ combative Manichaeism, which resulted in various negative censorship reports for the issues that appeared under Mihura’s leadership, as evidenced by José Antonio Llera (“Documentos inéditos” 123-25). This ludic destabilization of various sacrosanct conventions was continued in La Codorniz, whose apparently innocuous, escapist humor would also be severely vituperated by censors and by various hegemonic voices, who accurately perceived the magazine’s cynical deconstruction of respectable social and moral symbols. La Codorniz felicitously contributed to the alternative education of the postwar younger generation that was otherwise tired by hegemonic exhortations to disciplinary role models and skeptical in respect to their alleged moral superiority, a formative significance that will be soon examined in more detail. The numerous defamiliarizing strategies of the magazine’s humor, as in the case of the disparate comedies that will be further analyzed, functioned as an efficient “anti-rite” of a stifling postwar quotidian, while the generous ambiguity of the nonsensical, historically decontextualized, stories and graphical humor published in La Codorniz (both during and after under Mihura’s leadership) triggered ironical politicized readings of the contemporaneous reality.
Some of the theatrical, novelistic and cinematic defamiliarizing techniques used by these humorists effectively use many dehumanizing, playful resources taken over from the vaudeville register of the Hollywood “lower genres” (i.e., the silent slapstick comedy of early twentieth century and the anarchistic comedy of the 1930s), a filiation that is particularly obvious in the cynical attitude to romance, marriage and family, irreverently undermined through visual gags and slapstick moments involving the young lovers or the married, middle-aged couple. This merciless puncturing of a potentially romantic love story is carried out much more crudely or cynically than in screwball comedies, which were also influenced by the vaudeville tradition but which lack this tireless focus on the carnivalesque deflation of romance. This consistent derision of romantic love that characterizes the humorists’ work, which is enhanced by the insolent imprint of vaudeville, helps us better understand why the Spanish screwball and disparate, even if they share many semantic elements, are different comedic genres, that is, each type of comedy operates a different syntactic distribution of their romantic and burlesque components: whereas romance is always relegated to a secondary position in the disparate comedies, being subordinate to other (comic) purposes, the Spanish screwball integrates its vaudeville units in a narrative of romantic commitment or reaffirmation, as we have seen in the previous chapter. We shall discuss later, however, the actual influence of the American screwball, particularly that attached to Capra and Lubitsch, on “the other generation of 27” and thus on the disparate comedies under scrutiny in this chapter.

Other common humorous elements that resonate with the Hollywood “lower genres” and preclude all possible emotional identification with the characters include, according to Stuart Green’s analysis, violent stunts, comically aggressive confrontations against various embodiments of authority, exaggerated facial expression and body language, hyperbolically
literalized dialogs or absurd conversations, defying all communicative rules (as in the Marx Brothers’ anarchistic comedies), grotesquely caricatured figures, outrageous confusion and mistaken identities etc.\(^1\) Numerous vaudeville elements of this type, refurbished by the humorists in their comedies or humorous stories and novels, were also present in the prewar Spanish theatrical comedy, as showed in the first chapter, which leads us to a similar observation regarding the popularity of disparate comedies after the Civil War, namely, that the humor typology from Buen Humor, Gutiérrez, La Ametralladora, and especially from La Codorniz also had a preparatory formative influence for the understanding and popularity of the disparate kind of humor. There were other lines of continuities between the prewar and the postwar as well, including a common exposure to some popular Hollywood genres, which represented another important reason for the success of most postwar Spanish disparate comedies. Their popularity must have thus been indebted, to a great extent, to the existing interdiscursive cultural competence of the Spanish audiences, humorists and film producers, a competence largely shaped by the prewar dramatic stage and popular comic press, in their turn influenced by the Hollywood comedic discourses of the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Starting with the 1920s, which marked the beginning of Hollywood’s worldwide hegemony, the commercial Spanish theater felt increasingly threatened by American cinema, which led to a fruitful renovation of its plots and scenography, whose modernization often meant a creative refashioning of Hollywood themes and cinematographic techniques according to local

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\(^1\) Stuart Green also mentions the occasional example of bodily petrification, which can be similarly linked to silent comedy (especially to Buster Keaton), as in Elias’ deadpan expression in his effort to keep up appearances in front of his dead and current master in Jardiel’s play, “Un marido a precio fijo”, or in Fermin’s and Leoncio’s cases in another play by Jardiel, “Eloísa está debajo de un almendro” (From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage 151).

Both plays have been adapted to the screen, resulting in two comedies included in the current chapter under the label of disparate. Stuart Green also mentions the humorists’ fondness of props (152), which can be retraced to comedian comedy as well, as in the case of the uncooperative objects in Tono’s and Mihura’s “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario” or in Jardiel’s “Habitantes de la casa deshabitada”, where Gregorio’s shotgun appears useless with the ghost.
dramatic traditions and standards of taste, an adaptation we have touched upon in our discussion of screwball. The younger humorists under discussion in this chapter nonetheless deemed this dynamic prewar stage too provincial and hostile to innovation as well as hopelessly inferior to American cinema, whose growing power on the Spanish cultural scene they enthusiastically welcomed. They were later personally involved, with the exception of Miguel Mihura, in the actual production of Hollywood films during the transition to sound, at the time of the double-version movies (i.e., in both English and Spanish), which attempted to erase any potential language barrier and to ensure broader exhibition markets after the disappearance of the “universal language” of silent comedies. The humorists’ decision to start working as film dialog and script adaptors for the Hollywood Spanish versions in the early 1930s was attributed to the alleged inferiority and stagnation of the Spanish prewar theater, which precluded any significant renovation they were interested in making. The Spanish prewar cinema, in dire need of financial investments and efficient reorganization and consolidation, was an unlikely competitor with Hollywood for the humorists’ services, even if Mihura, Jardiel and Neville sporadically worked in the Spanish film industry as well in the first half of the 1930s. The humorists’ intermittent participation in Hollywood’s system of production roughly between 1930 and 1935, at the crucial time of studio transition to the sound, significantly entailed their direct exposure to both the flourishing years of the anarchistic comedy and to the initial period of Hollywood screwball, two film discourses that undeniably imprinted their humor and cinematic approaches.

1 In the case of Neville and Jardiel, their involvement in the prewar Spanish cinema significantly took place after their formative Hollywood experience. In 1933, Jardiel added voice-over comments to several silent shorts, which resulted in melodramatic parodies (i.e., Celuloides rancios), Neville directed several movies, among which El malvado Carabel (based on a novel by Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, one of their acknowledged humor masters) and La Señorita de Trévelez (which adapted one of Arniches’ play). Starting with 1934, Mihura, in his turn, worked for the CEA and CIFESA studios as a Spanish dialog adaptor and a dubbing supervisor of many Hollywood screwball and anarchistic comedies, and collaborated with the director Eduardo García Maroto in the production of the film parodies Una de... and with his own his brother, Jerónimo Mihura, for whom he drafted the script of Don Viudo de Rodríguez.
Furthermore, their direct experience of American movie production greatly contributed to a professionalism and a cosmopolitan sense of distinction that were hard to rival after their return to Spain, especially in the somber setting of the postwar, which otherwise marked, however, the state-supported reorganization of national cinema, as shown in the first chapter, and the humorists’ cinematic and theatrical consolidation on the autochthonous stage. Moreover, if we leave aside Mihura, the other four humorists’ prewar training in foreign movie production taught them important technical and narrative innovations during Hollywood’s transition to sound, improving their mastery of cinematic and theatrical dialog, plot and pace, increasing the efficiency of their actor selection, and giving them a better assessment of audience tastes and of marketing strategies. Their transatlantic stay also gave them the important opportunity of conversational, first-hand encounters with many paradigmatic actors and directors of the time (e.g., Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, King Vidor, Clark Gable, Mary Pickford, Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, Buster Keaton, Gloria Swanson, Lawrence Olivier, Buster Keaton, Adolphe Menjou), whose informal acquaintanceship was often facilitated by Neville’s financial ease and his mundane, aristocratic savoir-faire. Chaplin’s friendship and professional model in particular became doubly instrumental in the consolidation of their artistic choices and intellectual self-positioning.

Firstly, his fierce defense of an auteur cinema, of desired artistic autonomy (which led him to personally direct and produce many of the films he would star in) reinforced the humorists’ deep aversion to the Fordist organization of the American film industry, which frustratingly denied them the creative protagonism they dreamed of enjoying and relegated them to an alienating position of mere cogs in a huge factory-like machine, an aspect that Stuart Green also mentions (From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage 37). Mihura’s and Jardiel’s recurrently
voiced disenchantment with the postwar Spanish cinema actually echoes similar complaints, namely, their dependence on numerous other people in the movie industry (e.g., director, main stars, producer etc.) and their subsequent inability to put their original ideas into practice as they considered best, a position that is undeniably close to the romanticized belief in the demiurgic artistic creator.

Secondly, it is quite significant that, after their personal Hollywood experience, the Spanish humorists reclaimed a cinematic genealogical affiliation not with the early slapstick comedy of the Keystone studios, whose coarse vaudeville elements, loosely joined together, deprived it of a high intellectual distinction and refinement in their eyes. What they enthusiastically celebrated instead was the narratively integrated comedian comedy of the 1920s, which they saw best embodied in Chaplin’s auteur movies (but also in the films starring Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd).

This reputed “golden period” of silent cinema actually marks an important transition in the Hollywood movie industry, whose attempts of winning middle-class audiences and respectability greatly contributed to its newly chosen focus, namely, the social integration and/ or upward mobility of an initially misfit character (Krutnik 18) and the subsequent effacement of the initially unstructured, gag-based slapstick comedies, whose crude vaudeville bent appealed more to the lower-classes. The stability of his final symbolic assimilation through the social institution of marriage tends to appear as questionable and temporary, however, especially when it is contrasted to the comedian’s prior eccentricity and “performative rupture” (29). The 1920s protagonist’s eventual success, despite his apparently insurmountable drawbacks, is often brought about by a woman’s love, whose profile is often shaped through patriarchal misogynistic lenses: she often embodies “the demands of integration and responsibility for the male”, an order
to which he “anarchically” rebels as he struggles to maintain his alleged independence or seeks to bond with other equally misfit males (37). This misogynistic tendency of comedian comedy tended to be uncritically endorsed by the humorists under discussion in this chapter, who harbored similar opinions—their cultural products repeatedly make recourse to the figuration of women as conservative social forces that prevent or eventually undermine the narcissistic male protagonist’s desired utopian liberation from all authority. It is important to mention here, nevertheless, that not all comedian comedies embody this implicit gender bias in the young female characters that are associated with the male protagonist’s final social integration through marriage (a resolution that can be exemplified, in the Spanish case, by the disparate comedies Mi adorado Juan or El hombre que se quiso matar, for instance). Some comedian comedies displace a hostile, unsympathetic laughter onto a loud, repressive matriarchal figure (either a middle-aged wife or the main character’s mother-in-law), whose domestic tyranny is an obstacle to man’s frenzied search for erotic encounters, a misogynistic standpoint that also frequently appears, for example, in Mihura’s comedies, stories and caricatures.

This gender bias is often correlated with a childish male protagonist, which brings us to another characteristic of the 1920s comedian comedy that is worth underlining in this chapter, namely, the fundamentally naïve, narcissistic celebration of a kind of childlike haven of complete freedom and lack of responsibilities, a utopian vision that is set in opposition with coercive social rules and institutions that are typical of adult life. The figuration of this idealized world undeniably relied on the audiences’ sympathy, which was inseparable from a vicarious pleasure, based upon a similar fanciful desire of untrammeled plenitude and liberty. This wish-fulfilling element of the 1920s comedian comedy was accompanied, in most cases, by a repeated denunciation of the mindlessly mechanized and dehumanized social relationships under
capitalism. This disenchanted perspective undeniably resonated, in its turn, with the avant-garde primitivist critique of the “repressive” Western civilization and with a related flamboyant celebration of the irrational, the pre-social, and the playfully childlike, a cultural position that is inseparable from the contemporaneous impact of Freud’s psychoanalytical work on the unconscious.

The perceived parodic takes of the 1920s comedian comedy on the bourgeois social and moral conventions and its parallel idealization of the playful insouciance of childhood clearly captivated the Spanish avant-gardes, including Ramón Gómez de la Serna and “the other generation of 27”. These two major generic attractions were hailed for their alleged revolutionary tendency, especially in those few comedic cases when the marginality or nonconformism of the main character was not eventually resolved in favor of social integration (e.g., when the Tramp, interpreted by Chaplin, continues his wanderings and his idealized rootlessness after a last symbolic escape from repressive social authority). This kind of countercultural, bohemian celebration of individual freedom was perhaps best epitomized by the beggar Guarripato’s figure in Tono’s and Mihura’s play “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario”, apparently poorly adapted to the screen by Ignacio Iquino, who allegedly destroyed the poetic, surrealist humor of the original script by minimizing the narrative importance of Guarripato and his fierce defense of voluntary social marginalization (Lara and Rodríguez 101-02). Another idealized rejection of social integration, similarly tainted with misogyny and the condemnation of the bourgeois institution of marriage, is to be found in Mi adorado Juan, a disparate comedy that will be later

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1 Probably relying on various contemporaneous film reviews, not explicitly mentioned in the book, Lara and Rodríguez contend that Iquino’s version preserved only some scenes and dialogs that respond to the director’s predilection for “lo extravagante, lo absurdo, lo inverosímil” (101), which apparently resulted in “un maremágnum de despropósitos […] en forma de pesadillas y sueños” for the sake of plot cohesion (102). The unfortunate loss of this interesting disparate comedy in its film version prevents its detailed analysis in this chapter.
analyzed in this chapter, which is based upon Mihura’s script and was later transformed into a successful play.

Analogously lower class, liminal characters of picaresque traits are to be found not only in the 1920s comedian comedies but also in the prewar Spanish stage, particularly in Muñoz Seca’s *juguetes cómicos*. His *fresco* protagonists and inverisimilar plot developments also mock the bourgeois work ethics and the sentimental conventions of other “genteel” dramatic genres, while the distancing and the disruption caused by the comedian interpreting the *fresco* tends to be a comparable showcase for the actor’s performance. These common traits, together with Muñoz Seca’s and García Álvarez’ ebullient verbal humor, enables us to better understand why these Spanish dramatists were among the confessed theatrical antecessors of “the other generation of 27”, even if the humorists’ poetic, surrealist propensities drew them, however, more akin to the humor of the Hollywood comedian comedy and to its focus on an essentially frustrated, misfit or self-marginalized protagonist (and less to the *fresco* figure, a kind of cunning *picaro* who can always pragmatically manipulate or adjust to the environment). Be it as it may, the discursive affinities between such autochthonous prewar theater and this well-known Hollywood comedian comedy points to the humorists’ hybrid formation, enabling us to understand both the rapid popularity of the American comedic genre in prewar Spain (where it could be better acclimated through the locally existing theatrical models) and the welcoming reception of the humorists’ own plays and type of humor, inspired by these two narrative registers, of comparable protagonists and values, despite their different cultural origins.

“The other generation of 27”, linked to the comedic genre of *disparate* under discussion in this chapter, undeniably saw a more fruitful artistic potential in the “lower genres” of Hollywood cinema and in the rising entertainment industry in general, in so far as their
differential elements (i.e., both cosmopolitan and “low culture”) could be used to mock and trample most aesthetic and moral conventions associated with the respectable cultural sphere of the time. This instrumental use of the “lower genres” and of its growing market was also doubled by an interested, though less publicized, attempt of self-promotion in the cultural field of the time: the celebrated “revolutionary” break with consecrated artistic values is inseparable from a questioning of the established power structures that prevent the aspiring newcomers from a desired position in the cultural hierarchy. According to Bourdieu’s lucid analyses in Distinction or Les règles de l’art, the enthusiastic artistic endorsement of “popular” art and tastes is thus generally meant to both enlarge the domain of the aesthetically legitimate realm and to ensure, through this expansion, a coveted redefinition of the cultural field. On the other hand, the yearned artistic distance and differentiation from all other lifestyles, especially from the bourgeois and petit bourgeois typical lives, tend to lead the avant-garde artists closer to some of the preferences of the popular taste (294), which they aesthetically refurbish and use for their own self-promoting interests. Furthermore, as is particularly obvious in the aristocratic Neville’s case (whose endearment for sainete, verbenas, flamenco, and bullfights is well documented), the aesthetic appropriation of “the objects of popular taste” presupposes the introduction of a distance in respect to ordinary perception, “by displacing the interest from the ‘content’, characters, plot etc., to the form, to the specifically artistic effects” (Bourdieu Distinction 34).

Neville’s conservative public defense of sainete in the postwar is thus significantly inseparable from “refinement” (i.e., “finura”), opposed to “un tipismo barato, un casticismo trasnochado” (“Defensa del sainete”). This sophisticated take on sainete is ascribed by Neville to those (inevitably few) individual artists who can “feel”, as he does, the sainete, based on a postulated innate taste, which inevitably brings us to what Bourdieu considers a socially and
culturally classifying function of taste, a “legitimize[d]” mode of appropriation of cultural goods and of the taste for them, capable of ascribing nobility and distinction (Distinction 1-2). Furthermore, the self-interested defense of such an allegedly “innate” taste (which hides the differential role of social origin and education) is notably accompanied, in Neville’s case, by the conservative, romanticized vision of a harmonious, yet hierarchically structured social universe that is marked by a historically unchanging lower-class, the absence of middle-class, and, “hasta los tiempos nefastos que hemos atravesado [i.e., the Spanish Second Republic and the Civil War], [por] una auténtica cordialidad entre las clases elevadas y el pueblo”. His idealized and elitist comments on sainete are even better understood in the specific context of their publication, in 1944, as a reply to an angry Primer Plano editorial which heavily criticized and politicized Neville’s artistic choice of sainete for most of his postwar movies (except for La vida en un hilo, a disparate comedy that will be analyzed in this chapter). As it was mentioned earlier, what seemed suspect for the Primer Plano editorialist were the possible political connections of sainete (particularly through its irreverent humor and its “miserabilismo”) to the Second Republic, a time when this genre was associated with social protest and was used to forge a national (i.e., “authentically Spanish”) film industry. In this clearly politicized postwar context of debate, it is quite unclear to what extent Neville proclaimed his conservative, idealized vision of the lower-class people based on his own personal beliefs or on a shrewd assessment of the contemporaneous situation, which was hostile to any social demands or any crude depiction of actual social inequalities. Bearing in mind his prewar aristocratic endearment with popular spectacles (e.g., verbenas, bullfights, flamenco), his 1944 response in Primer Plano might have easily been a politically correct framing of his own elitist conceptions. Furthermore, this article also indirectly endorses his ability to come up with an “authentic” Spanish style, as significantly
opposed to other genres that he mentions, which also exist in other cultures, such as situational comedy and historical drama. The *sainete* thus also functions as a token of artistic originality that is, nevertheless, locally grounded (i.e., *castizo*), its main difference to the actual products of “popular taste” being its stylistic refinement, an idealized generic assessment that clearly prefers to disregard the fact that the aesthetically paraded “popular taste” of *sainete* has always been a product of the cultural elites, not of the romanticized lower classes themselves.

The aestheticized display of the “popular” fulfills one of its main functions, however, that of ascribing distinction to the stylizing artist in the high cultural field. His “original” and interested capitalization of lower forms, in view of a “monopoly of artistic legitimacy”, is usually doubled by a struggle to impose a peculiar (i.e., distinguished) “art of living”. This newly advertised type of life is “always a challenge thrown at the bourgeois lifestyle, which it seeks to condemn as unreal and even absurd, by a sort of practical demonstration of the emptiness of the values and powers it pursues.” (57) The aesthetic rebellion is consequently accompanied by an ethical divide, which celebrates moral transgressions from socially sanctioned patterns of conduct and, in the name of a trumpeted and dubious “total freedom” and “self-expression”, fosters what Bourdieu succinctly terms the “morality of pleasure as a duty” (367).

This embrace of hedonism and of a distinctive, “artistic” lifestyle clearly distanced the humorists from the actual lower classes, whose preferred genres they would sometimes rework in a stylized form. Instead, it drew them socially closer to the aristocracy and the haute bourgeoisie, setting them apart also from the “unrefined” taste and conduct of the lower middle-class, unsurprisingly one of the most frequent targets of satiric attack for its *cursilería* or “unfounded” pretensions of distinction. As Bourdieu observes, “[e]xplicit aesthetic choices are in fact often

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1 For an extensive treatment of Neville’s prewar and postwar hedonism and dandy pose, see Juan A. Ríos Carratalá (“Edgar Neville y la comedia de la felicidad”, *Una arrolladora simpatía: Edgar Neville. De Hollywood al Madrid de...* 273)
constituted in opposition to choices of the groups closest in social space, with whom the competition is most direct and most immediate” (Distinction 60). In her compelling study of cursilería, Noël Valis shows how this is “a mark of inferiority” and “inauthenticity”, related primarily to the lower middle-class and to its alleged lack of both social and aesthetic distinction (48), which is often connected to an unrefined provincialism that appears “imitative, in bad taste, pretentious, or cheaply sentimental” (15). Lo cursi is not only a class-based label, however, but also a gender-based one, being most often used in reference to a “bourgeois, feminine domesticity” (29) that is linked to both affectation and obsolete moral values. Furthermore, lo cursi, a word that emerges in the nineteenth century, tends to point to a certain cultural malaise in front of increasing urbanization and leveling out, to a discrepancy between appearance and reality, to a sense of ‘inadequacy and insecurity […] when advances in modernization stimulated social transformations’ and social class barriers became more and more unstable (19), leading to a lack of clear social differentiation and distinction. Moreover, the Republican attempts to implement wide-reaching social reforms and a democratization of culture unsurprisingly triggered the humorists’ visceral aversion to the perceived changes in the social and cultural hierarchies, whose remodeling was often figured as an uncouth “proletarization” of the Spanish la posguerra). For Tono’s similar attempts of a lavish, prodigal lifestyle, of bohemian elegance and distinction, see López Rubio’s recollections in “La otra generación del 27” (51-53) or as recorded by Aguirre Sirera (40-42). For Jardiel’s passion for gambling in famous casinos, see López Rubio’s memories in “La otra generación del 27” (72). For Mihura’s self-labeled bohemian, “snob” stance, see his declarations in “De teatro, lo major es no hablar” (16-19), “Mis memorias” 316, or “Conversación con Mihura” (Miguel Martínez 232, 239-40). For Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ recurrent defense of a lavish, bohemian existence, see Manuel Bayo (72). For José López Rubio’s cosmopolitan endearment with sports, cars, travels and a high society lifestyle, see José María Torrijos (“López Rubio: el remedio en la memoria” 21-22). Fernando Fernán Gómez’ already mentioned label, of “señoritos de la República”, applied, in different instances, to both Wenceslao Fernández Flórez and the younger humorists under discussion, perhaps best captures their bohemian lifestyles, whose endorsement even after the Civil War set them morally apart from the politically correct artistic and intellectual role models: “eran señoritos alegres, frívolos, divertidos. Nada religiosos […] Eran libertarios y libertinos en su modo de vivir.” (Galán La buena memoria de Fernando Fernán Gómez y Eduardo Haro Tegel, 116-17). About Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, he says: “Lo curioso es que él también era un hombre absolutamente de derechas, pero con una literatura absolutamente disolvente, de izquierdas, libertaria, antimilitarista, defensora del amor libre” (114). Fernán Gómez also adds that both Fernández Flórez and Jardiel were among those who believed that being right-wing meant “[v]ivir cómodamente en un mundo muy alegre, muy divertido” (115).
society (from the standpoint of a cosmopolitan aestheticism). After the Civil War, in a different sociopolitical context, one of the most frequent objects of condescending, witty satire in La Codorniz were the spurious pretenses of refinement of the postwar *nouveaux riches* and the provincial images of domestic *cursilería*, most frequently incarnated by shallow and pretentious female characters of self-righteous morality, a gender bias that also appeared in various *disparate* comedies (e.g., *La vida en un hilo*, *El hombre que se quiso matar*, *Sólo para hombres*).

Most prewar indictments of *lo cursi* in the humorists’ novels, plays, stories, or caricatures are linked to parodic derisions of such “genteel”, conventionalized film genres as western, horror and especially melodrama, by introducing wildly exaggerated plot developments, to the point of inverisimilitude and absurd, which humorously deflated any morally or sentimentally uplifting moments.¹ This mischievous parodic bent can also be linked to some of the humorists’ comedic experiments in the prewar Spanish cinema (e.g., Jardiel’s script for *Celuloides rancios*, Mihura’s dialogs for *La hija del penal*, his script of *Una de fieras* and of Don Viudo de Rodríguez) as well as to various postwar *disparate* comedies, based on the humorists’ earlier or contemporaneous plays or novels.² The narrative conventions that are most commonly derided are those of the melodrama, to some extent present in almost all *disparate* comedies, of the fantastic or horror genres (e.g., *Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada*, *Un marido de ida y vuelta*), of thriller (e.g., *Intriga*, *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, *Eloísa esta debajo de un almendro*, *Melocotón en

¹ Leaving aside innumerable parodic stories and caricatures of this kind in *Buen Humor*, Gutiérrez, the prewar film magazine *La Pantalla* (as well as in the later *La Ametralladora* or *La Codorniz*) and virtually all major prewar works of these humorists to a greater or lesser extent deflate melodramatic conventions primarily based on cinematic models (e.g., Neville’s *Don Clorato de Potasa*, López Rubio’s *Roque Six*, Mihura’s and Tono’s “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario”, Jardiel Poncela’s “Una noche de primavera sin sueño”, *Amor se escribe sin hache*, *Espérame en Siberia*, *vida mía*, Pero... ¿hubo alguna vez once mil virgenes? etc.).

² It is also important to mention here Jardiel’s 1935 Hollywood production, *Angelina o el honor de un brigadier* as well as his 1939 Argentinean production, *Margarita, Armando y su padre*, which similarly parody various established nineteenth-century melodramatic conventions.
almíbar, Maribel y la extraña familia, La pandilla de los once). It is interesting to note here, however, that these innovative, parodic takes on some long-standing genres seemed to have also felicitously appealed to the impatience and/or fatigue of humorous magazine readers and film and theater audiences with a perceived outdated rhetoric, which had been consolidated through a repeated exposure to unimaginative rewritings of some nineteenth- or twentieth-century narrative models, in their adventure and/or melodramatic versions. On the other hand, it can be argued that Mihura’s humorous take on the long established genre of the thriller (e.g., in the postwar disparate comedies Melocotón en almíbar or Maribel y la extraña familia) also pays a peculiar kind of tribute to a narrative form whose resourcefulness undeniably appealed to his reader and film spectator sensibility, according to his own declarations (Reyes 20). Furthermore, he was also involved in the scripting and production of several Spanish thrillers at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s (e.g., Confidencia, Vidas confusa, Siempre vuelven de madrugada, La calle sin sol, Una mujer cualquiera, El señorito Octavio, El pasado amenaza and La corona negra), a period that in Spain was also marked by a rising popularity of Agatha Christie’s detective novels and of Hollywood’s noirs and thrillers.

The humorists’ iconoclast attraction to parody undeniably made them hail the refreshing variety elements of popular spectacles (e.g., circus, music hall, the burlesque theater), the Hollywood comedian comedy of the 1920s, and the Marx Brothers’ anarchistic comedies of the 1930s, whose vaudeville aesthetics captivate them through their frenzied rhythm (including slapstick and, in general, the image of a “body out of control”) and their cynical, anarchistic take on the bourgeois values that melodrama exalts (e.g., family, marriage, decorum, work ethics,

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1 The three parodic sketches scripted by Tono (i.e., Una de monstrous, Una de indios and Una de pandereta) are included in the comedy titled Tres eran tres, directed by Eduardo García Maroto, which departs from the premise that these three Spanish productions have to defend themselves from angry accusations of plagiarism (brought by a foreign film production company in front of an international court).
property etc.). The Marx Brothers’ decisive comic influence, extensively analyzed by Stuart Green in his book, *From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage* (153-58), is perhaps most clearly manifest at the verbal level, where communication is absurdly disrupted by incongruous replies, usually fast and concise, as is the paradigmatic case of many dialogs in Tono’s and Mihura’s play, “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario”. Its *disparate* characteristics must have benefited from Tono’s Hollywood direct exposure to this genre and perhaps even more by Mihura’s prior experience as a translator and Spanish dialog adapter of *A Night at The Opera* (and of the anarchistic comedy *Diplomaniacs*, of similar tone). The flouted logic and reason that stamp most conversations from the 1930s anarchistic comedies must have undeniably built upon a favorite vanguard strain (e.g., of Surrealist bent) that had already shaped the humorists’ stories, novels, plays and caricatures since the late 1920s.

What should be added to Green’s useful review of common comedic elements is an observation regarding the unmistakable misogynistic tendency, in our opinion, that informs the dizzying associations, vague referents, and the recurrent samples of twisted logic that, as Green judiciously notices (162), are placed in women’s mouths in various comedies and novels written especially by Jardiel (e.g., *Un marido de ida y vuelta*, *Tú y yo somos tres*, *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, *Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada*). It can thus be argue that, whether they are related to the vaudeville heritage of the anarchistic comedy, of Hollywood screwball, or of the very prewar Spanish stage (in its turn influenced by Hollywood cinema), all these bewildering female remarks or vague words and referents are quite maliciously used in the humorists’ work

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1 Stuart Green also mentions the noteworthy presence of the comic duo made up by Fermín and Leoncio (in the play “Eloísa está debajo de un almendro”) or by “El tío del Gabán” and Castelar (in “Los ladrones somos gente honrada”), which remind the Chico and Harpo pair on screen, as “amiable rogues who participate in the non-romance storyline on which the successful conclusion of the romance storyline depends.” (157-58) Like Harpo, Castelar relies on non-verbal communication, as his impeded speech (when frightened or excited) requires an “interpreter” (i.e., “El tío”, whose role resembles Chico’s) to articulate what he wants to say.
and, as we shall see, in the disparate comedies to which they are connected. The satiric yet vaguely disquieting positioning of the comedic female character in a temporary position of superiority (whether in words or action) over a weak, easily confounded male, usually concluded, in the vaudeville tradition, with the pedagogic disciplining and containment of the transgressive woman, whose eventual submission meant a channeling of her disruptive energies within the domestic sphere (i.e., as a wife and mother). This distressing depiction of the “wild woman” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was, in its turn, linked to a more widespread fear of “un restrained matriarchal power, domestic disorder, and sexual inversion” (Jenkins What Made Pistachios Nuts? 248-50). This change in the usual film balance of power can also explain the concomitant presence of effeminate men, comic in so far as they are unable to restrain this “new woman”, who, as Henry Jenkins perceptively remarks, was very distanced from the Victorian ideal of “the angel of the hearth”.

The vaudeville genres, with their final restoration of male authority, undeniably participated in the contemporaneous debates about gender roles, whose actual social redefinition meant an increasing power for women and a subsequent masculine anxiety and desire for self-assertion and female submission. It is not the place here to once again dwell upon the ambivalent educational role of such vaudeville tradition in respect to gender roles—suffice it to mention that it can be nuanced in between two opposing poles, one conservative and patriarchal, and another one subtly reformist and progressive. On the one hand, the portrayal of female deviance from socially sanctioned models of gender behavior often served the authoritarian purpose of further reinforcing “the normality and desirability of ideals of feminine domesticity” (249), narratively and ideologically justifying the final exercise of male discipline. On the other hand, these irrefutable misogynist purposes of the burlesque could not prevent an undeniable emancipating
effect of such “inverted” depictions, broadening women’s behavioral alternatives in respect to
traditional gender roles—even the liberating spectacle of women as occasional subjects (not
objects) of the comic discourse entailed a shattering of various entrenched misconceptions (e.g.,
wit as almost genetically male, women as possessors of a different, if any, sense of humor,
related to their “sensitive” and “nurturing” side etc.). Last but not least, it should be remarked
that the vexing vaudeville image of the laughing woman, a threat to male authority and dignity,
was significantly different from the (sexist) figure of the dumb, giggling female that was so
conspicuous in much of the American and Spanish cinema of the 1950s, as we shall later see in
more detail, upon examining the humorists’ attitude in front of this cultural trend.

Their ambivalence in respect to the variety core of the Hollywood comedies of the 1920s
and 1930s is especially interesting when contrasted to their clear preference for more
sophisticated, “artful” approaches, exemplified by what they considered auteur movies (i.e.,
starring the well-known comedians Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, or the Marx Brothers).¹ These
artistic role models are commended not only for their derisive attitude to socially sanctioned
customs, but also for their intellectual, metaphorical associations, which appear in the visual gags
displayed in these comedies. These gags are interpreted as a sample of the poetic “logical
absurd”, which the humorists recurrently championed not only artistically (i.e., as the “new
humor” of the age, imprinted by Surrealism and other avant-garde movements), but also as the
only legitimate Weltanschauung in a chaotic, disenchanted, post-First World War setting.

Before embarking upon a necessary survey of this heralded “new humor”, it is important
to mention, however, that the concept of a “new humor” was not an isolated Spanish invention of

¹ The anarchistic comedies of the 1930s (as was the case of most 1920s comedies starring Keaton and Lloyd),
including those featuring the Marx Brothers, can hardly be considered auteur movies, as the humorists and many
critics romantically perceived them, but, as Henry Jenkins shows, a standard Hollywood screen production, based on
a Fordist division of labor and indebted to the studio’s shrewd economic interest in the vaudeville aesthetic and the
the 1920s, even if its Spanish usage is differently employed than in the Anglo-American world around the same time. As Henry Jenkins shows in his study on the anarchistic comedy of the early 1930s (What Made Pistachios Nuts? 26-44), the latter kind of “new humor” was strongly associated with the rising entertainment industry (e.g., revue and vaudeville spectacles, slapstick comedies etc.) and the humorous mass-market publications of the early twentieth century, whose economic interests made them advance pleasure and immediate responses, evident in the uncontrolled, outward display of laughter, which became both a desirable goal and a measure of the success of such humor. This lucrative appeal to “basic visceral responses” (33) was in practice leveling all classes due to its intense stimulation, but it especially attracted the new urban masses of the United States, as it was especially fitted to their rapid pace of living and their subsequent quest of rapidly gratifying amusements. This essentially democratizing form of humor resonated not only with folk and immigrant traditions but also with various earlier strains of humor, cruder and more vulgar, which, although rejected by “refined” critics and audiences, had existed before as “restricted to the masculine culture of the saloons and the oral discourse of the ghetto” (38). The industrialization of entertainment, the increased leisure time, and the expanded family budgets in the first decades of the twentieth century gave national prominence to these converging humorous traditions, commonly labeled as “new humor”. At the same time, the new entertainment industry also increasingly targeted the middle class, women and children in order to expand its audiences and thus its financial returns. The conquest of new markets for the “new humor” was a particularly difficult endeavor, however, as it faced powerful middle-class anxieties about the loss of bodily control, equated to an even more feared loss of social control, an uneasiness that seems to have similarly pressed upon most conservative Spanish film
censors and reviewers after the Civil War, judging by their harsh indictments of slapstick in the case of both screwball and disparate comedies.

The “new humor” not only enormously appealed to the lower classes, but it also relied on unmediated and irresistible instinctual responses (e.g., triggered by the crude shocks of physical slapstick) that seemed to blur taste categories and social class distinctions. The tensions that underlay the dissemination and reception of the “new humor” are thus related to the early twentieth-century anxieties about industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and unionization, which, together with the heated issues of women’s suffrage and the inescapable generational conflicts of the time, contributed to the prevalent discourse of “social decay” and “immorality”.

These conservative responses to the ongoing social and cultural transformations unsurprisingly attacked the playful “new humor”, seen as empty, excessive, and anarchistic from the lofty standpoint of “good taste” and a “restrained” or “refined” laughter (What Made Pistachios Nuts? 26-28). This latter, “civilized” form of humor was based on the aesthetically and philosophically endorsed ability to perceive comic incongruence, which was a mark of social distinction and of a superior cultural capital. Early twentieth century actually witnessed many social and cultural debates about “the appropriate limits and proper functions of popular humor” and laughter—what tended to be primarily opposed in these polemics were the “gross”, “excessive” “new humor”, on the one hand, and, on the other, the old Victorian conception of humor, seen as socially edifying, more grave and serious, “cultivated” and thoughtful (26-28). The “refined” forms of humor were praised for their subtlety and restraint as well as for their distance or cultural filter set between the individual and the comic stimuli. It is useful to remember here again that the introduction of a more or less explicit distance, which was part of a socially and culturally hierarchical attitude of distinction, inevitably subtends the avant-garde
championing of the “popular” as well, even if, on the other hand, it may seem opposed to its celebration of intense emotions and of anti-bourgeois values and forms of entertainment.

In the case of the contemporaneous British and American realm of “high culture”, its disdain for public amusements and for their reliance upon “cruelty, brute emotions and unrestrained passions” was paralleled by an understandable endorsement of realist comedy, based on situational humor, sentimentality, and moral concerns (30). This elitist condemnation of “new humor”, inseparable from a defense of class boundaries and of (naturalized) economic and social inequalities, became both an obstacle and an incentive for the increasing respectability of this popular entertainment. Hollywood in particular sought to attract a widely diversified audience in terms of class, gender, and age, so it dealt with “diverse and often contradictory conceptions of what constituted good taste and appropriate entertainment.” (21) In the case of the late 1920s comedian comedies (featuring the well-known Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd etc.) or of the earlier 1930s anarchistic comedies associated especially with the Marx Brothers, the American film industry took over various popular vaudeville elements that, although highly conventional in those original settings, undeniably appeared as unconventional and disruptive in respect to both the recently established norms of classical Hollywood cinema and the bourgeois values and morality with which this classical cinema was associated. It is also true that those vaudeville-based forms of the American motion pictures, which were initially marginal, were eventually absorbed in the dominant aesthetic options, being later differentially deployed in the commercial forms of entertainment in respect to its defamiliarizing uses by the avant-garde.

Any translation of formal practices from one system to another inevitably entails a resistance or reinforcement of their initial social connotations (e.g., related to taste and propriety), a reception attitude that varies according to the dominant conceptions in different
sociocultural communities. It is interesting to see how, in the case of the 1920s and 1930s Spain and of the humorists we focus on in this chapter, the concept of “new humor” was differently inflected, as it was associated with an additional sense of distinction, set against not only the intellectually unmediated enjoyment of the new, popular forms of entertainment (e.g., the French revue, the narratively loose Hollywood slapstick comedy), but also, or even more, against the older, respectable kinds of humor. These aged, autochthonous comic forms were associated with the domesticated, middle-class forms of nineteenth-century *altas comedias*, with the “festive” humor of mild sociopolitical satires in various comic magazines (e.g., *El Madrid Cómico, Gedeón, El Mentidero*), or with the relatively tamed and gentrified one-hour plays of *género chico* discussed in the first chapter. This type of humor, rooted in the nineteenth century, was perceived as anachronistic and usually *cursi* or “chabacano” (two words that implicitly involve an assertive aesthetic self-positioning, as we have already seen), and, as such, it was included in the cultural past that was condescendingly dismissed. Particularly noteworthy here is Jardiel’s play, “Eloísa está debajo de un almendro”, whose sarcastic prologue takes place in a modest cinema theater (i.e., *cine de barrio*), where the *botones* unsuccessfully attempts to sell candies and pralines to a lower-class audience who enjoys *sainetes* and, as such, only consumes peanuts and seeds, a culinary taste that is disparagingly seen as consistent to the low-culture status of the film genre they prefer. Condescending allusions are even made in respect to the loud chomping sounds of such lower-class snacks, which would preclude a predominantly silent (and hence aesthetically respectful and appropriate) setting for a different, more “refined”, film viewing. Furthermore, as we have already seen, parodies of ossified genres (i.e., melodrama, *sainete*, or folkloric musicals) are quite recurrent in the humorists’ plays, novels, caricatures or magazine articles (e.g., Tono’s prewar and postwar parodic recipes of successful *sainetes*, following the
Alvarez Quintero Brothers’ style) as well as in the disparate comedies that are associated with their work, as evident in Jardiel’s recurrent parodies of melodrama, in Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ dark anti-melodramatic touches in *El malvado Carabel* and *El hombre que se quiso matar*, in Neville’s merciless satire in *La vida en un hilo* (as the two provincial bourgeois women confess having been deeply moved by a melodrama focused on two orphans), or in Mihura’s caustic take on the folkloric female singer in the dialogs he introduced to ¡Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall!.

At the same time, as we have already seen, these new entertainment genres were alluringly associated with an urban modernity and an insouciant irreverence towards the most established institutions of the bourgeois society, yet their reliance upon an immediate instinctual release through laughter was ambivalently approached by the humorists under discussion. It is thus noteworthy that what they preferred was, on the one hand, a distant ironical perspective, embodied in a kind of melancholy smile instead of laughter, and, on the other, the most narratively integrated comedies of the already mentioned stars of the mid-1920s, which were embraced through the filters of contemporaneous Surrealist and vitalist understandings of humor and art, namely, through such concepts as fantasy, intuition, playfulness, logically incongruent associations etc.

Their humorous conception is actually an amalgamated outcome of widely diverse intellectual and artistic influences that were prominent at that time, including the Freudian psychoanalytical work on the subconscious (with its deconstruction of cherished social and moral conventions), his seminal work on jokes and their relation to inhibitions, and his formulation of humor as an “an economy in expenditure upon feeling”, which consolidated their uncomfortable standing in respect to the expression of emotions. Most of these vanguard
influences shaped these humorists through Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s indelible and repeatedly acknowledged formative imprint, especially through his famous Pombo tertulias, through which they came into contact with some of the most important artistic and intellectual debates of the age. Especially important to mention is the young humorists’ exposure, through Ramón, to some foreign conceptualizations and forms of humor that were developing at that time (e.g., Luigi Pirandello’s umorismo) and to the French or Italian avant-garde movements, especially to Surrealism and Futurism. Of particular relevance here is André Bréton’s “Surrealist Manifesto”, with its exalted generational rejection of existing aesthetic and moral norms, its celebration of dreams, psychic automatism, the marvelous, the unusual, the extravagant, and of an idealized fresh, carefree childlike perspective (which was an obviously nostalgic cultural construction).

The cultural space of the café, which is nostalgically depicted in the disparate comedy Mi adorado Juan, was also essential, not only as a formative space of cultural circulation, inextricable from the concept of early twentieth-century tertulias (where the latest artistic and even sociopolitical issues were tackled), but also as a unconventional setting of actual literary production—Valle-Inclán, Ramón and Jardiel Poncela are perhaps among the most well-known examples of contemporaneous writers who drafted a great part of their work within the bohemian space of the café. Furthermore, it had an undeniable influence on some of the verbal characteristics of the humor we are considering, if we take into consideration Michael Rössner’s perceptive remarks, according to which the direct, face-to-face interactions, typical of the café, triggered an undeniable prioritization of improvisation, quick and witty retorts, a reliance upon various nonverbal, external elements, all meant to have the greatest possible impact upon the reader: “la necesidad de la sorpresa continua, de la serie interminable de pointes y la estructura paródica que trabaja con alusiones no sólo literarias a la actualidad. […] hacia la realidad
contemporánea que llega a aspectos humorísticos por la mezcla incongruente de esferas y elementos” (34).

Succinct descriptions of Ramón’s formative influence, especially through his Pombo tertulias, are to be found in all five humorists that are essential in the understanding of the postwar disparate comedy. They all seem to agree upon is his cultural authority in shaping their vanguard artistic tastes and their iconoclast relation with earlier realist and romantic productions, perceived as false and anachronic or, to use Neville’s words, “putrefacto”. This harsh vindictive word was very fashionable at the time and could be linked to the word “putrefacto” that Dalí and other avant-garde artists coined in order to refer to a detested, allegedly superseded cultural form, made up of the “sentimental, bourgeois, and conformist” (Ades 74).

The humorists’ genealogical self-positioning as a kind of “second vanguard generation” in relation to Ramón was perhaps best alluded in Neville’s reference to Ramón as “nuestro rompehielo admirable y admirado” (“Prólogo” 10), but especially in Jardiel Poncela’s assessment of their wider cultural circulation in respect to Ramón’s: “Lo que el público no pudo digerir entonces de Ramón, se lo dimos nosotros masticado y lo aceptó sin pestañear siquiera”

1 One cannot help wondering, actually, to what extent even the name of Ramón’s famous avant-garde work, Greguerías, not only its aphoristic style or its humorously heterogeneous juxtapositions, can be directly related to the ambience (“gregarious” par excellence) of the literary cafés of the age.
2 In “Ramón: el buque nodriza” (5), for instance, Neville qualifies his essential influence in the catalytic ambience of Pombo as the means through which “aprendimos a discernir mejor sobre los valores estéticos y literarios del pasado y del presente, […] esta confianza en lo que empieza y este desdén por lo que muere, por su artificiosidad […] Ramón nos indicó el camino y nos hizo ver por qué a esto, a lo otro y a lo de más allá se debía decir y aplaudir, y por qué era risible”. José López Rubio, in his turn, also assessed their master’s formative authority: “Este fenómeno que aturdía a este grupo de jóvenes y les dejó como si les hubiera dado un aire, llenando sus cabezas de violentos hálitos, se llamó Gómez de la Serna. […] A Ramón bastó con sugerirnos posibles senderos intransitados y cada uno tomó el que le podía server mejor para sus propósitos.” (“La otra generación del 27” 46-47) Tono stated, along similar lines, that “Ramón era un director de orquesta que estaba atento a todos nuestros movimientos […] Ramón fue siempre generoso con los que empezaban” (qd. in Torrijos, “El otro grupo del 27” 405). Mihura also values their uncontested master’s shaping prerogative as that of someone who “nos hizo ver las cosas de un modo distinto a como las veíamos anteriormente.” (“Periodismo de humor” 439)
3 In her panoramic article on the 1920s surrealist and avant-garde tendencies in painting and film, Dawn Ades mentions that this understanding of “putrefacto” belonged to Dalí and to some other Spanish artists influenced by Surrealism and Dadaism (e.g., Buñuel, García Lorca, Pepín Bello), who disdainfully embodied it in Juan Ramón Jiménez’ figure. This trumpeted iconoclasm is inextricably linked, of course, to a battle of self-legitimation against the already consecrated figures of the cultural establishment (such as Juan Ramón Jiménez).
(qtd. in López Rubio “La otra generación del 27” 47). As an inevitably “second vanguard generation”, the younger humorists depend much more on the market, both in terms of an inability to live solely on their “art” (notwithstanding Neville’s notable exception) and in the sense of a greater accessibility of their work for the larger public (i.e., unlike Ramón’s uncompromising theater, theirs often enjoyed considerable success with the wider public). The humorists’ strong ties with the rising contemporaneous mass market for entertainment (through their significant participation in various humor magazines and, later, in a theater and cinema that were popularly and commercially successful) have indeed brought them labels of “commercialism” and “evasionism”, as we have already seen, in contrast to the loftier ranking of “true”/“high art” attributed to their master, Ramón, to Juan Ramón Jiménez, or to the poets who are commonly ascribed to the “Generation of 27”.

On the other hand, as Bourdieu would say, the bohemian, hedonist lifestyle they share with the “first vanguard generation” (e.g., Ramón Gómez de la Serna) shows an acute self-

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1 They certainly capitalized better on the unprecedented boom in literacy rates and the unprecedented increase in mass consumption, which took place in Spain in the first three decades of the twentieth century. This explosion of the mass market for entertainment also meant a spectacular rise in melodrama readership for both women and the proletariat, at a time when many mass-produced popular novels in pamphlet form and on a weekly basis appeared and developed (Davies: 117-18). It is the case of El Cuento Semanal, La Novela Corta, or La novela Semanal, whose illustrations and overt narrative judgment values clearly assumed a less educated (but numerically massive) readership. The humorists’ recurrent vitriolic attacks on melodrama can thus be seen both as an attack against an enviably popular and financially lucrative mass entertainment form and as an attempt of personal artistic distinction in respect to such “unrefined” literary genre of the “uncultivated” masses.

2 Another illustrative example of this taxonomic divergence is Lázaro Carreter’s reserve in respect to López Rubio’s label of “the other generation of 27”. In his response to the latter’s 1983 inaugural discourse in front of the Spanish Royal Academy, Lázaro Carreter succinctly states an important contesting point between the two groups, which he embodies precisely in their different relation to the mass public of the time: “Tuvo una vocación pública, un deseo de instalarse y de afirmarse multitudinariamente, por los cauces de las revistas de quiosco y de los escenarios céntricos. El lema juanramoniano de la escondida senda, del destino minoritario del arte, no le sedujo […] Eso establece una diferencia cualitativa de cierta entidad entre ambos grupos, y tan difícil es que uno aceptase la fusión, como que el otro la pretendiera. Ni siquiera el género dramático, que es común […] puede comunicarlos: ningún vínculo, ni aún casual, los reúne, salvo las amistades personales.” (92) Despite these elitist reasons for differentiation, Lázaro Carreter will afterwards concede that the two groups are also united by a certain “aire de familia”, determined by common sociohistorical circumstances, in his opinion, which triggered similar bourgeois bohemian attitudes as well as a kind of elegant iconoclasm and desire of innovation, a phrasing that brings us once again to the ubiquitous issue of distinction, an essential propelling force for all these differently positioned vanguard artists.
consciousness of distinction as “taste makers”, not only through their iconoclast cultural productions but also through their “dressing audacities, the culinary fantasies, the mercenary love affairs, and the refined leisure activities” (Les règles de l’art 100). Particularly important for the purpose of this chapter, is their similar humorous attitude, seen as a kind of bemused, disenchanted, ironical distance in front of a world that seems chaotic, transient and devoid of meaning. As such, this “humorism” most probably stems, in both name and characteristics, from Pirandello’s earlier concept of umorismo, which is advanced not so much as an occasional comic relief or discharge in laughter in front of something perceived as incongruous, but as an existential standpoint that is inescapably linked to a kind of metaphysical sense of loss and meaninglessness.

In “Gravedad e importancia del humorismo”, published in Revista de Occidente in 1928, Ramón summed up his conception as “tragicomedia” (275), “ligado con lo absurdo” (271), as “[l]a actitud más cierta ante la efimeridad de la vida, [...] el deber racional más indispensable”, “la limpia desesperación de reír, que es lo que más vida adquiere la inteligencia desengañada” (272), which essentially means “devolvérselo todo al cosmos un poco disociado, macerado por la paradoja, confuso, patas arriba.” (269) This bleak existential perspective is further advertised as “antisocial” and “antipolitical” (271), which is rooted in a confessed axiological skepticism and lack of any didactic pretense. This indirect insistence on artistic autonomy (with its recurrently trumpeted contemplative distance) is a comprehensible “high culture” strategy of distinction and

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1 While evident in all humorists, the urban cosmopolitan embrace of modernity, sophistication and “youth values” (e.g., sports, fashion, cinema) before the Civil War was particularly conspicuous in Neville and Tono, whose dandy postures and lavish, bohemian lifestyles ascribed them a coveted aura of distinction within the select literary and artistic circles of prewar Madrid. This extravagant display of style was undoubtedly more difficult for Tono, whose economic capital and subsequent work necessity did not allow him recurrent excesses of prodigality, which often left him penniless until the next occasion of lavish squandering of his recently earned revenues (Aguirre Sirera 40-42).

2 The word “humorism”, used by Ramón and later by his younger disciples by all indications derives from Pirandello’s 1908 vision of umorismo. Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ understanding of humor, as evident in his 1945 inaugural discourse in front of the Spanish Royal Academy, seems to derive from Pirandello’s umorismo as well.
differentiation in a milieu increasingly marked by various attempts of political injunctions, the economic power of the market, and by “unrefined” forms of mass entertainment that advanced a spontaneous, unreflective response. Ramón’s repeated insistence on the word “contrario” (and on its synonyms “doble” and “revés”), in reference to the potential duality of all “reality” aspects and to a correlated state of metaphysical doubt, strongly recalls Pirandello’s (pre-Freudian) reworking of romantic irony in his understanding of umorismo as “the feeling of the contrary”.

In his well-known work appeared in 1908, Il umorismo [On Humor], Pirandello reviews various conceptions of humor, through which he builds up his own artistic genealogy prior to his description of umorismo, which is also a self-advertising attempt of poetics and of self-representation, which often occurs in the cases of Ramón, Fernández Flórez, Mihura, Neville, López Rubio as well and maybe less in the case of Jardiel or Tono, not so prone to a melancholy version of humor. Not satisfied with Schlegel’s concept of romantic irony, especially because of the alleged authorial detachment and superiority to the created world, Pirandello contends that “humor is more than just a puncture” of “the vain appearance of the universe” (On Humor 7) and more an ambivalent “feeling of the opposite”, which can be, for instance, the most appropriate response in front of Don Quixote’s emblematic figure: the troubling, bitter laughter that Cervantes’ protagonist triggers allegedly stems from a bitter authorial disillusionment with “reality”, a mixture of comic and tragic, and is inextricable from pity, sorrow, and admiration for Don Quijote’s heroic attempts towards justice, despite his ridicule. The humorist (like Cervantes, for example, in Pirandello’s artistic genealogy) is portrayed as someone who compassionately and painfully tears the “masks” (i.e., mental constructions) imposed upon a meaningless “reality” and who reminds man of the “harsh reality” of his fate, that of a life that can never be rationally understood. This typically fin-de-siècle, Modernist sense of a kind of metaphysical wasteland is
unsurprisingly accompanied by the intimation of “a higher order of truth”, which is momentarily glimpsed as the humorist/creator strives to overcome his limited (sociopolitical, economic) condition through a relentless questioning of the “mystery” and “chaos” that surrounds him: it is only the (autonomous) artist, in this self-serving Modernist account, that can actually transcend, through creation, his ordinary human limitations.

Pirandello also takes over Richter’s distinction between classical (i.e., an uncompassionate, “vulgar” satire of vices) and romantic humor, exalting the latter as “a philosophical laughter mixed with pain because it stems from the comparison between the small finite world and the infinite idea, a laughter full of tolerance and sympathy.” (16) Richter’s interested genealogical distinction between these two types of humor is refashioned by Pirandello (and, through him, by Ramón, Baroja, and the humorists under discussion in this chapter) as the difference between the comic, a mere “perception of the opposite” in his conception (113), and humor, which appears as a (superior) “feeling of the contrary” that, in the artist, is inseparable from reflection and that, in the creative process, manifests itself through an association of contradictory images (112).

This distinction between comic and humor is further paralleled, in the Spanish case, by the differentiation between laughter and smile, with an obvious preference for the refinement of the latter, associated with “civilized” or “cultivated” people (with a necessary prior intellectual education), as Neville summed up his conception of humor: “la manera de entenderse entre sí las personas civilizadas. [...] la manera de ser de un individuo con una educación y un espíritu.

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1 In his 1919 work, La caverna del humorismo, another acknowledged influence on the humorists under discussion here, Baroja also considers humor as a kind of bittersweet mixture of tragic and comic (57), a distanced philosophical perspective that, unlike the disdained satirical-moral comic, invites to reflection, not to identification (105-06). This humor is allegedly rooted in imagination and melancholia (224), the latter most probably understood in a similar sense of metaphysical loss and uncertainty, not deprived, in his case, of Schopenhauerian touches. A review of all contemporaneous writers and artists who tried to assert their cultural productions using similar discursive strategies (rooted in analogous reactions to their particular sociocultural position) is not only beyond the limited scope of this chapter and thesis but also impossible to thoroughly complete.
dentro del canon que acabamos de describir. […] las gentes aprenden a reír de una manera más culta [i.e., con Wenceslao Fernández Flórez y Julio Camba]. […] esta otra manera elegante de reírse” (“Sobre el humorismo” 739-44). The educated smile, on which all the younger humorists insisted, following Ramón’s and Fernández Flórez’ steps, is thus deemed inseparable from a contemplative, reflective distance, opposed to the facile sentimental identification of melodrama. This reviled genre is condescendingly associated especially with the women and the lower classes not only by Ramón or the humorists under discussion, but also by Baroja or Ortega y Gasset, the latter significantly one of Neville’s friends and intellectual mentors. Ramón thus asserts that women cannot be humorists because of their impossibility to maintain their contemplative distance (“Gravedad e importancia del humorismo” 275), while Baroja misogynistically claims that women cannot “sense” humor due to their fundamental reliance upon “physiology”, which leads them to an urgency of emotional identification and involvement (128). Ortega, in his turn, associates women with the ridiculed “masses” or “hombres vulgares” (“La deshumanización del arte” 48), who are deemed intellectually inferior for their propensity towards sentimental intervention, hence for their inability to have a relationship of contemplative distance towards the works of art. This misogynist sense of artistic and intellectual distinction is fully embraced especially by Mihura and Jardiel, but is to some extent shared by Fernández Flórez, Neville, López Rubio and Tono as well, whose cynical takes on melodramas are often paralleled by caustic portrayals of culturally unrefined women (e.g., “señoritas cursi”, narrow-minded, tyrannical wives or mothers-in-law, excessively materialist fiancées or wives), who have an unmediated and unproblematic relationship with the quotidian and misunderstand their insecure, awkward, but usually intellectually superior male partner.
The portrayal of women as deprived of intellectual distinction is misogynistically but unsurprisingly paired with *cursilería*, an association that inevitably betrays a “stylized fear of sentiment”, which Noël Valis cogently analyzed in her discussion of Modernism and its relations with *cursilería* (216). On the other hand, all these Spanish humorists, clearly influenced by Ramón and Pirandello, repeatedly insist on the necessity of tenderness and humane understanding as inseparable from “authentic” humor, an emphasis that surfaces especially in Neville’s, Mihura’s and Fernández Flórez’ postwar declarations and which explains, to a great extent, the subdued melodramatic tones in several disparate comedies that are related to their plays or novels. This paradoxical coexistence of a cultivated reticence in front of any blatant emotional display, on the one hand, and, on the other, a kind of implosive, bitter tenderness that precludes Manichaean moralizing divisions, can be linked to what Noël Valis terms “modernist *cursilería*”, a kind of anachronistic romanticism linked to the idea of lost authenticity and to a nostalgic relation to a bygone past that is nonetheless felt both insufficient and outdated (224-26). The humorists thus repeatedly and programmatically condemn the direct emotional identification and the typical sentimental education of melodramas from the condescending standpoint of a cultivated intellectual distance (that is inextricable from a sense of distinction), yet their literary and cinematic productions are nevertheless permeated by a metaphysical malaise in front of an irretrievably lost world of meaning and of significant emotional connections. The force of their bitter satire, with which they tend to misogynistically portray their female characters (as intellectually inferior, frivolously self-centered, and/ or domineering), should thus also be measured against their deep sense of disillusionment with romance and even more with the contemporaneous institutions of marriage and family—almost never do we come across a romantic relationship between two similarly educated and intelligent persons. Under
such unpropitious circumstances, the cynical consideration of romance primarily relies on its perceived inability to provide a kind of last emotional respite from an alienating world. Their playful humor, which often seeks to defamiliarize social, cultural, and moral conventions, is therefore indeed “la sonrisa de una desilusión” (Fernández Flórez “El humor en la literatura española” 10), inseparable from skeptical bitterness and melancholia, an existential and artistic position that becomes even more conspicuous within the oppressive postwar quotidian that constitutes the background of the disparate comedies that will be analyzed in what follows.

**Disparate(s) in an oppressive regime: Humorous defamiliarization and skeptical audiences**

One of the most stubbornly entrenched leftist interpretations of screwball comedies and of most disparate plays and films, especially of those produced during the initial postwar period (i.e., until roughly 1946), is that they are all deprived of any authentic aesthetic and political value, being manifestations of a “light”, allegedly “escapist” humor that was politically sanctioned (or even shrewdly promoted) by Franco’s authoritarian regime.¹ This simplistic judgment that became institutionalized in the 1970s actually contends, in its most generous assessments, that this kind of socially and politically “uncommitted” humor was otherwise the only possible one in those bleak autarkic circumstances, where a kind of omnipotent censorship would have completely determined all aesthetic choices publicly available. It would be redundant to reiterate here the already mentioned counter-arguments to this persistent monolithic image, as these two chapters have expounded on how this traditional leftist indictment of a whole

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¹ The otherwise culturally consecrated “golden age” of La Codorniz also refers to the period between 1941 and roughly 1946, related to Mihura’s and Tono’s stylistical imprint—even if Mihura resigned from his managerial position in 1944 in favor of Álvaro de Laiglesia, his defining influence was still conspicuous until around 1946, when a more overt social and political critique permeated the humor of this magazine.
array of postwar humor is at best oblivious, on the one hand, of the aesthetic complexity and politicizing potential of this humor, and, on the other, of the meager margins of freedom that still existed in a society that, although authoritarian and plagued by censorship, was by not means monolithic. What needs to be added here is that this traditional leftist condescension and/ or indictment of a seemingly “evasionist” humor is to a large degree indebted to the unavowed belief in the existence of a morally and politically “decorous” genre to treat certain topics within a specific sociocultural context, which ensures the verisimilitude (and corresponding cultural canonization) of that particular discursive type. The “decorous” generic frame that is implicitly (and retrospectively) advanced by these detractors of a despised “escapism” seems to be inextricably linked to a realist aesthetics and a politically committed stance, a conjunction that is best embodied by Neorealism in the realm of cinema and a loosely understood social realism in the sphere of literature, two genres that flourished, however, only after 1946. This year is otherwise a very important landmark, as it roughly marks the end not only of the Spanish screwball cycle but also, for some critics (e.g., González-Grano de Oro, Alás-Brun, Green), of the “golden age” of La Codorniz and of a type of theatrical and film comedy (which are included under the larger group of disparate) whose humor is clearly related to that of La Codorniz.

The political, aesthetic and moral institutionalization of a particular generic treatment (i.e., a politically committed realism in this case) is, nonetheless, not only a matter of reception

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1 As it was already mentioned in the Introduction of the thesis, this observation relies on Germán Labrador’s discussion of “decorum” as a moral, aesthetic and political category that sanctions or invalidates the relation between a certain genre and a particular narrative material (“Productos genéricos” TS).

2 Unsurprisingly, some of the theatrical authors that José Monleón commends in the 1970s, for instance, are Antonio Buero Vallejo and Alfonso Sastre or the prewar regenerationist Arniches, while most leftist film critics of the 1970s (whose hermeneutics was later institutionalized in the academia) accuse the alleged comic evasion of the 1940s while they extol Bardem’s Neorealist melodramas (i.e., Muerte de un ciclista, Calle Mayor) or the acclaimed New Spanish Cinema of the 1960s. Both historiographic perspectives tend to sanction a realist aesthetical canon for the postwar Spanish literature and cinema, a realism that is necessarily linked to an oppositional (i.e., leftist) politics. This peculiar cultural and political standard of appreciation precludes any value from the literary or cinematic products that are connected to politically conservative and/ or formally uncommitted cultural producers, as was the case of the humorists under discussion or of most directors that adapted their narratives to the Spanish screen.
that publicly emerged with the mid-1950s crystallization of an oppositional culture. The various forms of humor displayed in the early issues of La Codorniz, in the humorists’ plays, stories and novels, as well as in their screen adaptations, were not only retrospectively “indecorous—they were also considered morally and politically “improper” for the contemporaneous conservative establishment, at the time when they first emerged on the sociocultural scene. On the other hand, their very lack of (hegemonic) “decorum” at that time was their strongest appeal to the younger generations of the immediate postwar years, as the playful, nonsensical type of humor they put forth was a welcome reminder that, as Mihura put it, “todo tiene un revés, que todas las cosas pueden ser de otra manera” (Mis memorias 305). It is very easy to downplay this defamiliarizing effect from the standpoint of a later, more permissive sociopolitical ambience, which made the earlier type of humor appear both outdated and politically tame, that is, “evasionist”. This hasty assessment ignored not only the increased politicized value of this apparently benign humor in a harsh authoritarian context but also its essential critical-epistemological function, carried out through its absurdist reframing and questioning of the linguistic, aesthetic and social conventions of the time. This gnoseological issue is inseparable from the question of what made people laugh and why at a particular time and in a particular society, an important question that is present in most contemporary revisionist studies of film comedy (e.g., Jenkins, Rowe, King, Brunovska Karnick, Olsin Lent, Musser etc.) and which was also touched upon in the first chapter.

A thorough review of the peculiar humor of the postwar disparate comedies thus inevitably leads us to La Codorniz, the main humor magazine that emerged after the Civil War (i.e., in 1941) and that soon became an unquestionable mass phenomenon. Its humor, particularly in its initial playful, nonsensical forms, decisively shaped the public’s tastes and horizon of expectations to the extent that censors, reviewers and even ordinary readers understood various
national and foreign plays and movies (even Ionescu’s or Beckett’s absurd theater) through the 
so-called category of “humor codornicesco”, as earlier shown in this chapter. On the other hand, 
the humorists under discussion grudgingly disowned this loose label when it was applied to their 
own plays, stories or screen adaptations (as was the case of “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo 
contrario”, La vida en un hilo, “El caso de la mujer asesinadita” etc.), claiming that they had 
initiated this type of vanguard humor since the 1920s, before the Civil War, cultivating it for 
many years before the emergence of La Codorniz. While these assertions claimed an important 
postwar continuity with the prewar cultural scene, the humorists’ resentful dismissal of the 
“codornicesco” tag was clearly related to their unavowed defense of a more respectable position 
in the artistic-literary field: the increasing marketability and broad social institutionalization of 
La Codorniz meant that the classifying marker “codornicesco” triggered an automatic 
devaluation of respectability in the established cultural field, whose constitutive rejection of 
fashionable and “commercial” associations did not change with the postwar political injunctions 
and the subsequent tendency towards heteronomy of the cultural sphere. Taking these 
oppositional (self-)positionings in mind, it is easier to understand why Mihura became 
exasperated with the recurrent, pejorative label of “codornicesco” ascribed to his postwar theater, 
an irritated distancing that was eventually accompanied by his managerial abandonment of the 
magazine itself in 1944. He also attempted to publicly dissociate himself from a type of humor 
whose ongoing struggle against various entrenched stereotypes ended up as a marketable, 
fashionable jargon and critical attitude, which was imitated within other contemporaneous 
publications for its tremendous success. This humor also decisively shaped an entire postwar 
younger generation, who became to talk “en codorniz” and assume a kind of general skepticism
in respect to the reigning slogans of the time, or, as Mihura euphemistically phrased it, “contra el
tópico, contra la frase hecha, contra el lugar común” (Mis memorias 300).

It is interesting to see how even José Monleón, a fierce defender of politically committed
literature, openly praised the essential (counter)educational work of La Codorniz in an article
that nonetheless indicted Mihura’s and the other humorists’ alleged “evasionist” plays for their
purposeful ambiguity, or, as he further clarifies, for their defiance of common logical and
rational rules (“La libertad de Miguel Mihura” 46-47). Monleón’s differential evaluation of the
potential politicized critique of their disparate comedies in respect to that of La Codorniz is quite
paradoxical, given his acknowledgment of the essential genealogical ties between the popular
humor of this postwar magazine (under Mihura’s leadership) and Mihura’s and Tono’s plays,
before and after the emergence of the magazine (e.g., “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario”,
“¡Viva lo imposible!”). Both comedies and humorous articles seem to be characterized by
Monleón in terms of a foundational skepticism and hermeneutic ambiguity as well as by an
unwillingness to openly critique the contemporaneous “reality” or to take clear political sides.
Whereas the humorists’ comedies are, however, further criticized for their alleged lack of
explicit political commitment, La Codorniz is openly extolled for its liberalizing and
revolutionary potential, rooted precisely in “esta especie de duda permanente que definió la
revista. Su escepticismo sistemático, la sospecha de que las palabras no eran, casi nunca, más
que reflejos condicionados por la costumbre” (53). Monleón thus indirectly endorses two
different types of humor, a politically committed realist one, which was “decorous” for the
“serious” theater, and another one, playfully nonsensical, which was sanctioned as long as it did
not go beyond the pages of a popular humor magazine. This unacknowledged notion of decorum

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1 “¡Viva lo imposible!, o El contable de estrellas” was actually written by Mihura in collaboration with Joaquín
Calvo-Sotelo.
is another example of divergent ethical, aesthetical and ideological expectations and judgments for “authentic” literature or “art” as opposed to other cultural products of mass circulation that occupy an inferior position the cultural field: a non-committed and playfully trivializing humor may be condoned and even praised when it is present in a “lowbrow” public venue but it is criticized for its inadequacy when it indirectly tries to claim an honorable position in the institutionalized cultural field.

Monleón’s accurate assessment of La Codorniz, which can also be considered valid for the humorists’ plays, stories, novels and scripts as well, shows how this kind of humor, based on a defamiliarizing, “permanent doubt”, contributed to the creation of what can be understood as an alternative public sphere that was not only inevitably politicized in that authoritarian ambience, but even seemed to trigger a paranoid hermeneutic of cultural artifacts as well. Ordinary citizens of the time appeared not only aware of the widespread action of censorship and propaganda, but they also seemed prone to believe that contemporaneous censors were capable of a much more thorough and consistent ideological cleansing, a suspicious hypothesis that inevitably ascribed hyperbolical traces of alleged “immorality” and/ or political critique to what was actually consumed in public. Most cultural products of the age, particularly comedies, and foreign (especially American) movies, tended thus to be skeptically read against the rallying cries of the hegemonic sphere and credited with even more alternative, subversive potential than their producers might have ever intended. On the one hand, most Hollywood films, particularly those featuring seductive, glamorous stars like Rita Hayworth, Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo, were considered much richer in suggestive female images and/ or verbal innuendoes than they actually were in their original versions (Gómez Sierra, Gubern Un cine para el cadalso). On the other hand, La Codorniz generated many urban legends about daring cover pages that never
actually existed or about its supposedly immoral figures, hidden within apparently innocuous first pages, already inadvertently sanctioned by prior censorship (Laiglesia 20-21, Llera, *El humor verbal y visual de La Codorniz* 134). Furthermore, especially from the mid-1950s onwards, the magazine seems to have initiated a teasing game with the existing censorship, a playful attitude not deprived of marketing reasons (Llera *El humor verbal y visual de La Codorniz* 138): using the public spaces of cafes or radio shows, the collaborators of *La Codorniz* would make reference to various (morally or politically) irreverent jokes, articles or caricatures that were actually unpublished but that were mentioned as already existing in the printed magazine. The rumors about such alleged subversive humor quickly became notorious due to lightning fast oral transmissions from mouth to mouth, whose rapid dissemination relied on paranoid politicized interpretations that are typical in oppressive regimes. Furthermore, such quickly spreading rumors even had actual institutional repercussions, triggering panicked censors’ visits to the editorial offices of *La Codorniz*, with the aim of confiscating the allegedly impudent samples of seditious humor that were already circulating in the alternative public sphere but that were not actually existing in print. The lack of any material evidence made the censors look ridiculous, however, and further increased the subversive aura of the humor magazine in the same alternative public sphere of the time.

The conspiratorial atmosphere that surrounded *La Codorniz* and its attributed humor thus had an important cohesive function in the establishment of alternative networks of communication and community-formation, which were similar and most probably overlapping with those fostered by *coplas* singing, by ritual cinema-going (Gómez Sierra, “‘Palaces of Seeds’” 95), by retelling popular film plots in a family or informal setting (Labanyi, “The Mediation of Everyday Life” 106), or by various other forms of everyday, informal sociability
that were associated with different products of popular culture. All these mutually informing discursive venues, together with the disparate plays and movies of the age, undeniably contributed to the formation of complex, interdiscursive competencies and feedback mechanisms of interpretation and appreciation—the extra-filmic humor popularized by La Codorniz, for instance, had an essential formative function, forging a horizon of expectations that facilitated the spectators’ (including the censors’) perception of the disparate comedies’ counter-cultural investment. Furthermore, a specific film and dramatic genre, such as the postwar disparate, whose evolution was roughly coterminous with various postwar types of humor developed in La Codorniz, can also offer a privileged vantage point into the contemporaneous Spanish cultural history: the humor cultivated in these different cultural realms not only responded to the changing processes in the sociocultural, economic and political areas, but also constituted an important mode of (oppositional) self-identification as well as an additional, lateral communication channel and means of solidarity between different groups. These related manifestations of humor were thus instrumental in the creation and consolidation of an alternative public sphere or of what the film and cultural critic Rick Altman names “constellated” or “genre communities” (Film/ Genre 160-61). Such communities are united by specific consumption habits, that is, by similar styles, language, conduct, and shared experiences, which can easily become even more cohesive in a totalitarian regime, where oppositional groups have a much stronger sense of self-definition (i.e., both together as a group and against other/ hegemonic groups). In the case of disparate, its various thematic and formal transformations as well as its alternative public potential can be better understood if it is examined not only against the sociopolitical and cultural background of the time, but also in conjunction with the changes in the type of humor that were manifest in the popular La Codorniz. The individual analyses of
disparate comedies will thus attempt to briefly point out the thematic and stylistic consonance between the humor of these movies and that of the famous postwar magazine, a methodological choice that is meant to sketch an overarching picture of what made people laugh and why in the first two decades after the Civil War. This enterprise should also include also a short contrastive consideration of other contemporaneous forms of humor, such as the also popular desarrollista comedies, which often constituted, besides, the unacknowledged cinematic intertext that the critical disparates shrewdly mocked. This ambitious project must begin, however, with a clarification of the employed label, disparate, and of its hybrid genealogical claims.

**Genealogy and evolution of the disparate comedies**

The identifying tag disparate has been associated with different aesthetic, moral and political connotations, some of which have been mentioned, while others will be examined in due course. This classifying term seems to be, however, the single, most recurrent label within the descriptive jargon with which the humorists themselves, the critics (i.e., especially contemporaneous theater and film reviewers), and the censors tend to refer to the humor of La Codorniz (particularly in its initial stage, under Mihura’s leadership, when almost all humorists under discussion contributed to its issues) and to Neville’s, Jardiel’s, Tono’s, López Rubio’s, Mihura’s and Fernández Flórez’s narratives, plays, scripts, articles, jokes or graphical humor. Furthermore, the cultural complexity and the genealogical weight attached to the word disparate makes it an important designation to be preferred to the apparently obvious, yet non-culturally specific English translation (e.g., nonsense), which would sever various important connections.
Montserrat Alás-Brun’s published dissertation, *De la comedia del disparate al teatro del absurdo* (1939-1946), whose main ideas she takes over in her later article, “La comedia de humor en el contexto del teatro español de posguerra”, constituted the most important catalyst for the initial consideration of the term *disparate* as the most adequate label for the peculiar type of comedic humor encountered in this analysis of a large number of postwar comedies. The corpus of the plays that she examines under the designating brand *disparate* is, nonetheless, limited to an almost institutionalized “golden age”, comprised between 1939 and 1946, and only to four playwrights (i.e., Miguel Mihura, Tono, Álvaro de Laiglesia y Joaquín Calvo Sotelo), which she judiciously links to *La Codorniz*, even she does not actually makes a parallel analysis of the kind of humor that appeared in both their theater and their magazine submissions. Her decision not to include Neville, López Rubio and Jardiel Poncela among the authors she focuses her study of theatrical *disparate* remains puzzling: while she curtly claims in a footnote that the latter’s humor is more distanced from the one employed by the four playwrights she chooses to focus on (*De la comedia del disparate al teatro del absurdo* 17), she will recurrently give ample examples of the non-included writers’ plays, whose similar humorous strategies and themes indirectly constitute the best argument in favor of their joint consideration. On some other occasions (19-20, 40-41), she passingly claims Jardiel as an antecessor of the four playwrights “comedias del disparate”. The choice of such a short temporal postwar framework, within which she situates her dramatic corpus, is questionable because of the numerous examples of later comedies (i.e., after 1946) that she discusses and that show a clear affinity with the earlier plays that she centers upon.¹

¹ Even more intriguing is her unqualified assertion that “el humor codornicesco” disappeared towards the end of the 1940s (*De la comedia del disparate al teatro del absurdo* 85), by which she most probably refers to the disintegration of the kind of humor that she identified with the initial period of *La Codorniz*. This hasty remark also seems to
It is true that the initial postwar production of the humorists under consideration will gradually acquire unequivocal marks of a kind of playful, often parodic, sociopolitical costumbrism, particularly in the case of Mihura’s later comedies. This change is also obvious in the 1950s and early 1960s screen adaptations of their work, especially of Jardiel’s and Mihura’s plays. This gradual transformation of humor towards more materialist touches is also noticeable in some other film *disparates*, produced during this later period and based, for instance, on Fernández Flórez’ novels, as was the case of *El malvado Carabel*. Furthermore, it is quite interesting to see how this sharpening and darkening of sociopolitical critique is consonant with the changes in humor that are conspicuous in *La Codorniz* after 1946, since it began to be decisively influenced by Álvaro de Laiglesia’s leadership, as we shall later see.

Despite the discrepancies in corpus, temporal frame and methodology that differentiates this analysis from Alás-Brun’s investigation, this chapter and thesis remain indebted to her persuasive and pioneering proposal of the label *disparate*, by which she seeks to counter not only the entrenched pejorative labels of earlier times (e.g., “evasionist”/ “escapist”, “frivolous”, “bourgeois”, “commercial”, “Benaventine”, “alta comedia”), but also the vague “comedia de humor” or the narrow “comedia codornicesca” that have been employed in the discussion of the humorists’ theatrical output. Furthermore, through this identifying tag, she laudably mentions (but does not analyze in detail) the affinities between these dramatic forms of postwar humor and some similar prewar manifestations of vanguard connections (both in theater and in some popular humor magazines). Moreover, Alás-Brun also seeks to highlight these playwrights’ unquestionable prominence in a bleak cultural environment, typical of the first postwar years (“La comedia de humor” 286), their kinship with Carlos Edmundo de Ory’s *postismo*, for which

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preclude any actual diachronic consideration of postwar humor, both in the pages of these humor magazines and in the theatrical production of the writers she examines.

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they provide a kind of intermediary missing link (De la comedia del disparate al teatro del absurdo 15), as well as their thematic and formal rapprochement with the 1950s “absurd theater” of Ionescu, Arrabal and Beckett, whose metaphysical radicalism they do not share, however (90).

Alás-Brun does not actually attempt a genealogical reading of the innovative term disparate that she advances, even if she mentions in a footnote some potential cultural connections with Bergamín’s use of disparate (88), which he links to the oxymoronic Baroque style of Quevedo, Gracián y Calderón. She also briefly states that “disparate cómico” was a label frequently employed in the first decades of the 20th century in order to refer to a dramatic subgenre that was close to the farce (89), as was the case of García Álvarez’ or Muñoz Seca’s plays. Last but not least, she also asserts that some theatrical critics such as García Pavón and Marqueríe employed the terms “comedia” or “farsa disparatada” as well as “teatro del disparate” in reference to Mihura’s and Tono’s “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario” (89).

The identifying tag of disparate was much more commonly employed than Alás-Brun observes, being a designation that was widely employed not only by contemporaneous film and theater reviewers or censors (sometimes alternating with a specific generic adscription followed by the qualifying term “codornicesco”), but also by the humorists themselves in reference to their different cultural products. While it is tempting to genealogically relate this label to the temporally remote Cervantine disparate, there are not enough grounds to justify such a kinship, despite Neville’s or Fernández Flórez’ occasional endorsements of Cervantes (especially through the figure of Don Quixote) as one of the fathers of “authentic humor”. It is more likely that they have appropriated Cervantes’ alleged humor through Pirandello’s foundational text on humor in 1908, which influenced all humorists under discussion through Gómez de la Serna’s reception and dissemination of Pirandello. Don Quixote did acquire a paradigmatic status of reference for
Pirandello’s *umorismo* in so far as the fictional character’s contradictory personality would be prone to trigger the lauded “feeling of the contrary” that this chapter already touched upon and that Pirandello sees as defining for humor.

Bergamín’s essay, “El disparate en la literatura española”, which Alás-Brun mentions in a footnote as a potential antecedent of the label *disparate* (88), cannot convincingly serve as a potential self-classifying designation for the humorists given that Bergamín’s arduous defense of *disparate* as a quintessentially Spanish style was written and published in 1936, at a time when they had already defined their own perspective on humor. It is, however, important to observe that Bergamin, who is occasionally included in the canonized “Generation of 1927”, similarly found his own voice through Gómez de la Serna’s Pombo tertulias. He must have actually forged his notion of *disparate* through Ramón’s peculiar understanding of this term, which must have also decisively shaped the humorists’ approach to humor. Bergamín could not have influenced the humorists’ vindication of *disparate*, but he rather participated himself in the same formative intellectual circles as the humorists under discussion, most notably in Ramón’s well-known tertulias from Pombo, which contributed to the crystallization of many cultural genealogies, including that of *disparate*. Bergamín’s defense of this “cultural handle” as a paradoxical, poetic form of Spanish thinking that is grounded on a kind of metaphysical anxiety, seems to have been influenced by Gómez de la Serna’s take on *disparate*, as illustrated in various essays the latter wrote in the 1920s, especially in “Teoría del disparate” (which prefaces his 1921 *Disparates*) and in his 1928 collection of (mostly earlier) essays, grouped under the significant title *Goya*.¹

Published in the context of Goya’s centenary celebrations, this book is an exceptionalist, romanticized account of Goya’s life and work and an inherent genealogical attempt of artistic

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¹ The notion of “cultural handle” comes from Paul Schlesinger’s article “On National Identity” (219), where he employs it to analyze such terms as “national culture” or “cultural identity” as respectable identifying tags that are interestingly used by various cultural-political projects.
affiliation, most notably through the vindication of an oxymoronic, carnivalesque style and of an absurdist dark humor: “estoy convencido de que Gota fué precursor del humorismo intencionado y suicida […] el primer humorista español, o sea dominador del contraste” (Goya 87). Ramón’s paradoxical definitions of such disparate humor (e.g., tragic and comic, tragic and earnest, real and surreal, nonsensical and rational), which he sees best embodied in Goya’s Caprichos, Proverbios and Disparate series, does not only enable him to position himself in an illustrious genealogical line, having Quevedo and Cervantes as distant forefathers and Larra as an intermediary link, but it also allows him to reposition himself and the entire Spanish avant-garde (influenced by Goya, in Gómez de la Serna’s view) in a privileged precursor stance in respect to Surrealism: not only does Goya embody a quintessentially modern, split condition, but he is also a Spanish proto-surrealist, two assertions that he further substantiates by quoting Baudelaire’s remarks about Goya’s modernity (90). As such, a foreign based movement like Surrealism, perhaps the most important single influence on the Spanish avant-garde (Soria Olmedo 22), becomes, through Goya’s reclaimed figure, an (allegedly superior) Spanish invention avant la lettre, “el suprarrealismo español, […] atisbar o acariciar lo sobrehumano” (126), which puts forth a “reality” that “le hace muecas entre burlones e inverosímiles al final de los caminos claros que descubre […] sacada de sus casillas” (127-28).

Ramón’s interested hermeneutics of Goya can be understood, however, not only in the context of the ongoing struggles of external legitimacy and national projection of the Spanish avant-garde but also in respect to the internal clashes of the various Spanish avant-garde groups, whose battles of self-assertion often employed well-known paradigmatic figures that served as artistic ancestors and exalted role models. If the celebrated “Generation of 1927” endorsed Góngora and pompously affiliated themselves with the tercentenary of his death, Gómez de la
Serna, Valle-Inclán y Buñuel seem to have found in Goya’s image, “less sterile and aestheticist”, a more palatable precedent, whose centenary of death they celebrated one year later, in 1928 (Sánchez Vidal 110—11). Ramón’s understanding of Goya also allows him to put in motion another genealogical operation, by which he transforms Goya into a Spanish precedent of Pirandello, linked to a paradoxical kind of humor, similarly connected, in its turn, to both Cervantes’ Don Quixote and Romantic irony (Goya 127, 131).

Gómez de la Serna’s genealogical reclaim of Goya was unsurprisingly concluded and published the same year he published his seminal work on humor that was already discussed, “Gravedad e importancia del humorismo”, whose main ideas are taken up again in his 1931 article, “Humorismo”, which similarly functions as a kind of artistic self-representation. In this latter essay, humor is again conceived in relation to Surrealism, being generalized as a kind of anti-realist break with conventions and traditional language, a disparate that is linked to concepts such as the grotesque, the incongruous, the absurd and the illogical. These facets of humor are, in their turn, connected to a programmatically antididactic avant-garde, unconcerned with social and political partisanship, a stance that is peculiarly striking in the Republican context of this article’s publication, a period of increasing politicization of the cultural realm. Although genealogically related to various Spanish antecedents (e.g., Quevedo, Gracián, Góngora) in an interested personal and national attempt of legitimation, this contemporaneous, Surrealist-based humor is nonetheless proudly vindicated as superior (i.e., a “superhumorismo”) for its parodic, sometimes dark, irreverence. This “indecorous” attitude is paradoxically coupled with a celebrated poetic inverisimilitude or “fantasy”, two traits of “new humor” that Mihura, Jardiel, López Rubio, and Neville will later recurrently endorse.1 Their intermittent adoption of the label

1 Wenceslao Fernández Flórez advances a similar kind of humor, yet one cannot claim that it was due to Ramón’s generational influence. It is more likely that he took the ideas of poetic tenderness and imagination from Pirandello’s
disparate in reference to their cultural production (and even to a complex existential attitude that was already touched upon) must have been greatly indebted to Ramón’s intricate understanding of this term. In Gómez de la Serna’s perception, clearly informing the younger humorists’ views, disparate appears inseparable from what he designates as “the logical absurd”, a Surrealist, oxymoronic union underlying that was often validated in conjunction to Goya’s figure by Ramón and conceived as a mixture of reason and absurd (Goya 131), ingrained in an apparently normal, commonsensical quotidian (“Teoría del disparate” 6).

In his illuminating discussion of Jardiel’s theater, Francisco García Pavón (90) also felicitously employs the identifying tag of “the logical absurd”, which succinctly describes, in our opinion, the humorists’ perspective and practice of a humor they often refer to as disparate. Furthermore, this lapidary characterization can also be productively extended to the discussion of the postwar film comedies to be analyzed under the label of disparate in this chapter. Even if García Pavón does not genealogically connect this type of humor to Gómez de la Serna’s essential reworking of disparate, he establishes an important contrast in respect to Muñoz Seca’s disparates or juguetes cómicos (also known generically as astrakán), an unquestionable theatrical antecedent, confessed on a number of occasions by Mihura, Neville, Jardiel Poncela and Tono. Whereas Muñoz Seca’s burlesque plays accumulate absurd situations, mistaken identities, and playful puns, they are not integrated into a coherent narrative structure— their function is just to generate laughter at all costs (García Pavón 90-91). On the contrary, Jardiel’s theater, for instance, employs a structural “logical absurd” by setting into motion a logical

__umorismo__, whereas the younger humorists’ reception of Pirandello was filtered through Surrealism and Gómez de la Serna’s peculiar understanding of both umorismo and Surrealism.

1 In “Teoría del disparate”, Ramón asserted that “[e]l disparate es la forma más sincera, pues, de la literatura” (5).

2 His general assessments about Muñoz Seca’s disparates cómicos are also valid for many of García Álvarez’ plays, who was considered the former’s theatrical precursor (Dougherty and Vilches de Frutos, La escena madrileña entre 1918 y 1926 36).
development of events and characters from some absurd premises (91). His formal ambitions even lead him to come up with a final rational explanation of the initial nonsensical situation, a logical resolution that tends to take place in the third act (95). The important distinction that García Pavón makes between Muñoz Seca’s and Jardiel’s theater is similar to the general basic division of early Hollywood cinema between comic and comedic forms (Neale and Krutnik), or spectacle and narrative form (Jenkins), a difference that is usually rooted in the distinction between the vaudeville and the “legitimate theater” traditions: while the comic or spectacle-bent leaning of vaudeville merely seeks the generation of laughter, often resisting narrative integration (Neale and Krutnik 2), the narrative form of comedy (such as Chaplin’s or Keaton’s comedian comedies), generally appealing to a more respectable middle-class audience, seeks verisimilitude and integration. The Spanish burlesque theater of prewar times, to which Muñoz Seca’s juguetes or disparates cómicos belong, was precisely directed to the generation of laughter, whereas Jardiel (and the other young humorists of the same generation) openly endorsed the integrated comedian comedy, whose best epitome was Chaplin’s movies. It is unnecessary to enter again into a discussion of the different degrees of social and cultural distinction that each cinematic and theatrical choice had, both in the United States and in Spain, yet it might be useful to mention the seeming confusion of these two discourses in the case of two disparate comedies of the 1940s (i.e., Los ladrones somos gente honrada and Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario), which were based on two plays that were adapted to the screen by the popular director Ignacio Iquino.

1 María José Conde Guerri, one of the most thorough investigator of Jardiel’s plays, also judiciously claims that Jardiel transforms the already existing theatrical form of disparate into “a structural category”, an operation carried out through the seemingly “inverisimilar” (yet internally logic) series of various actions, situations and characters (93).
2 The play “Los ladrones somos gente honrada” belonged to Jardiel, while “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario” was jointly written by Tono and Mihura.
As it was mentioned in the first chapter, Iquino’s 1930s and 1940s comedies tended to be heavily influenced by the vaudeville tradition, more specifically, by the autochthonous revues that took place in the popular cafés and theaters from the Paralelo Boulevard in Barcelona, and by the foreign (i.e., Hollywood-based) burlesque genres, especially by the silent slapstick comedy and the 1930s musicals. The vaudeville roots of his movies (e.g., through mistaken identities, burlesque-picaresque situations, slapstick comedian performances, inclusion of musical breaks, very subtle sexual innuendoes) often enabled him to rapidly connect with the majority public of the time, an urban proletariat without high intellectual demands (Vidal 67) and whose social origin tended to add an accused “plebeian” connotation to his movies. It is actually quite ironical that Iquino chose the burlesque cinematic register of slapstick comedies, based on loose visual gags that sought the generation of laughter, in his adaptation of two disparate plays that relied on a structural, narratively integrated “logical absurd” and that shared more comic elements with Chaplin’s or the Marx Brothers’ comedies than with their “unrefined” slapstick precedents. On the other hand, it can be argued that Iquino’s “indecorous” film translations drew the register of Los ladrones somos gente honrada and Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario closer to the burlesque discourse of Muños Seca’s disparate or juguetes cómicos rather than to the humorists’ actual reworking of the autochthonous disparate tradition, through vanguard lenses and the influence of the 1920s comedian comedy and of the 1930s anarchistic comedies. It is thus easier to understand why Iquino’s peculiar aesthetic choice of adapting the humorists’ disparate plays to the screen unleashed numerous critical indictments for their aesthetic, ethical and even political lack of “decorum”: they were explicitly related by most film reviewers to a burlesque genre that was considered not only aesthetically outdated but also ethically questionable, through its reliance on slapstick and occasionally “gross” and/ or “grotesque”
allusions, and politically subversive for its focus on lower-class, marginal characters of picaresque traits as well as for its clear aesthetic connection to a burlesque comedy that was popular under the Second Republic. Furthermore, the Surrealist elements of play and absurd of the original plays that could potentially still be discerned in Iquino’s screen adaptations remained unnoticed by virtually all film reviewers, probably also because many prewar vanguard features (e.g., Surrealist poetic twists of “reality”, Pirandello’s metatheatrical allusions, Valle-Inclán’s grotesque) had become so institutionalized on the Spanish stage since the 1920s that they had already been incorporated into the mainstream prewar theater (e.g., Benavente’s altas comedias) and even in the lowbrow burlesque genres such as Muños Seca’s juguetes cómicos (Vilches de Frutos and Dougherty 101-02). This aesthetic amalgamation unsurprisingly erased any high-culture distinction of the vanguard elements that were appropriated by the lower register, a loss of sociocultural status that was radicalized in the autarkic postwar, where such connections with the prewar vanguard movements could easily trigger, besides, political suspicions of “continuismo” and accusations of moral “degeneration”. In this difficult postwar context of hegemonic reception, Iquino’s rewriting of Los ladrones somos gente honrada and Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario through local and foreign vaudeville lenses not only clearly destructured the cohesive “logical absurd” of the initial plays but also unwillingly exposed his screen adaptations to some prewar sociocultural associations were aesthetically, politically and ethically “indecorous” after the end of the Civil War. On the other hand, it seems that these narratively unstructured burlesque features added by Iquino were precisely the ones that ensured the success of these film comedies with most autochthonous film audiences, either of lower-class origin (who were very attracted to the vaudeville discourse) or belonging to the more liberal middle-classes and especially to its younger members, who were avid readers of La Codorniz.
and were thus already familiar with the playful humor of these movies, their vaudeville adagio notwithstanding. The reception of the theatrical staging of “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario” in 1943 was more ambiguous, however, being polarized along the same lines that diverged in the appreciation of La Codorniz (Alás-Brun 78): the play not only generated enthusiastic applauses but also triggered, unlike its later screen version, many indictments and even “pateos”, as documented in Fernández Barreira’s lengthy review from Primer Plano (“El humor de La Codorniz ha llegado al teatro”). This divergent reception can probably be linked to the differential social origin of the audiences that would see the play, which was staged at the mainstream theater María Guerrero, labeled “national theater” in 1940, after the end of the Civil War: the only people who could afford to go and see a play at this theater in 1943 must have belonged to the bourgeoisie and thus to a class that, especially generationally, harbored ambivalent attitudes (i.e., in between a conservative hostility and an enthusiastic liberal celebration) towards the disparate humor of such play, conflated with that of La Codorniz at that time. On the other hand, movie-going was an unquestionable mass phenomenon in the Spanish postwar, as cinema constituted the most important entertainment venue of the age for people of all social strata, including the lower classes, who might have not appreciated or understood the vanguard elements of such humor but must have undeniably enjoyed the theatrical and cinematic vaudeville displays introduced by Iquino’s destructuring rewriting of the “logical absurd”.

While it is true that, to a greater or lesser degree of structural integration, all humorists employ some form of “logical absurd” in the disparate comedies under consideration in this chapter, the comedies imprinted by Jardiel, Tono and Mihura seem to make the most extensive use of eccentric, arbitrary and/ or inverisimilar situations and characters, which are, however,

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1 As it as mentioned earlier in this chapter, Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario was quite clearly connected to the popular humor magazine even in its advertising posters (i.e., “La Codorniz en el cine/ en la cinta”).
narratively integrated, as it is evident in movies like *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, *Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada* and its later remake, *Fantasmas en la casa*, in *Un marido de ida y vuelta*, *Tú y yo somos tres*, *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, *Habitación para tres*, *La pandilla de los once*, *Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario*, *Mi adorado Juan*, *Melocotón en almíbar*, *Maribel y la extraña familia*, *Ninette y un señor de Murcia*. The film adaptations of Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ narratives seems to lie in an intermediary position, oscillating between a more absurdist bent (e.g., *El destino se disculpa*, *Intriga*, *El sistema Pelegrín*) and a more transparent social critique (e.g., *El hombre que se quiso matar*, *El malvado Carabel*), with the latter group still making use of many “logically absurd” situations and characters. Starting with the 1950s, Mihura has also gradually resorted to a more pronounced sociopolitical costumbrism, as one can see in a comedy like *Sólo para hombres*. Neville and López Rubio, in their turn, preferred narratively integrated comedies, yet with a less absurdist vision, which led to many accusations of “poetic evasionism”, a tag that might sound consonant with their current inclusion of their comedies (i.e., *La vida en un hilo* and *La luna vale un millón*) in the part dedicated to what can be termed “the bohemian disparate” for reasons that will be discussed in due time.

The degree of narrative integration displayed by the disparate comedies under investigation in this chapter is, however, inseparable from the question of film adaptation and production, an issue without which the observations on the humorists’ cultural positioning and production would be insufficient. It should be passingly remarked here that literary adaptations constituted indeed a great majority of the movies made in the first decades of postwar Spain, for reasons of safety and popularity: censorship tended to permit more ‘transgressive’ ideas to circulate if coming from a respectable classic, whose cultural prestige was also linked to better
commercial gains for the producing company, a situation that undeniably favored the screen adaptation of the humorists under discussion, permitting their corrosive ideas to shape large cinema audiences.\(^1\) While some space will be devoted to production details and directorial discursive propensities when individual films and their respective thematic adscription are analyzed, some important issues to briefly touch upon here are the cinematic and sociocultural lenses through which the humorists’ narratives were adapted to the screen and what they represented in the context of other contemporaneous registers.

As one examines the \textit{disparate} comedies, most of which were roughly produced in the first decades after the Civil War, some movie adaptations of the 1940s (e.g., \textit{Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada}, \textit{Los ladrones somos gente honrada}, \textit{Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario}) as well as the earlier \textit{El malvado Carabel} (from 1936) appear quite “theatrical” and without an adequate “cinematic pace”, two of the most recurrent criticisms of \textit{disparate} comedies that appeared in the film reviews of the age. These indictments are particularly relevant if we consider later film versions (i.e., the 1956 \textit{Los ladrones somos gente honrada} and \textit{El malvado Carabel}, or the 1961 \textit{Fantasmas en la casa}), which were skillfully produced in the different cultural and sociopolitical context of the mid-1950s and early 1960s.\(^2\) This new ambience, marked by rapid economic modernization, international opening, and a relative relaxation of censorship, not only allowed and prompted more critical edges, which resulted in more pronounced touches of social costumbrism, but also reaped the benefits of better endowed film studios and professional movie actors and directors, who could be more attuned to the productions and technical innovations that took place outside Spain (most notably in the United States) and could thus better respond to the contemporaneous audience tastes. It is interesting to

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1 For more comments on the advantages of literary adaptations under Francoism, see Faulkner (12).
2 The 1961 remake of \textit{Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada} was called \textit{Fantasmas en la casa} and was directed by Pedro Luis Ramírez.
point out in this respect that the disparate screen adaptations that enjoyed the widest support (both in terms of audience and film reviewers) were those that successfully adopted some contemporaneous popular genres, such as screwball comedy and noir in the early 1940s, thriller starting with the late 1940s, or comedian comedy (of a peculiar kind) in the 1950s. All these different genres, to a greater or lesser degree permeated by implosive melodramatic notes, permitted a more adequate structural development of the central “logical absurd”, a narrative integration that was, on the one hand, a characteristic of the original script, play, story or novel (often under the influence of these popular film genres from the very beginning) and, on the other, a result of the movie directors’ cinematic choice of a specific aesthetic register that enjoyed popularity at the time.

The disparate comedies did not respond only to these foreign-based popular film genres, however, but also to various autochthonous cinematic trends (e.g., folkloric and desarrollista comedies, Spanish detective movies, morally uplifting melodramas, either closer to a conservative, hegemonic discourse or to the celebrated “dissident” Neorealism). These recurrent genres are often subject of a milder or harsher parody, as we shall later see, while analyzing individual comedies. Also conspicuous are a cultural dialog with other contemporaneous literary registers (e.g., tremendismo, social realism, zarzuela, sainete) and an inevitable positioning in respect to wider sociocultural phenomena of the age (e.g., the triumphalist tone of news propaganda, the escalation of the Cold War, the rising importance of soccer, the increasing consumerism, the women’s presence in the workforce and in universities, the changing image of the Civil War in the hegemonic public sphere etc.). The disparate comedies under analysis in this chapter show, however, different degrees of referentiality to contemporaneous sociopolitical and cultural issues. What could be legitimately argued is that they seem to move towards more
and more transparent allusions, a gradual transition that was, as we shall see, parallel to the changes in the type of humor employed by *La Codorniz*.

It was during the first recognizable cycle of this humor magazine, under Mihura’s leadership (i.e., until 1944) and influence (i.e., roughly until 1946), that the style of *La Codorniz* can perhaps be most explicitly related to the prewar influences of “new humor”, a continuity that was not only ensured by the participation of its main cultivators (e.g., Mihura, Tono, López Rubio, Neville, Jardiel Poncela, Fernández Forez, Herreros, Perdiguero) but also by the very presence of jokes, stories and caricatures that had already appeared in *Gutiérrez*, for instance. Should we go beyond the constraining paradigms of “evasionism” and censorship dodging, this continuity with a prewar vanguard humor enables us to better understand Mihura’s declared intentions to promote a humor that “no se apoyará nunca en la actualidad, ni en la realidad, será un periódico lleno de fantasía, de imaginación, de grandes mentiras, sin malicia. No nos divertiremos de las desgracias ajenas. No nos burlaremos del caído ni halagaremos al que está en las alturas.” ([*Mis memorias* 305]) This programmatic rejection of a direct reference or critique of contemporaneous politics and society cannot be adequately understood if it is not connected to the humorists’ prewar disinterest in social and political clashes (which was also manifest in *Gutiérrez*, for instance) and in their general outlook on humor, which was to a large degree shaped by an elitist, vanguard claim of artistic and intellectual distinction that was posited, as we have seen, on the (self-defensive) denial of the injunctions of the political, social and economic spheres.¹ This marked avoidance of both sociopolitical commitment and of any didactic purposes, were thus paralleled by the promotion of a playful, seemingly gratuitous humor that, in Mihura’s metaphorical appraisal, was “un capricho, un lujo, una pluma de perdiz que se pone

¹ The eventual demise of *Gutiérrez* in 1934 was apparently to a great extent indebted to the increasing politicization of society under the Second Republic, which made the playful, uncommitted humor of this magazine become unappealing to larger audiences and hence financially unprofitable in the long run (López Ruiz 199-200).
uno en el sombrero; un modo de pasar el tiempo. El humor verdadero no se propone enseñar ni corregir, porque no es ésta su misión.” (Mis memorias 304) Another important link between La Codorniz and the humorists’ vanguard renovation of prewar humor is the clear epistemological weight of the comic strategies deployed in the popular postwar magazine, a focus that was undeniably implied by the same Mihura as he expressed his pedagogic skepticism and described the main purpose of the humor magazine he founded in 1941:

Lo único que pretende el humor es que, por un instante, nos salgamos de nosotros mismos, nos marchemos de puntillas a unos veinte metros y demos una vuelta a nuestro alrededor contemplándonos por un lado y por otro, por detrás y por delante, como ante los tres espejos de una sastrería y descubramos nuevos rasgos y perfiles que no nos conocíamos. El humor es verle la trampa a todo, darse cuenta de por dónde cojean las cosas; comprender que todo tiene un revés, que todas las cosas pueden ser de otra manera, sin querer por ello que dejen de ser tal como son, porque esto es pecado y pedantería. (304-05)

This critical epistemological prioritization, shared by both La Codorniz and the disparate comedies under consideration in this chapter, is arguably the most important (counter)educational value of these cultural productions, whose historical setting in the context of an authoritarian regime fostered rather than prevented an increased politicized reading of their apparently innocuous humor: the harsher the censorship and the denial of political rights, the greater the impulse to “over-interpretation” or paranoid hermeneutics, which tends to resort to a politicized allegory even in the absence of such intention on the producers’ part. The playful,
inverisimilar and/or grotesque defamiliarization of the quotidian that defined such humor was inseparable from a ludic relativization or even reversal of the advertised moral values (e.g., charity, selflessness, compassion, courage, determination, prudence, frugality, honesty, female modesty, chastity and humility etc.) on which the entire postwar Spanish society was allegedly founded: inadvertent, unconcerned doctors and barbers dismember their patients or clients (in various caricatures of La Codorniz), cannibals are immersed in small talk while cooking their victims (e.g., in Tono’s “Diálogos antropófagos”), petty thieves appear as ethically commendable in comparison to some affluent, unscrupulous middle-class characters (e.g., Los ladrones somos gente honrada), the physical maiming and subsequent exploitation of children seems an enviable lucrative option (e.g., El malvado Carabel), imminent suicide is not deterred but marketed for sensationalist and materialist purposes (e.g., El hombre que se quiso matar), hard work and study are condescendingly condemned in favor of a bohemian, socially marginal existence (e.g., ¡Viva lo imposible!), an unmarried woman can unproblematically share her hotel room with two other men, none of whom is her fiancé (e.g., Habitación para tres), a prostitute becomes an alluring candidate for marriage for a middle-class family (e.g., Maribel y la extraña familia) etc. Even deprived of any clear spatial and temporal markers, this defamiliarized world was inevitably read as an oblique reference to an oppressive, hypocrite and mean society (i.e., the so-called “España mezquina”), that is, as an ethical, social and political critique of contemporaneous Spain, as evident from the irascible movie reviews of the time. The disparate comedies thus contributed to a broadening and/or reframing of what could be publicly expressed under Franco’s authoritarian regime: their playful, often dehumanizing humor operated an essential estrangement of what was promoted in the hegemonic public sphere, effectively questioning the actual values and interests that underlay the sociopolitical hierarchy of the time.
and helping build and consolidate an alternative public sphere. These long-term corrosive politicizing and (counter)educational effects were especially noteworthy for the younger generations, whose alternative, critical language, values, and attitude were decisively modeled not only by their direct exposure to such printed or screen humor, but also indirectly, by the numerous networks of sociability and complicity (e.g., family circles, informal conversations, café gatherings etc.) where this humor was widely circulated.

It is true that the enthusiastic readers of *La Codorniz* were initially fairly limited in number—they tended to belong to the more liberal segments of the middle-classes, who, especially in the harsh 1940s, were among those few who could afford buying this humor magazine in the postwar. On the other hand, the *disparate* comedies could arguably enjoy a much wider audience spectrum due to the cultural status of cinema as primary mass entertainment in postwar Spain, in particular during the first two decades after the Civil War. It is necessary to briefly mention here that it is not easy to gauge the exact number of spectators that saw these movies, given that official box-office count was introduced in Spain relatively late, starting with 1965, which makes us rely on indirect assessment tools (e.g., occasional periodical data about how long these comedies were shown in cinema theaters, film reviews, the comedy directors’, actors, or producers’ testimonies, the humorists’ declarations etc.). It is even more difficult to ascertain the gender composition of these film audiences, an interpretive impasse that is hermeneutically complicated by the strong misogynist bent of the vast majority of these comedies and of the humor appearing in the pages of *La Codorniz*, which would seem to point that the target spectators were male, a hypothesis that contradicts, however, the existing data about the vast number of women who would regularly go to the cinema, which was a ritually ingrained in the Spanish postwar. Various testimonies about the audience of *La Codorniz* that
time (e.g., Mingote, Laiglesia, Martín Gaite, Acevedo) seem to also suggest that its readers were not gender-segregated—this humor magazine apparently even contributed to an increased intimacy and complicity between the younger postwar generations, whether men or women, beyond the hegemonically endorsed formulas of inter-gender socializing (Martín Gaite 76). This important personal evidence once again points to the alternative, (counter)educational role of this humor, which was most probably not limited to the readers of La Codorniz but could be extended to the spectators of the disparate comedies under consideration, which employed a stylistically related humor.

The marked misogynist tendency of this humor gradually acquires dark, grotesque manifestations towards the 1960s, ironically paralleling the rising presence of more transparent sociopolitical critique. Women were thus often portrayed as heartless, materialist and domineering, capable of stifling men’s individual freedom and making them resort to the most gruesome ethical betrayals, a recurrent image that virtually incarnated in women the most oppressive characteristics of the Francoist regime. The female characters are actually made to reproduce the indicted dichotomy of the post-autarkic Spanish society: on the one hand, an ascending consumerism (due to the rapid economic development sparked in the late 1950s) and, on the other, a morally conservative and politically despotic system. It is through this enforced parallelism that the tyrannical matriarchal figure (as a stifling mother, middle-aged wife or mother-in-law) and the mindless, frivolous young woman (who is only interested in consumerist values) become two paradigmatic comic representations that surface in many caricatures and stories from La Codorniz as well as in numerous disparate comedies of the late fifties and early sixties (e.g., Un marido de ida y vuelta, El malvado Carabel, Sólo para hombres, Ninette y un señor de Murcia). Similarly negative depictions of women did appear, nonetheless, even earlier,
in the 1940s (e.g., Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario, El hombre que se quiso matar, El destino se disculpa, Mi adorado Juan), even if their vilifying characterization did not carry the same weight of aggressive, dark connotations. The portrayal of woman as materialist and oppressive (coupled with frivolous or morally reactionary traits) was otherwise commonly employed in the humorists’ prewar production, being rooted both in their personal preconceptions and lifestyles, on the one hand, and, on the other, in culturally entrenched patriarchal stereotypes that denied an authentic artistic and intellectual distinction to women. Their misogynist mindsets became stronger during the Second Republic and its reformist attempts of gender equality, a radicalization that was preserved during the Civil War, as one can judge from the pages of La Ametralladora, and that continued in the postwar, as evident in both La Codorniz and the disparate comedies under analysis.

In some of Jardiel’s, Neville’s or López Rubio’s 1920s and 1930s narratives, this unfortunate gender bias gave way, however, to what the Surrealists termed “l’amour fou”, an idealized representation of woman that, while still not remarkable intellectually, was frequently objectified as a kind of postromantic muse capable of instilling an obsessional, ecstatic love that was also the best catalyst for aesthetic creativity. This aestheticized, almost religious image of love was naturally opposed to the despised bourgeois domesticity—marriage was viewed as a stifling social convention that destroyed individual freedom and creativity, a conception that became even more conspicuous in the postwar, when the triumphalist hegemonic exaltation of marriage and family, together with the official prohibition of divorce, must have exacerbated the humorists’ misogynist rejection of both marriage and of the bourgeois female types that avidly pursued it or sanctimoniously endorsed it. It is thus particularly noteworthy that, as Mihura abandoned the leadership of the magazine in the mid-1940s and the predominant type of humor
present in La Codorniz changed from an absurdist, vanguard line to clearer touches of sociopolitical critique, this evolution was symbolically represented by Mihura through a “fall from grace” paradigm, which bemoaned the transformation of an idealist, ethereal young woman (an allusion to the initial magazine, under Mihura’s leadership) into a fat, bad-tempered and pedantic wife, following her unfortunate “marriage” with Laiglesia. While Mihura often narrativized the conflict between individual and society underlying his work through the conflict between men and women (in which men tend to be the shrewd women’s eventual victims, especially through marriage “entrapment”), this allegorical choice that pejoratively portrays female change through bourgeois marriage is quite significant for the humorist’s implicit attitude towards this social institution and its detrimental effects on women, whose degradation appears almost inevitable in this framework (as in most of his cultural production). The disparate comedies actually offer strikingly few (and usually brief, insufficiently developed) images of caring and intelligent women that can be acceptable companions (e.g., in El hombre que se quiso matar, Mi adorado Juan, La vida en un hilo, Sólo para hombres), yet even in these more fortunate cases most female protagonists are not deprived of coexisting problematic traits that threaten the men’s cherished utopian freedom.

Such moderately positive female figures are exceptionally rare in La Codorniz as well. This scarcity can be connected to the magazine’s merciless derision of the social, cultural and

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1 This mock argument between Mihura and Laiglesia was published in the last two December issues of La Codorniz in 1946 and unsurprisingly silenced Mihura’s growing interest and time investment in script writing at that time, coming after his temporary distancing from the dramatic stage, due to the modest marketability of his first plays. He apparently became more and more tired of managing La Codorniz, of writing new articles and/ or drawing new caricatures on a weekly basis, which made him decide to abandon the magazine after he ensured that his wartime collaborator, Álvaro de Laiglesia, would manage the magazine after April 1944. Laiglesia, in his turn, pointed to what can be considered as the inevitable cultural aging of an initially fresh, parodic and absurdist humor by mid-1940s, a time that also symbolically marks the end of the Spanish screwball cycle and of the first trend of disparate comedies in postwar Spain (as well as Mihura’s, Tono’s and Neville’s last submissions to La Codorniz): “la fórmula de humor poético e irreal estaba ya agotada y no era periodicamente rentable. Tuve por tanto que revitalizarla con inyecciones de humor más real y vinculado con los temas del mundo en el que todos vivíamos.” (“La Codorniz” sin jaula 174)
verbal conventions of the class that constituted the most important social support of Francoism, that is, “the reactionary bourgeoisie”, whose women were considered even more conservative, oppressive and narrow-minded than their male counterparts. The radicalization of sociopolitical critique during Laiglesia’s leadership of the magazine entailed an increasing satire of the hypocrisy and unscrupulous selfishness of this class, particularly of the financial oligarchy later, who will be linked to the Francoist desarrollista policies and to the technocrats who implemented them. Furthermore, as it was mentioned before, the 1950s and the 1960s Codorniz also saw a rising protagonism of shallow, frivolous, and/or oppressive, domineering women, through whom the disciplinary discourse of the regime appears enforced and perpetuated in the realm of romance, marriage and family. The darker touches of such misogynist lenses in the late 1950s and early 1960s are perhaps also linked to the male sense of insecurity and disorientation that must have been triggered by the stronger presence of more assertive women in the university and in the workforce, a social trend that was otherwise parallel to increasing female emancipation worldwide, particularly in the United States, where it also generated various panicked patriarchal reactions.

After the end of the Second World War and through the 1960s, the Hollywood comedies, noirs and domestic melodramas often put forth a destabilizing, often bleak, view of romance, marriage and family, which, as Henry Jenkins skillfully analyzes, corresponds to the postwar “dramatic shifts in the social construction of gender” (“’The Laughingstock of the City’” 251). Already insecure about the fidelity of the wives had left behind during to war, the returning American soldiers also had to cope with an unheroic and unfulfilling professional sphere, which seemed to foster an obsession with success, giving rise to a male sense of anxiety for not being able to stand up to these social challenges. Furthermore, this frustrating subordinate role outside
the home is coupled with a perceived dwindling of male authority within the family, where women were depicted as “passive complainers and worriers, unable to change their situation through their actions, but often harsh in their judgments of men.” (251) On the other hand, women, who had an active economic role during the war, were afterwards told to focus only on the domestic realm, which inevitably led to female frustration and domestic unhappiness as well as to an overall sense of personal isolation and unfulfillment (252).

This very brief review of some significant trends in the postwar American society enables us to better contextualize the increasing number of both comic and noir portrayals of women (verging between domineering wives and predatory vamps), which parallels the proliferating images of weak, manipulated and overall ridiculous males. To some extent a cultural rewriting of the “war of the sexes” pattern (that was differentially staged in the Hollywood screwball comedies, for instance), the American postwar comedies displayed particularly aggressive clashes, especially in the 1950s comedian comedies (e.g., featuring Bob Hope, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis), which put forth exaggerated versions of “male inadequacy and incompetency”, thus transforming the formerly heroic “knight” (of war sagas and prewar and wartime melodramas and romantic comedies) into a laughable “fool” (252). Many postwar American comedies actually made recourse to parody, ironizing various narrative conventions of domestic melodramas, Westerns or romantic comedies, even if they also favored a reaffirming, conservative ending that aimed, in Jenkins’ view, to resolve the anguishing “male dread” (258). This attempt to eventually restore the lost trust in traditional masculinity and to minimize the threat of the female protagonist’s self-assertive speech and actions did not preclude, of course, the potentially empowering force of such female screen displays on the women in the audience—as in the case of screwball comedies, both American and Spanish, no conservative ending could
completely erase the emancipating (counter)educational impact of prior narrative developments, especially in a context, like the postwar Spanish one, when such empowering female images were in stark contrast to the hegemonically promoted role models for women.

In the 1950s Hollywood comedian comedies, this clear gender anxiety is narrativized through a focus on male protagonists who show a “refusal of socially constructed identity rather than an inability to achieve an identity” they never desired (Jenkins What Made Pistachios Nuts? 227). Like in the 1920s comedian comedies, this enforced social integration is achieved, once again, through the caustically depicted female figure, which embodies the reviled dominant values of society, an embodiment that is fiercely condemned in the context of a bohemian male refusal of the oppressive social institutions of the time. This kind of clash will also be particularly conspicuous in the disparate comedies grouped here under the heading of “the bohemian disparate”, which will be soon analyzed. It could actually be argued that, if the 1920s comedian comedies (best epitomized by Chaplin’s narratively integrated movies) shaped the Spanish humorists’ texts that were later adapted to the Spanish screen under the form of disparate comedies, the 1950s American models of comedian comedy influenced the mid1950s film adaptations of the humorists’ plays and of Wenceslao Fernández Florez’ novels, particularly those disparate versions starring Fernando Fernán Gómez (e.g., Un marido de ida y vuelta, Sólo para hombres, El malvado Carabel). It is important to mention here that this iconic actor and director was an enthusiastic admirer not only of the humorists under analysis or of Hollywood prewar and postwar comedian comedy, but also of the autochthonous sainete, which he reworked along critical, miserabilista lines. Starting with the late 1950s, his peculiar take on sainete can be
arguably linked to a more transparent sociopolitical critique and to a “darkening” of humor, a trend that is visible both on screen and in print (i.e., in La Codorniz).  

The postwar examples of Hollywood comedian comedy and of Spanish disparate comedy display more frenetic, unstable and self-conscious male characters, with a much more conspicuous tendency towards exaggerated masquerade and impersonation (sometimes in the visual cinematographic form of the direct address to the spectators). These stylistical propensities can be connected to such characters’ “self-conscious acknowledgement of their own construction and destabilized identities” (Jenkins and Brunovska Karnick, “Introduction: Acting Funny” 161). In the case of the 1950s American protagonists, their eccentric performance of social roles has been consistently read as a symptom of collective neurosis, a diagnostic that was undeniably triggered by the massive American popularization of Freudianism in the aftermath of the Second World War (160). This widespread dissemination also catalyzed the prominence of sex and seduction in the Hollywood cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, which often centered upon the submissive, sexualized “dumb blonde”, an object of male desire otherwise in need of man’s guidance and education (Rowe 171).

The late 1950s marked a similar depiction of gender roles in the Spanish cinema as well, a change that was coupled with an enhanced protagonism of material values (significantly voiced through the female characters), which, in Spain’s case, was facilitated by the consequential rise of desarrollismo. It is actually interesting to see how in most conservative desarrollista comedies of this period (e.g., Las muchachas de azul, Luna de verano, Los tramposos, Ya tenemos coche, Los pedigüeños, Tres de la Cruz Roja), the recurrently featured “dumb” women (whether blonde

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1 It might be useful to passingly remark here that the preference for dark comedy was not a Spanish peculiarity at that time—it was also present in Italy already with the early 1950s, under the name commedia all’italiana, as well as in the United States towards the beginning of the 1960s (Gehring The World of Comedy 50) and it remains yet to be ascertained to what extent these foreign cinematic discourses influenced the Spanish film production of the age, an issue of contention that exceeds the limited scope of this thesis.
or brunette) may be avid consumers that place high financial demands on men, but they do not generally pose a real problem to traditional gender roles. Their trivialized intellectual capacities are in a stark contrast both with the 1920s flapper protagonists and with the 1930s and 1940s screwball heroines. As for the disparate comedies, they seem to favor not this prior kind of female sophistication, but domineering or predatory women, who are not only frequently associated with materialism but also tend to revel in manipulating and humiliating a weaker, insecure and generally passive male. The most obvious narrative punishment of such (intellectually unimpressive) women’s assertiveness might be the very grotesque contours of their materialism, authoritarianism and excessive frivolous performance in a plot that becomes increasingly darker towards the 1960s (e.g., El malvado Carabel, Un marido de ida y vuelta, Ninette y un señor de Murcia).

In a postwar age when the Hollywood movie industry was impressively consolidating and expanding its worldwide markets, the constant exposure to the male and female role models that its films put forth, together with the institutionalized gender disparity of the postwar Spanish society, allow us to better qualify both the misogynist tendency of the disparate comedies under consideration and of most other contemporaneous Spanish films.\(^1\) Furthermore, the undeniable international acclaim of Hollywood cinema as well as fascination of the postwar Spanish audiences with its narrative patterns, stars and cinematographic spectacle enable us to infer the enviable shaping power that Hollywood cinema catalyzed—not only directly, though its own film productions that were successfully exported, but also indirectly, through the aesthetic and sociocultural influences that such cultural industry had on the local movie production and on the collective identities it gradually transformed. The noir, the domestic melodrama, and the 1950s

\(^1\) This issue would benefit, however, from a more comprehensive genealogical analysis, yet such an investigation exceeds the limited scope of this chapter and thesis.
comedian comedy are just some of the celebrated American exports that had an enormous sociocultural influence worldwide in the aftermath of the Second World War, contributing, besides, to the cultural aging of various narrative models that were previously flourishing in postwar Spain (e.g., screwball comedy, war and rural melodramas etc.).

The unmistakable popularity of comedy as a cinematic genre, especially in the bleak Spanish ambience after the Civil War, endowed the disparate comedies with a peculiar formative power for the postwar collective identities, a shaping impact that was greatly facilitated both by the powerful links of continuity with the prewar Spanish screen, stage and humor magazines, and by the gradual postwar consolidation of the popular La Codorniz. This (counter)educational effect depended, in its turn, on the very ability of the disparate comedies to transform their humor throughout the years in accordance with the changes of Hollywood cinema and of the consecrated La Codorniz. It is thus interesting to reflect here upon the contrast between the theatrical failure of the play “¡Viva lo imposible!” in November 1939, in the bleak aftermath of the Civil War, in respect to the commercial success of the disparate film comedy ¡Viva lo imposible! at the end of the 1950s. Whereas Mihura’s and Calvo Sotelo’s play did not have many chances of popularity with a mainly bourgeois theatrical public who had little appreciation for bohemian values at that particular historical juncture, the later screen adaptation, addressed to a much more diversified cinematic audience, could enjoy more popularity not only because of its discursive affinities with the fashionable Hollywood comedian comedy of the time but also due to its resonating abilities with a time and Spanish society when there was more and more anxiety (as evident in various dark comedies of the age) with the diminishing role of the individual,
stifled by sociopolitical and economic mechanisms, and with the moral price of social integration in a society that was still authoritarian.¹

As far as La Codorniz is concerned, it is interesting to mention that its increasing sociopolitical critique was inseparable from its ascending popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, becoming a true mass phenomenon of undeniable cultural influence in so far as the public visibility of its humor and its formative impact in the alternative public sphere are concerned. The disparate comedies under consideration did not follow a parallel development, as, with almost no exceptions, they seem to have consistently enjoyed a lot of popularity and commercial success. It is unclear if they had more widespread (counter)educational power as their critical references became more transparent, given that the strength and mode of any critique cannot be judged outside the existing margins of dissent: the apparently abstract, absurdist humor of the early 1940s disparate comedies might have had a comparatively more influential impact of defamiliarization on its spectators, in those harsh living circumstances, as the later disparate comedies on their respective audiences, who enjoyed a relative political relaxation and better economic circumstances. The latter spectators were also exposed to various critical discourses (e.g., Neorealist movies, social realism in theater and literature etc.) that might have rendered the critique of the disparate comedies of the age or of the contemporaneous La Codorniz less exceptional, if not less powerful, than in the early 1940s. It is interesting to mention here that even the regular collaborators of the later Codorniz (e.g., Mingote) asserted that the magazine under Laiglesia’s commendable leadership “fue una buena revista sin duda, pero ya no era la sorpresa, el deslumbramiento, la renovada novedad si eso se puede decir. La primera Codorniz

¹ The different producer (i.e., the “Teatro Español Universitario” group) and audience makeup of “Tres sombreros de pico” in 1952 as well as the changed sociocultural setting of that age also better explains the late theatrical success of this play by Mihura. Its playful, lyrical bohemian outlook could not find any interested theatrical producer when the play was originally written, in 1932, a not so surprising rejection considering that it was neither commercially appealing nor politically committed in the spirit of intense politicization of the cultural life at the time.
era distinta en cada número y siempre un prodigio de confección, de originalidad, de renovación constante.” (“La Codorniz”) Whereas it is unclear to what extent such statements are shaped by a nostalgic outlook that retrospectively tends to fabricate “golden ages”, it could be said that the (counter)educational impact of the humor circulated by La Codorniz and by the disparate comedies are comparable over the years due to the more or less limited margins of freedom that existed at the time. It is true, however, that in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, in a period of extensive social and political unrest, when there are barely any disparate comedies available, La Codorniz gradually loses its public and contesting vigor, becoming more and more conservative. This phenomenon, unlike what happened in the 1940s and the 1950s, distances it from the younger generations, especially from the reformist university youth, which clusters around more audacious humor magazines like El hermano lobo in the 1970s (Llera El humor verbal y visual de La Codorniz 149).

The cultural aging of this humor magazine is paralleled by the increased commercialization and coarse eroticization that takes place in the late 1960s and early 1970s film adaptations of some earlier written disparate plays or novels (e.g., Un adulterio decente, Por qué te engaña tu marido, Las panteras se comen a los ricos, La decente, Blanca por fuera y Rosa por dentro, Las siete vidas del gato). These movies, very popular with the wider public, can roughly be ascribed to a kind of burlesque destape comedy, which was loosely structured, seeking primarily to elicit audience laughter and titillation. In some cases, this generic reworking can be linked to the sociological emergence of landismo, which will not analyzed here as it exceeds the scope of this chapter and thesis. What might be interesting to mention, nevertheless, is that this double-sided phenomenon (i.e., rising commercialization and eroticization) that occurs after the end of the disparate cycle is paralleled once again by a similar contemporaneous evolution in the
pages of La Codorniz, which revels in more and more sexual imagery and in a growing number of caricatures and images of naked women. This satirical transformation of woman into a degraded sexual object not only responds to a shrewd marketing strategy (which parallels a significant loss of critical voice), but also radicalizes the strong misogynist undercurrent that always characterized the humor magazine.

The last disparate comedy is Ninette y un señor de Murcia, adapted to the screen in 1965 by Fernando Fernán Gómez, who laudably preserved Mihura’s subtle, playful touch, unlike what happened with the late 1960s and early 1970s destape versions of some of his plays. This disparate comedy is rather solitary in the 1960s scenery—the other disparate comedy that is temporally closest, La pandilla de los once, goes back to 1963, while in 1961 and 1962 emerge few other disparate comedies, which enables us to consider the first half of the 1960s as marking the end of the disparate cycle in Spain, followed by the rise of the afore-mentioned destape comedies, which responded to other audience expectations and to a different sociocultural and political ambience.

The evolution of the disparate genre throughout the years cannot be properly understood if it is not contextualized in reference to other contemporaneous foreign and autochthonous discourses, whether cinematic, literary or theatrical, a joint framework of analysis that will be further explored in the discussions of various subgenres of disparate and in the analyses of individual comedies. Their noteworthy sociocultural resonance at the time of their public dissemination could not prevent, nevertheless, a contemporaneous and posterior lack of artistic prestige, which had to do more with their rising commercial marketability and with their accused “conservative” or politically uncommitted stance, about which we have already talked several times. It is quite significant in this respect that La vida en un hilo (scripted and directed by Edgar
Neville) is the only aesthetically and politically uncontested film adaptation of the humorists’ _disparates_, which significantly did not enjoy a resounding commercial exploitation, for reasons that have greatly to do with the peculiar comedic style employed. While its vicissitudes will be examined in greater detail in the section devoted to its individual analysis, it might be useful to briefly comment here upon some of the reasons for the ambivalent contemporaneous reception of _La vida en un hilo_, as it sheds some revealing light on some other _disparate_ comedies of the 1940s as well.

Neville, as well as all other humorists under discussion, repeatedly manifested their endearment with the screwball discourse, particularly with its playful, nonsensical protagonists and dialogs. In terms of directorial affinities, they confessed their appreciation of Capra and Lubitsch, the latter being only partly related to the American screwball comedy (even in this case, to a very distinctive strand), while the former was also connected to the so-called “populist comedy”, some of whose examples can actually be conflated with the screwball comedy (e.g., _Meet John Doe_, _Mr. Deeds Goes to Town_, _Mr. Smith Goes to Washington_, _It’s a Wonderful World_, _You Can’t Take It with You_). While many directors and reviewers of _disparate_ comedies talked about a Lubitsch or Capra “touch”, it is important to mention that these directorial styles, in their turn shaped by a concrete historical period and stage of Hollywood film production, cannot only be ascribed to these two directors and to their comedies, but also to various other contemporaneous American directors (e.g., Howard Hawks, George Cukor, Gregory LaCava, Preston Sturges) whose styles are strikingly similar but whose names have not been so institutionalized in connection to screwball.

Lubitsch’ sophisticated comedies have never been very popular with large audiences in the United States or abroad (Mast 215), generating occasional misunderstandings in some less
cultivated spectators, a reception problem that also befell La vida en un hilo, which shared the much acclaimed “Lubitsch touch”. Edgar Neville optimistically chose to produce this disparate comedy from his own (considerable) financial resources, yet its box-office returns left him dissatisfied—even if this movie, as it was previously mentioned, was quite successful at the time of its screening, according to contemporaneous reviews and interviews with its director. Furthermore, the film was warmly received by critics and won institutional prizes for best story and best script from the Círculo de Escritores Cinematográficos (Green From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage 65). The aura of sophistication and of stylistical and narrative “difficulty” that surrounded Lubitsch’ comedies conferred an essential artistic distinction (hence attraction) for Neville in particular, but also, judging by their declarations, to Fernández Flórez, López Rubio, Mihura, Tono and Jardiel Poncela. Lubitsch was an essential landmark also for some 1940s film directors (e.g., José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, Rafael Gil, Jerónimo Mihura) that adapted some of the humorists’ disparate narratives, even if only Neville’s comedy La vida en un hilo puts forth a more visible stylistical resemblance with Lubitsch’ comedies.

From a technical point of view, Neville must have borrowed the ironical use of editing from Lubitsch, including what Gerald Mast termed “the art of omission”, that is, “what is not shown, what is not heard, what is not said.” (207). This witty use of camera placement and montage was, for both directors, an undeniably efficient way of dodging censorship, especially in the case of erotic innuendos. Lubitsch also seems to have taught Neville to pay close attention to objects, not in themselves but in their relationship to the people who owns or uses them, a particularly useful cinematographic lesson considering the Spanish humorist’s already

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1 Misunderstanding the contrastive function of another potential choice in the female protagonist’s past (presented under the form of a seemingly real flash-back), some spectators of La vida en un hilo (not many, but loud enough to project a sense of failure with the entire audience) were apparently perplexed and angrily protested as to how to understand Mercedes’ marriage with two different men (i.e., one real and another one under the sign of a “what if”).
entrenched predilection for a playful, caustic take on the reactionary bourgeoisie’s pretensions and conventions. What might have appealed even more to Neville’s outlook on humor and its associated sense of distinction, was, however, Lubitsch’ witty, ironical attitude towards sentimental platitudes and moral assumptions and his cynical parody on romantic passion and conflict as well as on social conventions (Mast 208), which stemmed from a cold, cerebral view on “human fallibility” (211). Thinking about La vida en un hilo in particular, it might be important to mention other mark of Lubitsch’s influence on Neville, namely, the emphasis on the characters’ tendency to want what they do not have, cannot get, or should not want as well as to have what they do not want or should not have (208), which seems structurally defining for Neville’s disparate comedy if we consider the self-questioning that Madame DuPont occasions in Mercedes and that constitutes the starting point of the movie.

The merciless satire of rural and small-town life that appear in this movie as well as in El destino se disculpa (here especially through Manolo Morán’s demagogic character) can be parodically linked, however, to Capra’s populist screwball comedies of the 1930s and early 1940s (in a post-Depression era), which put forth a somewhat anti-intellectual nostalgic celebration of traditional values of a rural or small-town community, as was displayed in films like Meet John Doe, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, or Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. It is quite ironical, nevertheless, that, in the early 1940s, Capra was hegemonically viewed as dangerously “anarchistic”, hedonist and evasionist and consequently anti-exemplary, judging by González Ruiz’ angry review from Primer Plano (“Frank Capra o la evasión”) or from the anonymous review of You Can’t Take It with You (screened in postwar Spain under the subversive title of Vive como quieras). These reviews labeled Capra a bohemian, Marxist dandy that enjoys
portraying eccentric, self-indulging individuals and families. The first chapter already elaborated upon the important formative impact of such screwball comedies, inviting to playful view of romance and to a carefree, frivolous existence, devoid of stern calls to responsibility and duty or of moralistic celebrations of traditional marriage and family, so trumpeted in autarkic Spain. What should be nuanced here is that Capra’s comedies apparently gave rise to at least two different interpretation lines: one that focused on the alleged anti-social and anti-disciplinairy tendency of his films, exalting it or indicting it, and another one that mocked the melodramatic, populist elements of his movies, as did the humorists, who otherwise greatly appreciated the playful, carefree characteristics of his comedies. It is also important to mention here that postwar directors like Jerónimo Mihura, Rafael Gil or José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, who adapted to the screen some of Jardiel Poncela’s, Fernández Flórez’ or Mihura’s disparate narratives, have confessed their use of what they defined as Capra’s attractive combination of ludic, critical humor and melodrama (the latter usually referred to as “humanidad y calor”, which were some of the most important, significantly vague, qualifiers of many disparate comedies). The melodramatic touch of his comedies usually takes place at the end, offering a satisfying romantic and moral closure, which is clothed in fantasy in his late 1940s films. This necessary suspension of disbelief was meant to counter the potential audience incredulity in populism and poetic justice in the aftermath of the Second World War and the postwar insights into the disquieting mass support for populist leaders in fascist Germany and Italy (Gehring Populism and the Capra Legacy xvii). This cynical and/ or fantasy take on populism and the traditional community and patriotic values with which it was associated in the late 1940s, not only in Capra’s comedies, but

1 These reviews labeled Capra a bohemian, Marxist dandy that enjoys portraying eccentric, self-indulging individuals and families.
2 For more details, see the 1943 Primer Plano interviews with Rafael Gil and with Jerónimo Mihura (the latter with Fernández Barreira), Gómez Tello’s 1945 laudatory review of El destino se disculpa and the 1950 interview with Jerónimo Mihura.
also in other American movies of the time (e.g., noirs and domestic melodramas), will be further radicalized in the 1950s due to the Cold War paranoia and the atomic threat. This bleak sociopolitical setting is inseparable from the rise of a dark comedic vision that seems to emphasize the absurdity and arbitrariness of modern life, leading to a frustrating existence that transforms people into “unwilling spectators” rather than participants in their own life (Gehring The World of Comedy 69), a perspective that is to a great extent shared also by many 1950s comedian comedies and their problematically misfit, self-conscious protagonists.

Whether stylistically or narratively influenced by Lubitsch’ or Capra’s comedies, the Spanish humorists under discussion and their screen adaptors displaced romance onto a secondary realm, which represents the main, structurally conspicuous, difference between the screwball and the disparate discourse, despite the numerous common elements they share. If the former is directed towards the establishment or re-establishment of the main couple, the latter shares more traits with a narratively integrated comedian comedy. Whereas comedian comedy opens with identity confusion or an anarchic individual that is frequently (and strenuously) integrated into the social life, where he needs to obey mature adult expectations, not to continually try to escape them, screwball comedy starts with more “coherent, if incomplete, identities”, working to throw them into crisis in order to make them more malleable and complementary to each other for the sake of the couple and future marriage (Jenkins and Brunovska Karnick “Introduction: Acting Funny” 166). Slapstick, fluid identities, and the heroine’s “excessive performance” in a screwball comedy are alternative strategies that gradually build an awareness of the couple’s compatibility not only as lovers but also as companions and friends, according to the new gender roles that underlie screwball and that do not preclude disciplinary inflections, particularly at the end. In comedian comedies, which not only verge on
satiric undertones but often parody other genres, the unstable identities and eccentric masquerade are the male protagonists’ prerogative and are problematic for both romantic relationships and social integration, while women misogynistically embody the conservative, disciplinary forces of the society that is rejected. Taking these aspects into consideration it is perhaps easier to understand why not screwball but comedian comedy (in its 1920s, 1930s and 1950s versions) was a defining generic framework for the humorists under analysis as well as for the film adaptors of their disparate narratives, an influence that does not exclude, as we have already seen, the fertile cinematic dialog of the disparate comedy with many other movie genres and cycles, both foreign and autochthonous.

No longer wishing to prolong this broad introduction into the actual examination of individual disparate comedies and their respective cycles, this general survey will endhere, not before clarifying that, while it was tempting to divide the studied movies chronologically, it seemed more productive to review their evolution thematically, showing how different topics evolved throughout the decades. While it was difficult to find discrete leitmotifs that would best integrate various comedies, this eventual subdivision is based both on an actually recurring theme (i.e., the bohemian disparate) and on what could be more easily considered as subgenres (i.e., the thriller disparate and the costumbrist disparate) that sometimes parody other “serious” genres. This working classification must acknowledge, however, its hermeneutic shortcomings and the fact that the borders among the three identified types of disparate are quite porous, which does not mean that there is not a dominant generic and thematic “logic” that seems to govern each set of comedies and that is liable to historical transformations.

This classification choice has enabled a construction of a historicized account of the disparate genre, investigated in conjunction with other aesthetic and sociocultural phenomena,
from which particularly important is the parallel consideration of the different types of humor that were present in *La Codorniz* during the first two postwar decades. Such joint analyses allow to better assess the epistemological and sociopolitical value of the *disparate* comedy and humor, whose recurrent deconstruction of the conventions underlying the social game (i.e., *illusio*) was essential for the sharpening of the audiences’ critical sense reframing of the lenses through which an oppressive quotidian was viewed. While this chapter has a marked preference for overarching concepts such as defamiliarization, anti-rite or reframing in relation to the *disparate* humor under consideration, it also resort to the pragmatic-hermeneutic tools that several other critics (e.g., Marta Sánchez Castro, José Antonio Llera, or Emilio de Miguel Martínez) have also employed in their analysis of the humor displayed in *La Codorniz* or in other prewar magazines and plays connected to “the other generation of 1927”. These methodological strategies derive from Bousoño’s useful notion of “break with the system” (i.e., established by reason, logic, experience, moral values, sentimental attitudes etc.), understanding by “system” a rule-based relation between two terms whose observance conventionally generates social meaning. This analytical choice is consonant, however, with the formalist notions of estrangement of the ordinary language, logic, reason, and social relations, a methodological kinship that is retraced by Bousoño himself as he observed the affinities between humor and the poetic language. Furthermore, in order to better understand the degree of defamiliarization operated by humor, it is essential to link it to intentionality, while at the same time being aware that most comic intentions are based on extra-textual or extra-cinematic factors that are not blatantly conspicuous, particularly under an authoritarian system that seeks to assert its ideological control also by means of a censorship system. The importance of intentionality points, in its turn, to the necessary complicity and collaboration of audiences, whose joint defamiliarizing and “paranoid”
hermeneutics effectively contributed to the creation and consolidation of an alternative public sphere or of a “constellated” or “genre community” (Altman, Film/ Genre 160-61). This alternative community is actually united by its specific consumption habits of humor and comedy, which shape an oppositional sense of self-definition that is a vital survival and counter-educational means in a totalitarian regime.

**The bohemian disparate: In and out the social game**

If we remember the humorists’ sociocultural positioning and elitism before and after the Civil War, it is perhaps easier to better understand their marked propensity towards a bohemian, hedonist and sometimes self-marginalized stance in respect to society and its rules. This celebration of a carefree existence, unencumbered by irritating calls to duty and responsibility, appeared even more conspicuous in the bleak postwar period, when their comedies, articles and caricatures eulogizing this lifestyle proved particularly appealing and marketable. Their postwar cultural production, so often indicted for its alleged evasionism later on, successfully provided essential coping strategies for a vast segment of population, whose exposure to this other, playful and anti-disciplinary kind of narrative enabled them to reframe their quotidian in a different way and thus to shape their subjectivities in a different manner than the one hegemonically enforced, which had an undeniable counter-educational and politicizing value in the long run. Even the humorists’ merciless derision of melodramatic convention could have an undeniable political value in so far as a conservatively resignified form of melodrama (with its Manichaean moral split and its attempt of immediate emotional allegiance) was amply used in the first postwar years from the pulpits, in the hegemonic media that employed a triumphalist, impassioned
rhetoric, and by a conspicuous array of lofty, tear-jerking war and historical epics, for instance. To introduce eccentric, arbitrary, and inverisimilar characters and situations in this stifling ambience was thus not only a welcome artistic enterprise that established an aesthetic continuity with many prewar endeavors but also a remarkable counter-educational feat, with corrosive ethical and political implications, some of which were inevitably linked to this postwar continuity.

This emancipating potential notwithstanding, it should be clarified that the positively portrayed bohemian protagonist, who seeks to dodge or even exit an oppressive and hypocritical social game, is almost always a man, as in most comedian comedies. The women’s position is either conservative and/or equally oppressive as the larger society, or, in some other cases, they stand in a more ambivalent, intermediary position. The female protagonists of some comedies (i.e., *La vida en un hilo*, *Mi adorado Juan*, ¡Viva lo imposible!) are thus torn between bohemian longings for a hedonist, carefree existence and their own strong consumerist desires or their yearning for a conventional marriage and family, associated with financial and emotional security. This noticeable dilemma tends to make them more compliant to the disciplinary discourse of society and, through their occasional final capitulation, it also has the (implicitly criticized) outcome of making their spouses more prone to (re)enter a despised and even abhorred social game, with its inevitable sense of ethical and political failure to happily and utopianly live outside society.

This biased distribution of the social pressures of integration along gender lines is particularly conspicuous in Mihura’s comedies adapted to the big screen that are included in the category of the bohemian disparate (i.e., *Mi adorado Juan*, ¡Viva lo imposible!, *Ninette y un señor de Murcia*). It seems to have been present also in the earlier and lost disparate comedy *Ni
pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario, which exalts the self-marginalized figure of the bohemian beggar Guaripato and caustically portrays the figure of Margarita as a capricious, frivolous, brainless young woman who urges Abelardo first to get rid of his fortune (in order to suit her momentary romantic whim to be with somebody poor) and then to obsessively become rich again in order to please her new fancy—she superficially rejects him both times after he dutifully complies to her wishes. There are also significant resemblances between these disparate comedies and the celebrated 1932 play by Mihura, “Tres sombreros de pico”, where the weak male protagonist cowardly abandons a potentially bohemian life with a circus company to be eventually trapped into marriage with a conservative, narrow-minded bourgeois woman whose figure is associated with a panicked loss of freedom and of individual integrity. In Mihura’s case, the clash between individual and society thus tends to be misogynistically dramatized as a conflict between a man and a woman (de Miguel Martínez 23), as Mihura otherwise noted in an interview: “mi teatro soy yo y una mujer enfrente” (de Miguel Martínez, ”Conversación con Mihura” 239). He often rooted this attitude in his own womanizing tendencies and in his negative vision of marriage as something boring and monotonous as well as in a never allayed fear of women and of their controlling power over men (239). His personal lopsidedness is an indicator, however, of a larger gender anxiety that was conspicuous not only in the work of all other humorists and in the respective film comedy adaptations of their narratives, but also in other Spanish movies, of various generic adscription, and in the humor magazine La Codorniz, which continued a comic line already present before the Civil War, as we have already seen. The first issues of this humor magazine not only recurrently feature various misogynist caricatures of tall, fat and domineering wives that abuse their puny husbands (according to the paradigmatic image of the bourgeois wife in Mihura’s universe), but they also satirically portray women as
vain, frivolous, capricious, jealous, materialist, garrulous, hypocrite, thriftless, narrow-minded and overall duplicitous and unreliable. Particularly noteworthy are some established sections of the first Codorniz (e.g., “Para usted, Señora”, “Nuestras página para la mujer”) that clearly parody some exalted hegemonic stereotypes of the age: the morally and socially proper young women who know how to politely but vacuously speak when going on a visit, the thrifty housewives that do not squander anything that can be potentially reused, the practical, moral mothers who know how to raise their sons to become “hombres de provecho”, “con sus carreras acabadas y muy buena posición” (e.g., “Convierta su niña en niño”). The contemporaneous slogans and exhortations of the time, which were otherwise obsessively heard from the pulpits, in various self-help manuals, and in the hegemonic media (especially in the women magazines and in the news), would thus be sarcastically incorporated in the magazine and would often be carried to absurdist touches (e.g., “No tire los elefantes viejos”). 1 Even the setting of these repetitive diatribes within the pages of a humor magazine like La Codorniz, that is, decontextualized, would inherently operate a useful defamiliarization, satirically deflating their potential propagandistic power. A similar estranging strategy with humorous effects is actually carried out in La vida en un hilo, whose comedic expectations inevitably undermine the clearly mocking presentation of various social conventions that take place in Ramón’s provincial bourgeois house, especially those linked to his sanctimonious aunts, Doña Encarnación y Doña Purificación, two parodic figures that were already established by Neville in the pages of La Codorniz.

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1 Parodically mocking the austerity slogans and exhortations of the age, the humorous “No tire los elefantes viejos”, which appeared in the third issue of La Codorniz, for instance, from June 22, 1941, urged such model housewife not to get rid of old elephants, which would be a mindless waste given that everything can be reused.
The fact that this misogynistic tendency was doubled by a repressive postwar institutionalization at a hegemonic level (e.g., mediatically, ecclesiastically, medically, juridically etc.) makes the otherwise emancipating humor of these humorists acquire an unmistakable reactionary touch in the case of genre portrayal, reinforcing the dominant discourse. On the other hand, as in the case of disciplinary portrayals of strong, eccentric and subversive female protagonists in the Spanish screwball comedies, this problematic deployment of misogynistic humor does not preclude a potentially empowering effect on women spectators as the reiterated focus on powerful women and weak, manipulated men may not only reinforce the prevailing discourse by comically reversing the existing (i.e., “advisable”) contemporaneous relations, but it could also give women alternative, strong images of femininity, however ironically envisioned or conservatively punished in the end. It might be worth underlining here that, while both Mihura and the other humorists were attracted and influenced by the screwball discourse (Mihura was even a prewar Spanish dialog adaptor for some American and Italian screwball comedies), they did not take over the romantic focus of these films, whose more egalitarian perspective on relationships and marriage they did not share. All disparate comedies will thus relegate romance onto a secondary position, prioritizing other issues, such as the individual and his problematic clash with society, as it is best apparent in the bohemian disparities under analysis (i.e., La luna vale un millón, La vida en un hilo, Mi adorado Juan, ¡Viva lo imposible!, Ninette y un señor de Murcia), which were undeniably influenced by comedian comedy and its utopian celebration of individual freedom and of a bohemian lifestyle.

A particularly poetic, yet problematic exploration of this theme appears in the comedy La luna vale un millón, released in 1945 and directed by Florián Rey after a story and a script written by José López Rubio, who, compared to the other humorists under discussion, seems to
have enjoyed the most extensive exposure to the inner workings of various foreign cinema industries, not only the American one (i.e., he worked for MGM and Fox between 1930 and 1935 and again for Fox between 1937 and 1938), but also the Mexican and the Cuban (in which he was involved for two years, between 1938 and 1940). Abroad he not only worked as a translator, an adaptor and a dialog writer for the Spanish versions of some Hollywood movies, but he was also a scriptwriter for Fox and in the Mexican and Cuban industry. This ample professional experience endowed him with considerable expertise before his work as a scriptwriter and director in the postwar Spanish film industry, enabling him to know “los gustos del público, los resortes y efectos del diálogo, la invención de un argumento, la economía de la acción, el ritmo de una comedia, incluso el ajuste de un papel a un actor o una actriz.” (López Rubio, qtd. in Torrijos, “López Rubio: el remedio en la memoria” 33) The cosmopolitan touch that he gave his comedies, as evident, for instance, in the portrayal of the multimillionaire Fernando Burgos in La luna vale un millón, was astutely united to his realistic assessment of the postwar Spanish public’s expectations, which made him frequently resort to popular tropes and star figures from local folkloric musicals, as was the case of Miguel Ligero, the protagonist of La luna vale un millón and one of the most beloved Spanish actors of the time. Miguel Ligero had already worked with José López Rubio in Pepe Conde, a comedy that he directed in 1941, and that was a screen adaptation of a play by Muñoz Seca and Pérez Fernández, “Pepe Conde, o El mentir de las estrellas”.¹

If we bear in mind the distinction between Muñoz Seca’s structurally loose disparate cómico and the narratively integrated comedic disparate that is the focus of the present chapter,

¹ José López Rubio further developed the original story of Pepe Conde and made a much bitterer sequel in 1946, El crimen de Pepe Conde, whose script and story he also wrote, choosing Miguel Ligero again to star Pepe Conde, the bohemian, poor and hapless Andalusian Gypsy that is transformed by a rich marquis into a provisional rich man to be later thrown back to his humdrum existence.
it is important to mention that, even in the case of the Pepe Conde series, his directorial work greatly transformed the original dizzying concatenation of playful dialogs and comic situations based on identity confusion. Unlike what happens in the original plays, where there is no room for narrative construction or for the characterization of clearly delineated protagonists, in López Rubio’s screen adaptations there is a slower pace, which allows a narrative integration of visual gags and of various comic situations as well as the development of a complex main character.

While his professional exposure to foreign cinema industries, particularly to the advanced Hollywood once might have taught López Rubio how to skillfully construct an efficient comedic narrative, this lesson must have built up on his enthusiasm with the mid1920s comedian comedy that he, like the other humorists, was so enthralled with, especially with those movies starring Chaplin and Keaton, whom he even befriended during his transatlantic stay. It is very important to point out here a meaningful coincidence, namely, the fact that López Rubio’s Hollywood experience took place at a particular historical moment, not only of transition to the sound, but also at a time that saw the failure of the vaudeville-based “anarchistic comedy” of the Marx Brothers and the consequential rise of the toned down, narratively integrated screwball comedy.

It was also during this age when Frank Capra started to become notorious for his particular brand of screwball comedies that was already touched upon and to which López Rubio must have continued to be exposed also after his return to Spain in 1940. He actually confessed in his later years, after he abandoned the autochthonous film industry, that he would have liked to be a director like Capra or Lubitsch, an inability that he ascribed to the industrial and political

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1 This series was made up of two “Andalusian comedies” (according to the contemporaneous reviews), which were based on a story that López Rubio took from the popular Muñoz Seca and Pérez Fernández duet.
situation of the postwar Spanish cinema (Heinink 200).¹ Be it as it may, he must have taken from Capra his tenderly utopian celebration of a naïve anti-hero and of an occasionally idyllic countryside, which is often contrasted in the American director’s filmography with the corruption, artificiality and affectation of urban life. While it is true that López Rubio made a more nuanced portrayal of rural life (especially in his Pepe Conde series, where such ambience is powerfully marked by class disparities and social injustice), it is unclear to what extent he must be credited for the bohemian praise of “free life” that Anselmo, the poor, Tramp-like figure protagonist from La luna vale un millón, associates with the countryside: the endorsement of such an idyllic vision of countryside might also be indebted to Florián Rey, the director of this disparate comedy, whose prewar and postwar filmography often resorted to an idealized depiction of rural life, which was harshly contrasted to the city in the two versions of his melodrama La aldea maldita, for instance.

The disparate that sets in motion La luna vale un millón is based on the famous and popular pattern of the mistaken identity: the multimillionaire Fernando Burgos, who has a plane accident, finds himself lost in a remote countryside area, where he was undressed by a poor Gypsy, Anselmo, who is stunningly similar to him physically and, based on this potential confusion, he puts on the rich man’s clothes and dresses Fernando in his own rags. The story convincingly builds up on this absurd premise, allowing both male protagonists to remain virtually unrecognized by their immediate entourage, which enables Fernando to experience the charm of a less constrained rural setting and of a sincere romance with the young, naïve peasant Teresa, while Anselmo is more and more stifled by the multimillionaire’s daily work and dietary restrictions to the point that he will eventually long for his poor but unencumbered existence.

¹ This bitter confession of a personal frustration might have also implicitly tried to explain why, in the absence of an economic capital that Neville, for instance, had, he had to resort to making such historical movies as Alhucemas or Eugenia de Montijo in order to support himself.
The movie ends on an idyllic note, with Anselmo happily falling asleep in the field after he sings “el oro no es la felicidad, la luna vale un millón”, after Fernando abandoned his business life and, together with Teresa, went on a twenty-year “vacation” (according to what he said in a letter to his private secretary).

If we remember López Rubio’s and the other humorists’ vanguard endearment with a bohemian, leisurely life that has pleasure as its greatest “duty”, which was an important sign of sociocultural distinction, it is quite interesting to note that what is repudiated of city life has to do with various constraints on the body (i.e., diet, exercise, lack of plentiful sleep) and on personal time, which cannot be dedicated to leisure but must me used for lucrative labor (i.e., to earn more and more money). It is thus unsurprising that Fernando does not eventually choose to live in the countryside, but to enjoy his considerable fortune in the pursuit of a hedonist life in a leisurely setting. The compulsory moralizing touch of the end will show Fernando finally accompanied by a simple, kind woman, whose low social origin and genuine love is accompanied by a welcome gratefulness (as Teresa finds out Fernando’s real status and his desire to marry her). Her personality stands in contrast to the domineering, frivolous character of his former fiancée, Hortensia, a beautiful and sophisticated city woman who is eventually shown to harbor unscrupulous motifs for being with Fernando. This finale permits a narrative punishment of a vamp type of woman and the implicit praise of a submissive feminine image that seemed consonant with an otherwise hegemonically extolled feminine role model. Teresa’s characterization is not completely devoid of occasional touches of materialism, nevertheless, which appears closer to a kind of commonsensical, hard-headed pragmatism, however, hence

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1 Anselmo, unlike Fernando, would make flirtatious comments to all the pretty young women he would encounter, adding to those who were working in the office: “La mujer no debe trabajar nunca. Bueno… el hombre tampoco, es una lástima con este sol”. Once his hunger would become insufferable, he would tell all the employees to go home to eat, alleging that not only that it was already late, but that they had already earned enough money for the day.
under a relatively less reproachable guise. On the other hand, she is also melodramatically impressed with city life, whose alluring image she has constructed by means of romance novels, another hint at a different, alternative discourse that, however condescendingly indicted by the humorists under discussion, was undeniably important epistemologically and axiologically for its female readers, who could thus reject the disciplinary social and moral discourse that was hegemonically promoted in favor of this other shaping pattern of their personality. Here it is interesting to mention that her endorsement of urban life is inseparable from the representation of city as a modern place of leisure, which is implicitly contrasted to Fernando’s (and later Anselmo’s) idealized image of a contemplative lifestyle, which otherwise tends to be men’s not women’s prerogative in the humorists’ narratives. It might be interesting to point out that in 1944 (after Laiglesia took over the management of La Codorniz), around the same year this comedy was released, this humor magazine featured an interesting article, “¡No queremos estadísticas!”, which must have mockingly alluded to some incipient signs of hollow, triumphalist statistics in the conservative media of the time, especially in the news bulletin NO-DO, and to somewhat sarcastically endorse (given the already changing tendency of this humor magazine) a contemplative existence, “lejos de las ciudades, sin trabajar, sin leer estadísticas, pescando en el río y contemplando el sol tumbado panza arriba”. This final image of the article strikingly resembles the final scene of the movie, where Anselmo is singing his happy glorification of such bohemian, carefree existence after his illustrative failure to pay attention to data and figures from business reports (he usually fell easily asleep and snored during the meetings that would employ such statistics).

1 Fernando (considered to be Anselmo by Teresa) tries to undermine the glamorous melodramatic image that she has of urban life by praising the bohemian, poetic charm of her own rural life: “se está mejor aquí, con esta luz y paz. Aquí se ve el cielo, la luna, las estrellas…” At this melancholy evocation of countryside, Teresa bluntly retorts: “Conmigo pareces tonto”, thus subverting the potentially sentimental touch of Fernando’s words.
Teresa’s somewhat idyllicized figure is insufficiently developed in this comedy, remaining a vague, idealized portrait, not deprived of tenderly poetic undertones that seem to characterizes López Rubio’s humor, if we are to judge by his later plays and by his own declarations. It is this delicate poetic tenderness, which also colors the idyllic rural depictions of a utopianly “free life”, that prevents the film from becoming an either lofty or moralizing harangue that bemoans the artificiality and pretense of city life (which is occasionally idealized by Teresa, besides). The vindication of a bohemian, contemplative existence together with the indictment of a harsh work ethics and of a disciplinary manipulation of both personal time and body will also surface in the other bohemian disparates that will be analyzed in this section, resonating with the humorists’ own ideas and lifestyles. Such a financial potentate’s idyllic conversion to a carefree existence would be unthinkable, however, in the later sociopolitical and economic context of postwar Spain, when, starting especially with the end of the 1950s and the rise to power of the Francoist technocrats, such representatives of the financial and entrepreneurial oligarchy will be portrayed along dark comic lines both in La Codorniz and in the later screen adaptations of the disparate comedies.

The celebration of a hedonist, bohemian existence, whether in an urban setting or in an idealized countryside, deprived of social conflicts and class disparities, must have acted as an efficient counter-educational model for the contemporaneous audiences of La luna vale un millón, who were encouraged to mock the hegemonically advanced ideas of frugality, austerity, self-discipline, and hard work. The numerous shrewdly sarcastic innuendos that this disparate comedy puts forth against these celebrated autarkic values are perhaps most efficient when Anselmo, who has taken over Fernando’s life, is constantly plagued by hunger, despite the enormous resources that he has at his disposal—the reiterated reference to a famished condition
could not have passed unnoticed in the bleak postwar period known as “the years of hunger”. Differently metaphorized in various contemporaneous narratives as well, this obsession with hunger as well as Anselmo’s recurrent rebellion against what he calls the enforced “fasting” (i.e., “ayuno”, of unmistakable subversive connotations at the time) constitute an indirect critical comment about the contemporaneous situation of Spain, who could not enjoy the much promised “Franco’s bread” (i.e., “pan de Franco”) that was promised by the National propaganda during the Civil War.

The critical touches in Anselmo’s constant hunger and in his inability to actually enjoy Fernando’s temporarily usurped possessions become even harsher as Fernando confronts Anselmo in the end, which leads to the latter’s cringing supplication not to be handed to the police, a posture that sharply underlines the social distance and power between them. This gap is further enhanced in the end, when Anselmo is once again presented in his rags, which is in a stark contrast to Fernando’s last image and to his restored lavish existence. Despite the film’s final image and subversively bohemian vindication of Anselmo’s poor, but carefree existence at the margin of both society and its work ethics, it is unclear to what extent his enforced return to a socially utopian, seemingly contemplative existence is very convincing. Coming after Fernando’s decision to abandon his business and life routine in favor of a leisurely lifestyle, ensured by his considerable fortune, Anselmo’s glorification of a kind of pastoral existence appears more a matter of social necessity than an actually enviable choice, despite the fact that he actually refuses a bank employment from Fernando—it would have been practically

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1 Anselmo would grudgingly exclaim in Fernando’s house that “hay que comer con lupa”, without being able to actually enjoy and indulge in anything.
2 One of the film’s poster plays with this contrast and with the implicit pattern of mistaken identity, so popular at the time, as it shows Miguel Ligero’s both roles (as Fernando and Anselmo) in the same image, a choice that also undeniably relies on the actors’ popularity with contemporaneous film audiences. Such juxtaposition of two differently dressed men nevertheless enhances the social contrast between the two characters. Furthermore, the fact that Anselmo is seated and has a contemplative, haggard look, while Fernando is standing next to him, in a condescending, businesslike manner, increases even more the implied difference in power and status between them.
impossible for him, besides, without a proper education and experience, to suddenly become a bank employee. The refusal of such a clearly unfitted job for him is narratively justified by Anselmo’s desire to go back to a kind of socially immutable identity, “vagabundo por herencia”, which subversively points to an impossibility of crossing the social barriers, which seem indeed perpetuated “por herencia”, not by merit—and charity does not seem to make a significant change in the social structure. It is only through marriage, as in Teresa’s case, that these class limits can be occasionally crossed, a final lesson that is consonant with that of most screwball comedies discussed in the first chapter and with what would take place in many other genres of Spanish postwar movies, such as the folkloric musicals, judging by Eva Woods’ pioneering analysis. Leaving aside the marriage loophole, this comedy thus puts forth a conservative social discourse, underlining that wealth endows its possessor to enjoy both a leisurely, carefree existence and, on this solid basis, a contemplative existence that seems to be otherwise the questionable apanage of those who have less: personal freedom and the possibility to disregard social conventions is best founded, after all, on a considerable economic capital. This wealth allows its owner to seemingly reproduce, in a fashionable, stylized manner, an untrammeled way of living (appropriated as form) that is ascribed to the idyllicized lower classes (i.e., a Gypsy tramp in La luna vale un millón). Such bohemian existence becomes thus associated with distinction when it is accompanied by an affluent social and economic position, a joint presence that is otherwise implicitly present in one of the posters of this disparate comedy, which presents only one image of Miguel Ligero, elegantly dressed, holding money in one hand and the moon under the other arm, hence enjoying both wealth and a hedonist existence.¹

¹ This image might also point, of course, to the ambivalent wish-fulfillment fantasies that underlay the frequent presence of the double in many postwar movies and which were already discussed in the first chapter. It is unclear if López Rubio merely took over this recurrent cinematic and theatrical motif of the age (together with the idea of mistaken identity and the subsequent narrative complications) when he wrote the story and script of this comedy, as
A similar ambivalent attitude towards wealth and leisure appears in *La vida en un hilo*, not only directed and produced by Edgar Neville in 1945, but also written by him (as story and as script). Often termed a “fantastic comedy”, according to a model that was already in vogue in various Hollywood productions of the time, *La vida en un hilo*, together with *El hombre que se quiso matar*, *El destino se disculpa*, and *Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario*, were seen as “películas codornicescas” at the time, according to Ángel Zúñiga, a *Cámara* film reviewer.

Fernández Barreira thus significantly titles his review of *La vida en un hilo*, “Han llegado a la pantalla ‘Doña Encarnación y Doña Purificación’” (43), alluding to the two female characters that Neville employed in one of his standard columns in the pages of the first *La Codorniz*. This already well-known sarcastic embodiment of middle-class *cursilería* might have contributed to the great success enjoyed by the first representation of *La vida en un hilo* (there were even standing ovations at the end, according to the anonymous review from *Dígame*). This disparate comedy apparently enjoyed considerable but not resounding popular support in all its representations, according to Ángel Zúñiga, which quickly dismisses it as typical of the poor reception of most national productions in respect to Hollywood movies. A previous claim should be reiterated here, which also qualifies Stuart Green’s different assessment of this public.
“failure”, attributed, in his opinion, to the “failed Americanization of Spanish comedy” in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War.

While the first spectators of this comedy, who praised it with the afore-mentioned standing ovations, might have been from those (i.e., of the younger generations and the liberal bourgeoisie) who were intellectually closer to Neville and the humor of La Codorniz, its other spectators might have had a less “refined” social and intellectual adscription, which would explain their occasional interpretive difficulties of the plot, especially of those images when Mercedes appears married with both Ramón and Miguel. Taking into consideration not only Neville’s subtle, playful sense of irony and humor, but also his confessed use of many of Lubitsch’ sophisticated comedic strategies (e.g., his witty, sarcastic employment of montage and of conversations), these hermeneutic problems appear indebted less to a “failed Americanization of Spanish comedy” and more to a sophisticated directorial style that was not very popular with large audiences in the United States either. It is quite interesting to note, however, that La vida en un hilo enjoyed less consistent popular success as other comedies of the time (e.g., El destino se disculpa) inspired in Frank Capra, who employed a relatively “easier”, more populist style, for instance, resorting to more overt melodramatic touches, particularly in the end. The less “cultivated” audience’s irritation with those misunderstood parts of the comedy is not a question of its overall repudiation of all national film productions in favor of the Hollywood ones, but a matter of sheer hermeneutic difficulty, which many American spectators of Lubitsch’ comedies also experienced. We should not retrospectively exaggerate, however, this alleged public “failure” of La vida en un hilo—the movie not only generated standing public ovations during its first night but also numerous positive reviews and comments in almost all publications of the age, as it is evident even in the issue 245 of Primer Plano, which cites a lot of laudatory remarks.
from the main publications of the time (e.g., Cámara, Arriba, ABC, Madrid, Alcázar, Marca, Ya, Informaciones, Pueblo, Dígame, Ecclesia, Medina), a list that includes mostly conservative ones. Furthermore, the fact that Neville decided to make a (thriving) stage version of this movie suggests that the comedy must have enjoyed considerable success as a movie as well, an accomplishment that Ríos Carratalá attributes to its thematic adscription to what he terms “la comedia de la felicidad”, which was well fitted, in his opinion, to the expectations of Neville’s contemporaneous audiences (“Edgar Neville y la comedia de la felicidad” 92). The critic actually takes over Francisco Ruiz Ramón’s label, “comedia de la felicidad o comedia de la illusion”, which both employ for many plays by Neville and López Rubio. Such classification is quite problematic, nevertheless, in so far as it is considered synonymous with the already discussed syntagm “teatro de la evasion”, which involves an unacknowledged ethical and political sense of decorum.

Be it as it may, Ríos Carratalá’s discussion of Neville’s theatrical production as “comedia de la felicidad” is extremely insightful in so far as it mentions that the pursuit of happiness (or, rather, pleasure (i.e., “goce”), to be more precise—is the major defining theme of interest for the cosmopolitan, “bon vivant” Neville, “quien no estuvo dispuesto a sacrificar un momento de goce en aras de la gloria literaria o cinematografica.” (79) His considerable economic and social capital endowed him with an even easier pursuit of a carefree, frivolous and leisurely life, devoid of any financial worries. His repudiation of hard work and his bohemian celebration of free time, witty conversations and sophisticated women (as well as the castizo sainete, flamenco and bullfighting) deserved him Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s endearing tag of “señorito de la República” and Fernán Gómez’ label of a “dandy en la taberna”, two

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1 Fernando Fernán Gómez also states that this comedy enjoyed and extraordinary success, not only with “intellectuals” but also with the contemporaneous public (“El dandy en la taberna” 255).
characterizations that point out Neville’s complex sociocultural and political positioning at that
time, which we have already touched upon. His essential continuity with a prewar urban,
cosmopolitan modernity and his witty, playful sense of humor are perhaps best exemplified by
his comedic masterpiece, La vida en un hilo, which skillfully cast the sophisticated, intelligent
actress Conchita Montes (his enduring lover and musa) as Mercedes, the female protagonist, the
popular “galán” Rafael Durán in Miguel’s (the winsome sculptor) role, and the unattractive
Guillermo Marín (a typical interpreter of villains in the Spanish cinema of the age) as Mercedes’
uptight, boring, tactless husband, Ramón. Furthermore, the clavoyante Madame DuPont
(brilliantly played by the talented actress Julia Lajos) has the narrative function of introducing
the absurd premises underlying this disparate comedy, as she can tell the recently (and happily)
widowed Mercedes how her past could have been, had she made another choice at an important
crossroads in her life: if she had chosen Miguel, not Ramón, to give her a lift home on a pouring
day, she would have enjoyed living with a nonconformist, carefree and witty man that would
have made her truly happy. Through Madame DuPont’s eccentric character, who can see a spark
of “unlived life” (i.e., Mercedes’ unexploited potential for self-development) in the protagonist’s
ironical eyes, Neville’s carefully constructed argument unfolds as the story of both what was and
what could have been Mercedes’ life. The film therefore abounds in “real” and “potential”
flashbacks of her married existence with Ramón and with Miguel, which is meant to put forth the
“logical” conclusion of her incompatibility with the former and her perfect match with the latter.

Neville’s use of romance as one of the means of attaining the coveted happiness that was
qualified before does not mean that La vida en un hilo is centered upon and establishment and re-
establishment of romance, as it happens in screwball comedies: the failure of marrying the right
person and the desire to later repair that error are deprived of any passion or romantic aura, even
if most posters of this movie center upon melodramatic images, an undeniable marketing strategy at that time. If romance matters in Neville’s universe, it is not placed in a forefront position, even if it can decisively contribute to someone’s bohemian enjoyment of everyday life, which seems to be the primary focus of interest. Madame DuPont thus illustratively characterizes Miguel as a potential husband for Mercedes as someone who was “creado para ti”, “llevaba en sí el gérmen de la alegría, […] nació especialmente para hacerla dichosa”, “veía el lado grato siempre, no dramatizaba”, and, very importantly, “no había tiempo para aburrirse con él”. Mercedes actually realizes in the end that, from a broader perspective, her daily life with Miguel would not have been so different from how it was with the civil engineer Ramón, as her everyday activities would have been quite similar (e.g., sleeping, eating, shopping, dancing, preparing for hours to go out, socializing in and outside the house etc.). The major distinction between her two possible trajectories are constituted, however, by “otro tono y otra felicidad”, in their turn triggered by “pequeños detalles, atenciones, simpatías”, which are fundamentally linked to a tactful sense of distinction, to a witty, playful sense of humor, and to an artistic savoir faire, which all enable Miguel to always know the right word and gesture in every private and social circumstance so that she is always entertained.¹

On the contrary, Ramón was completely tactless (both with her and in various social circumstances), had no sense of humor, and had a “horrendous taste”, making her life not only monotonous but also “ugly”, a characterization that once again underlines the essential function

¹ During their potential taxi ride to Mercedes’ home, had she chosen Miguel’s company, they would have exchanged sharp, witty small talk conversations that powerfully resonate with those of screwball comedy, particularly in its Lubitsch versions. When she tells him, for instance, that she does not work, but is “la felicidad en el hogar de mis padres”, Miguel hastily retorts: “¡Cómo me gustaría ser sus padres!” As he begins talking in a mock-earnest voice about the benefits of rain for agriculture, Mercedes asks him if he is an agriculturalist, to which he replies that he is “eso que llaman latifundista. Tengo varias tierras.” As she asks if they are close to Madrid, he clarifies that they are “en Madrid mismo. Son tierras que tengo metidas en tiestos, sabe usted. En uno tengo albahaca y en el otro un clavel, que sale una vez al año y se muere en seguida, pero lo tengo. Y luego unas hierbas, que aún no he averiguado de lo que son.” At this lengthy humorous explanation, Mercedes ironically retorts: “Se ve que es usted un amante de la naturaleza.”
of an aesthetic sense of social distinction that unsurprisingly appears as a kind of innate, natural gift. Particularly persuasive at a visual level is, for example, a brief montage of various kitsch objects ostentatiously displayed in the living room of Ramón’s provincial bourgeois house (e.g., a ludicrous clock received from his graduation colleagues, several outdated bibelots, curtains and paintings of dubious taste), which, in Lubitsch’ editing style, makes an ironical allusion to the poor taste of Ramón’s family. This montage is diegetically accompanied by the obligatory out-of-tune serenade that was sung by the middle-school children of the cursi family that visited them. The ascending shrilling pitch of their voices together with those parallel images of their trinkets is meant to climactically show Mercedes’ boredom and irritation with her married life by Ramón’s side. While she concedes that he is kind, industrious, and honest, Ramón’s endearment with a stifling routine and his inability to trigger any spark in his relationship with Mercedes make her utterly miserable. His spinster aunts, two sanctimonious older women that mercilessly relish in pointing out other people’s vices, further increase her marital unhappiness by constraining her to put up with all kind of sentimental and moral platitudes as well as with their unwritten rules of the house (which include how the house must be decorated, who can visit her, or how she is supposed to behave during other people’s visits). ¹ Ramón’s attempt to defend their moral righteousness by giving the example of their occasional almsgiving awakens Mercedes’ furious rejection: “no tiene generosidad con los defectos del prójimo”, a benevolent understanding of other people that the humorists saw inseparable from “authentic” humor. The hollow, duplicitous side of such trumpeted charitable actions will gradually acquire darker tones

¹ They do not even allow Ramón to tell “the tunnel joke” in front of the children that are visiting them with their parents, by arguing, despite Ramón’s protest, that there must be something indecent in the joke: “en los túneles de cuento no sucede nada bueno”, an attitude that undeniably alludes not only to the obsessive concern with morality in children’s education but also to a system of censorship that is actually envisioned within absurdist paranoid limits.
in the later disparate comedies as well as in the caricatures, jokes and stories from La Codorniz, showing an increasingly uncaring society that is only preoccupied with social appearances.

The fierce parody of the bourgeois social conventions and of their underlying hypocrisy that this disparate comedy achieved by the effectively humorous portrayal of Ramón’s house and of their entourage did not pass unperceived by existing censorship, which decried their subversive presence and also criticized the film’s propensity to show that “las personas llenas de virtudes son las rancias y aburridas, las que carecen de las facultades de hacer la vida amable a las gentes con quienes viven.” (qtd. in Sala Noguer 188) This lucid assessment of the movie’s corrosive social vision, by means of a playful conversational and cinematographic humor, clearly points out that such comedies, as was the case of the contemporaneous La Codorniz, had an acknowledged counter-educational effect on its spectators, who were subversively exposed to a humorous deconstruction of some moral and social models that were otherwise advanced in the hegemonic public sphere of the time. The defamiliarizing effect triggered by such playful display was enhanced, in the case of La vida en un hilo, by the contrastive (though not unproblematic) presentation of Miguel’s and Mercedes’ pursuit of a bohemian, carefree, and frivolous existence, which powerfully clashed with all the respectable values that were hegemonically put forth.1

The caustic portrayal of Ramón’s provincial, bourgeois world is quite similar to the mocking image of countryside that is carried out through the figures of the Sánchez family for whom Miguel makes an expensive monument, representing a family ancestor who will be triumphantly shown as a benefactor and forefather of the village, even if he did not do anything worth mentioning.2 This condescending portrayal of implied rural corruption, social injustice and

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1 Even the powerful impact ascribed to chance was unsurprisingly indicted in the same censorship report, as it contradicted the contemporaneous Catholic discourse of a benevolent providence.

2 The modernization he allegedly introduced in this village (e.g., pavements, electricity) are humorously shown to have been only around his rural shops and his house, which inevitably points to the narrow interest that underlay his
uncouth, affected caciques was, in its turn, not deprived of subversiveness in an autarkic epoch that idyllicized the countryside, making it a source of national moral regeneration. Mercilessly mocked from the perspective of a sophisticated, urban modernity, such tasteless, but gullible people and their occasional commissions appear to have the merit, however, to fund Miguel’s and Mercedes’ bohemian existence, whose lavish waste is almost always beyond their means. The satirized but necessary commercialization of art and taste that is implied here actually enables them to lead a carefree, frivolous and aestheticized life that is founded on that pursuit of that happiness already discussed. Even Miguel’s painting signed by El Greco, which he bought with many sacrifices, by selling everything that he had possessed at that time, will be eventually sold, in the absence of other financial sources, in order to buy an unnecessary luxury item (i.e., a mink coat) for Mercedes just to make her happy. While this spontaneous act of generosity is meant to be in stark contrast to Ramón’s carefully planned expenses and to his unimaginative signs of love, it also alludes to a dangerously consumerist type of sophisticated woman, for whose sake the bohemian artist or the proudly self-marginalized man is ready to forfeit his most cherished principles and values, giving in to the stifling pressures of society.

This sexist vision of enforced social integration is particularly noteworthy in the last three bohemian disparate comedies (i.e., Mi adorado Juan, ¡Viva lo imposible!, Ninette y un señor de Murcia), based on Miguel Mihura’s scripts and stories. The young female protagonists of these comedies (i.e., Eloísa, Paquita, and Ninette) might be temporarily tempted by unconventional lifestyle choices and cherish utopian dreams of escape from an oppressive quotidian, yet their conservative, consumerist penchant will eventually prevail, which will trigger their male “glorious” feats. He also eventually appears as stingy, unimaginative, and unkind even with his own children, while the greatest merit of his only praised son (Mrs. Sánchez’ father) was to get rich by winning the lottery. All the lavish expenses for this public work are ironically shown to come from the city hall state money, given that Mrs. Sánchez’ husband is the mayor of the village, which makes him unscrupulously dispose of public money.
partners’ reluctant social assimilation and subsequent loss of personal freedom, one of Mihura’s most recurrent endings. These finales clearly show a disenchanted view of the conflict between men’s dreams of a bohemian existence and women’s centripetal desires for the stability of a home, a clash that tends to be the main embodiment of the larger confrontation between individual and society, which dominates Mihura’s entire work. His own womanizing, misogynist tendencies, his disillusioned view of marriage as something boring and monotonous, and of romance as a fierce battle for power (that never ends in a companionate relationship, unlike what happens in screwball comedies) are undoubtedly manifest in the cynical resolution of the struggle between his female and male protagonists. The disillusioned portrayal of this conflict can, in its turn, be correlated to a broader pessimist outlook in respect to the possibility of attaining personal happiness: the bohemian quest for happiness—which, to a greater or lesser degree, permeates the other humorists’ writings as well—will thus be inevitably thwarted by the individual’s eventual capitulation in front of the coercive pressures of society.

Juan, the male protagonist of the 1950 disparate comedy Mi adorado Juan, is Miguel Mihura’s most autobiographical creation, according to his own confession in an interview with Emilio de Miguel Martínez (236). This character is a clearly idealized self-projection, whose celebration of a peaceful, frugal existence and of a friendly solidarity with lower class people is quite unconvincingly portrayed, however, especially when he is contrasted to the more complex female protagonist, Eloisa. Steven Marsh perceptively remarked, in respect to this problematically narrativized contrast, that it sheds a more favorable light on Eloisa than on Juan, despite the numerous attempts at the latter’s idealized portrayal (Popular Spanish Film Under Franco 38-39). It remains unclear, however, to what extent Juan’s deficient persuasiveness can be attributed to the actor’s (i.e., Conrado Sanmartín) more rigid body and facial language, which,
together with his tiring harangues, make him unconvincing in comparison to the more dynamic and versatile Conchita Montes. As in Mercedes’ case in *La vida en un hilo*, her interpretation of Eloísa adds an undoubted air of sophistication and refinement to this female protagonist, who is fully capable, besides, of standing on an equal intellectual footing with her partner. It is actually quite ironical that her sparkling intelligence is shrewdly narrativized to appear as one of the causes of her personal unhappiness. As she grumpily confesses to her father (i.e., the physiologist Palacios), she is tired of living a life where only intelligence seems to matter, coupled with the also indicted “seriedad” and “formalidad”, which are hedonistically but quite simplistically contrasted to an existence of liberated, manifest emotions that actually mean, in her case, a life endowed with romance. While she will get over this alleged sentimental paralysis due to Juan’s formative influence, there are very few signs of his actual emotions throughout the movie, cinematographically enabled by very few close-ups of his face, as Stuart Green observes (From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage 100). His constantly eulogized figure is otherwise a kind of hedonist-populist role model that is very similar to various bohemian protagonists of Capra’s populist screwball comedies. The desired persuasiveness of his idyllic image is seriously undermined, nevertheless, by its great dependence upon Juan’s and other characters’ speeches, being insufficiently derived from his actions or the actual narrative development of the movie. Both he and his simple, lower class friends harp on the charms of a bohemian, contemplative life devoid of any ambitions, which enables him to enjoy life’s simple pleasures (e.g., friendly chats and reunions, late sleeping, walking, fishing etc.) and a kind of untrammelled freedom that is implicitly contrasted to the numerous conventions that dominate the social game and preclude genuine human communication and bonding. Juan’s idea of an enhanced personal freedom based on an insouciant rejection of social conventions might ironically echo but remains quite
distanced from the ascetic Christian renunciation of the “vanity of the world”, which is in a stark contrast to the protagonist’s endorsement of a hedonist existence that sarcastically points to the Christian commitment to the higher values of another realm.

Neither Juan’s recurrent praise of such a lifestyle nor his neighborhood friends’ comments (e.g., “Todo el mundo ama a Juan, por bueno.”, “Juan consigue todo lo que quiere, todos lo complacen.”) can obliterate, however, the condescending, selfish side of Juan’s character, which emerges especially in his relationship with Eloísa: while he vehemently tells her that she must abandon all her habitual daily comfort and virtually her entire existence prior to their marriage in order to fit his unpretentious, hedonist lifestyle, he also condescendingly informs her that he does not intend to make any compromise, preferring to continue his former life (e.g., late sleeping, little working, fishing, daily café meals and reunions with his friends) as if nothing happened. It could be argued that this male protagonist exemplifies the bohemian bachelor’s dream of having an uncommitted relationship that brings him some emotional, physical and communicative perks with a beautiful, intelligent and sophisticated woman without undermining his self-centered routine at all. Given that such a (utopian) relationship could not be portrayed outside the institutional parameters of marriage in the the late 1940s, when Mihura wrote the script of Mi adorado Juan, he had to introduce Juan’s and Eloísa’s eventual marriage, however unconventionally and unconvincingly described. On the other hand, such an original image of marriage must have projected an alternative perspective on this social institution, given that, in the movie, it does not seem to emerge after the compulsory religious wedding but after a civil, if any, ceremony, an outlook that was closer to the prewar Republican times than to the postwar.
The problematic narrative construction of the comedy can probably be indebted to Mihura’s voluntary, idealized self-projection as well, which could not efficiently maintain the tone of playful humor and dynamic tempo set by the beginning of the story, when the disparate is put in motion: a rich, sophisticated young lady, Eloísa, driving in an elegant car with a chauffeur, steals ordinary dogs, causing much distress in their inconsolate owners. This ludicrous situation is later domesticated, as these absurd premises are later logically developed to show that the stolen dogs are used by the physiologist Palacios, Eloísa’s father, in his researches on how to prevent or at least greatly diminish the human urge to sleep in order to increase productivity. The aim of such an absurdist investigation is playfully opposed by Juan, who humorously vindicates the pleasures and benefits of sleeping, mockingly alleging, by an original string of syllogisms, that all evil is actually done by those who do not sleep, who have too much time (and subsequent boredom) at their disposal, which is used to negative ends. The celebration of a hedonist, carefree existence, which permits sleeping until late afternoon and the luxury to work only sporadically or to do unpaid (populist) favors to his humble friends, can nonetheless never be the apanage of those simple, lower class people that Juan (somewhat condescendingly) befriends, who have to work in order to earn the bare necessities of their existence: such an epicurean lifestyle can only rely on some prior capital, not only economic (with which Juan acquired his apartment and office as well as the basic necessities that he already has when he gives up his former job), but also educational and social (e.g., his skills, urbanity, social savoir faire, which also enables him to stay connected with better positioned people, for whom Juan does a series of paid “encargos”). Such leisurely life and carefree existential attitude are also an undeniable signifier of cultural distinction, being unsurprisingly contrasted to the economic and social hierarchies. Furthermore, Juan’s ambivalent embrace of a kind of older, pre-modern
values and forms of life (that celebrates the urban café tertulias, however) and his arduous rejection of what could be seen as “the Protestant work ethics” is dangerously close to the national and regional (i.e., Andalusian) entrenched stereotype of Spain, which is illustratively contrasted to the “American habits” that have already contaminated Spain. The opposition between the “American” space of the office and the autochthonous space of the café as the idoneous space for business parallels the clash between an (unnamed) American obsession with productivity, linked to Doctor Palacios’ research, and a would-be Spanish hedonist celebration of leisure, embodied in Juan’s idealized figure. This national contrast and almost patriotic vindication of a dubious national heritage problematically comes, nevertheless, at a time of welcome rapprochement with other Western countries (particularly the United States), as Spain is exiting its autarky and an economically and politically detrimental period of diplomatic isolation. On the other hand, Eloísa’s mocking reassessment of Juan’s hedonism (i.e., “Es usted como una vaca que se queda a mirar el tren.”) echoes Mihura’s similar, earlier celebration of a bohemian, carefree existence, linked to a peculiar kind of humor that was already discussed: “Yo, de momento, pienso que es mucho mejor ver pasar el tren, desde la pradera, como las vacas. Puede que sea una tontería, un gesto cursi, una estupidez, y una manera decadente y ‘snob’ de ver la vida. Pero es lo más cómodo que se ha inventado, lo más barato, y con lo que, además, no se hace daño a nadie.” (Mis memorias 316)¹ The return to such an existential perspective and view of humor in 1949 (when he wrote the script of Mi adorado Juan) represents a kind of “swan song” sequel for Mihura, as it comes after his earlier articles and fake autobiography that eulogized a similar outlook and that were all published at a historical time when such humor and contemplative lifestyle no longer seemed feasible nor alluring. This

¹ This fragment is part of a humorous fictitious autobiographical article that initially appeared in La Codorniz in the 1945 and 1946, when the magazine was no longer under Mihura’s leadership, and that was later republished in the 1948 collection titled Mis memorias.
“belatedness” might explain, to a certain extent, the sense of outdated and nostalgic coloring of this disparate comedy as well as its excessive reliance upon lengthy but frequently unconvincing speeches that seek to praise Juan’s existential choice and the parallel absence of a (historically impossible) persuasive narrative development of such a life stance, however useful as a defamiliarizing alternative, on the other hand, in respect to the hegemonic values of the time. It was quite ironical, therefore, that the Primer Plano review of Mi adorado Juan chose to silence the subversive implications of this disparate comedy by conveniently relegating it to an alleged “línea fantástica” that was evident in various earlier comedies directed by René Clair, Ernst Lubitsch or Frank Capra, who also seemingly employed non-conformist characters that “no están sujetos a las reglas de la lógica”.

If we leave aside the resourceful beginning of the comedy, most playful, nonsensical displays of humor are verbal and not situational, except when Juan brings an orphan child home to Eloísa soon after their unconventional wedding, alleging that he already wanted to have children and did not wish to wait for at least nine months.¹ His unceremonious treatment of the small boy as if the child were a merchandise (i.e., “no me ha costado nada, es una gama y juega muy bien”) caustically undoes the melodramatic discourse that frequently surrounds such orphan figures and reminds of similar prewar articles of Mihura in the pages of Gutiérrez, for instance (e.g., “Variétés en la inclusa”), where he also resorted to such playfully estranging breaks with the reigning system of moral values and social conventions.² Juan’s decision to abruptly return

¹ Some examples of such verbal disparate humor is when one of Juan’s friends, a former engineer, tells Doctor Palacios that he has given up his profession to study the liver, upon which he discovered that the liver does not actually exist, alleging some scientific proofs of its non-existence in Native American peoples (i.e., “indios”). Various other examples emerge when Juan presents his humble abode (i.e., a small, dirty, disorderly, noisy apartment, sometimes plagued by cockroaches) to Eloísa, who daintily remarks “¡qué bonito!”, “¡qué poético!”, “¡muy bien pensado!” as he grotesquely enumerates the numerous repulsive defects of his apartment, testing her reactions before agreeing to get married.

² It is quite ironical that the advertising poster of the movie chose once again to highlight a melodramatic discourse through the star images of the two main actors, Conrado Sanmartín and Conchita Montes, whose large faces appear
the child as Eloísa reminds him that he would need to work more in order to support him does not only further extend the dark humorous touches of the defamiliarizing merchandise association, but also serves to highlight Juan’s stubborn reluctance to make any compromise while he automatically expects Eloísa to assume and even increase her household chores to enable his bohemian comfort and to humor his occasional whims. She has a moderate victory, however, as, in the end, Juan condescendingly decides to work more and hire a maid to help her at home, as he is moved by her loyalty to him and her decision not to abandon their humble existence (she could have left with Manríquez and popularized his father’s research in America). ¹ Several other moments in the movie imply that this is only the beginning of a series of compromises that will eventually end with Juan’s enforced social integration through his wife’s criticized consumerist desires, a misogynist understanding that is oblivious of Juan’s self-centeredness and of Eloísa’s greater flexibility and devotion by agreeing to live a life so much more modest than she was used to. ²

It is important to mention here that Juan’s decision to abandon all social ambitions and material interests is, nevertheless, the significant outcome of a personal failure and the lack of the (mature) capacity to overcome it: as he confesses Doctor Palacios, he decided to embrace his current existence after a friend and patient died after he had performed surgery on him. Juan’s rejection of mundane temptations after the promise of a brilliant medical career, for which he had sacrificed his entire time and energy before, thus appears not so much a carefree celebration of

¹ One could easily say that he is actually moved to see in Eloísa’s final decision the efficiency of his own (Pygmalion) “work” that persuasively transformed her.
² Eloísa undergoes several “crises” (e.g., as she nostalgically looks over a fashion magazine, when she briefly goes back to her father’s house to take care of him during his illness, or when Manríquez tries to lure her with the prospect of a rich and famous existence), when she is tempted to leave Juan and go back to a leisurely affluent lifestyle that she enjoyed in her father’s house.
an epicurean existence as a defeatist stance, the result of his incapacity to process and overcome personal failure. Similar defeatist choices also characterize his close circle of friends, especially the biochemist Vidal (who could not overcome his former friends’ and colleagues’ personal and professional betrayals and the uncomfortable feeling that he was not irreplaceable) and, eventually, Doctor Palacios himself, who becomes increasingly disappointed by his assistant’s (Manríquez) gradual efforts to betray his trust and assume all merit for his research. Their trumpeted rejection of social conventions is therefore less laudatory than one might initially credit them for—the return to the adult world of social responsibilities would entail a mature revision of their frightened abandonment and the courage to face the possibility of (personal) failure and the subsequent destruction of their illusions of invincibility and self-importance.

The depiction of Juan’s rejection of the adult world of responsibilities and of his voluntary self-marginalization resonate with some of Chaplin’s Tramp characters and with several male protagonists from Capra’s movies as well as with Guaripato’s figure in Mihura’s earlier “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario” or with Paula’s idealized image from his celebrated 1932 play “Tres sombreros de copa”. The bohemian symbolism of the circus, with which Paula is associated, will appear again in the 1958 ¡Viva lo imposible!, directed by Rafael Gil, which ends in a similar manner as Mi adorado Juan, with the protagonists’ symbolic social integration and gradual loss of personal freedom after a temporary period of voluntary self-marginalization.

The disparate that sets in motion ¡Viva lo imposible! is represented by Don Sabino’s and, later, by his daughter’s (Palmira) bohemian decision to suddenly abandon their humble, bureaucratic jobs as state employees (i.e., “funcionarios de ministerio”) and to idealistically join a circus after they destroy or dispose of most of their inconsequential belongings and shout “Abajo lo vulgar y lo posible! ¡Viva lo imposible, lo soñado y lo utópico! ¡Oficina no, aire libre
Their intrepid adventure soon proves disappointing, especially for Palmira (modestly interpreted by the otherwise popular Paquita Rico), because of the unforeseen monotony and shortages of their itinerant life with the circus, which will make her eventually return to an existence even more tedious and mediocre than the one she initially fled: she will become an unhappy housewife, whose fastidious, stingy husband and former fiancé, Vicente, is, however, a better paid state employee (which means that he can enjoy, for instance, the luxury of a home phone). Eusebio, Don Sabino’s son, who grudgingly abandoned his secure life to join the circus, constantly complaining of the absurdity of this decision, will unsurprisingly be the first one to return to the social game, joining the state bureaucracy of the time that, although poorly paid, attracts him with the incentives of a fixed salary, paid vacations and a small apartment with central heating. The ironical twists of this comedy will show that the circus artists (e.g., the lion tamer Adriani, interpreted by Gila) actually long for a secure bourgeois existence, which they see superior to the routine and poverty of their own lives. Furthermore, Don Sabino (playfully interpreted by Manolo Morán), who resolutely decided to stay with the circus, will confess in the end that his eventual prosperous life is not indebted to his performance success but to his accountancy skills, which triggered the prosperity of the circus and hence his own better status.

Moreover, the conciliatory ending, which joins him, his daughter, Vicente, their son, and Adriani (who works in a zoo) in a melodramatic family setting, on New Year’s Eve, might seem to consolidate a conservative stance, praising the superiority of social integration and condemning the hollowness of a utopian bohemian dream of escape. This potential interpretation is severely undermined, however, not so much by the unglamorous life of the travelling circus as by the

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1 Upon finding out that Eusebio was secretly studying for the upcoming state exams (i.e., “oposiciones”), Don Sabino bitterly remarks “¡Eres capaz de matarme a disgustos, hipócrita! ¡Qué padre más desgraciado!”, an example of the playful verbal humor of this comedy, which frequently reverses the normal expectations of social life (in this case, of the more normal situation when parents are the ones who insist on the necessity of study and their children are often unattracted by the long-term investment in education).
devastatingly bleak image of the lower middle class and its meager living conditions, for which the break of a tureen is an authentic catastrophe and even a new hat or a simple waterproof coat represents a huge expense, the equivalent of ten years of savings. This grim picture acquires dark touches in Don Sabino’s story about his fellow employee who committed suicide, as he could no longer endure a constantly diminished salary (because of new taxes) and regularly increasing prices.\(^1\) Released in 1958, at a time when the hegemonic media employed a triumphalist tone about the modernization and rising prosperity of the Spanish population, ¡Viva lo imposible! offers an alternative gloomy perspective of how a large part of Spaniards actually lived, showing, besides, a dismal view of the diminishing role of the individual, stifled by sociopolitical and economic mechanisms and paying, at the very best, the harsh price of a mediocre, tedious and mean daily existence for the sake of the basic necessities of life (e.g., an apartment with central heating, home phone etc.). These bleak touches did not pass unnoticed by the reviews of the time, which indicted its “critica burda y grosera” of the contemporaneous society, as the annoyed Miguel Buñuel lucidly remarked (19), pointing to an unsanctioned (i.e., “indecorous”) humor that exposed, through comic defamiliarization, the oppressive socioeconomic workings of the late 1950s Spain.

It remains unclear to what extent the conservative finale or other few, openly moralizing stances of the movie (through unconvincing speeches), which seek to erase such prior bitterly critical touches, must be credited not to Mihura but to Calvo Sotelo’s touch—they jointly wrote the original 1939 play, “¡Viva lo imposible! o El contable de las estrellas”, that lay at the basis of

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\(^1\) What apparently prompted this employee’s suicide was his awareness of his future inability to have his daily roll (i.e., “bollo”) and coffee for breakfast, a detail that is not gratuitous in Mihura’s work, for whom a “café con leche” breakfast is synonymous of a nonconformist social existence while the reviled fried egg stands for social conformism, as is best illustrated in “Tres sombreros de pico”. The state employee’s suicide in ¡Viva lo imposible! might thus allude to a decision motivated by the prior symbolic destruction of the last possibility of individual freedom.
this script. Furthermore, even this play had a more audacious ending, giving the last words to Palmira, who bitterly-triumphantly exclaimed “¡Mamó de mí la aventura!” as her son ran away with Don Sabino and his circus. Adapted to the screen by Rafael Gil, a conservative postwar director, the end of this disparate comedy emphasizes Don Sabino’s conciliatory remarks to Vicente (in themselves not deprived of subversive connotations), “La felicidad consiste solo en ser lo que uno quiere ser”, which is meant to place the latter’s narrow-minded ambitions and complacency on the same level as the former’s bohemian dreams. “Lo imposible”, what cannot be fitted within the constraining discourse of social integration, is further resignified and tamed as merely what cannot yet be conceptualized because it pertains to the New Year, in a scene that shows all the main characters of the film holding hands and dancing while shouting “Viva el Año Nuevo, viva lo imposible!”. The comedy does not end here, however—the last scenes show the circus caravan disappearing in the distance and carrying with it, as it were, the seeds of bohemian rebellion and the protagonist who chose to dissociate himself from the social game. Don Sabino’s subversive figure is also enhanced by the brief depiction of his much younger, Parisian lover, another artist from the circus, with whom he maintains a relationship by all means different from the hegemonically endorsed institution of marriage.¹ This allusion to the circus as a morally permissive environment is enabled by the very itinerant, exterior location of the circus, which gives it an ampler margin of freedom in respect to the ordinary social conventions, even if his regular inhabitants (e.g., Adriani) appear to be longing for the very idealized commodities of the bourgeois existence.² This disenchanted, cynical view of happiness as nowhere in particular

¹ This allusion to a morally laxer life is also made manifest when various female artists nonchalantly walk around in bathing suits around the circus, triggering Eusebio’s sudden and only interest in a bohemian lifestyle.
² Adrian, who tames lions, is among those clearly expressing his longing for the security a bourgeois home. He is otherwise the protagonist of many playfully humorous scenes in this comedy, which undermine various melodramatic and social conventions by showing him talking about his lions as if he were talking about his babies and, on the contrary, treating another artist’s newborn baby as he treats wild animals (i.e., he soothes his crying by using his taming whip). This nonsensically unceremonious humor was understandably indicted by the conservative
but suspected to belong to those leading a completely different existence than one’s own
undeniably bears Mihura’s touch, echoing the ironical workings of human desire that he also
deployed in his play “Ni pobre ni rico sino todo lo contrario”, written the same year as the play
that lay at the basis of ¡Viva lo imposible!.

A similarly sarcastic but much more playful take on the avatars of desire is manifest in
what could be considered the last disparate comedy, Ninette y un señor de Murcia, directed and
starred by Fernando Fernán Gómez in 1965. It is a screen adaptation of a play where Mihura
perhaps most fiercely portrays the battle of sexes and the dangerous image of the attractive but
domineering young woman, who succeeds in taming an inveterate bachelor, transforming him
from an occasional lover into an unwilling husband. This depiction of a passive, bohemian man
who only seeks pleasure and an active woman who successfully uses her body in order to
domesticate the man’s instincts was by no means particular to Mihura nor to the Spanish cinema
of the time, where it extensively appeared in various desarrollistas comedies as well (e.g., Las
muchachas de azul, Viaje de novios, Ana dice sí, Luna de verano etc.). According to Steve Neale
and Frank Krutnik, this perspective was also shared by the contemporaneous American cinema,
which, starting with the 1950s and continuing into the 1960s increasingly focused on sexual
conflicts through a hero obsessed with proving his virility (by taking the female protagonist to
bed) but who was nonetheless strongly opposed to marriage, which he saw as a castrating
restriction, “an end to the male fantasy of unbridled sexual liberty” (169). Most Hollywood
comedies of the 1950s and 1960s thus construct a narrative where women and not men manifest
a strong desire for marriage and the necessary ruse to achieve it, while men need to be convinced
that marriage is after all worthwhile (i.e, despite a renunciation of their would-be “freedom”).

film reviews of the age for its “comicidad descabellada”, “de muy dudoso gusto”, unsurprisingly associated with a
“corte codornicesco” (Bufuel 19) that was deemed “grotesque”, hence socially indecorous in its defamiliarizing
touches.
The idea of marriage as an unwelcome, even passionately resisted, compromise for man is central to *Ninette y un señor de Murcia*, which is built on the following *disparate* situation: Andrés Martínez, a repressed, inveterate bachelor from Murcia, decides to spend fifteen days in Paris in search of erotic adventures and of a carefree life, yet he will eventually spend more than a month locked inside a small Parisian apartment, where he is more the seduced than the seducer of the twenty-three year old Ninette, whom he will be forced to marry and take to Murcia after she becomes pregnant. Andrés is undoubtedly representative for a large segment of middle-class Spanish men of the age, who had similar purposes in visiting France and who were similarly averse to a conservative conclusion of their erotic encounters.¹ Mihura’s playful touch makes such a man become the seduced, grudging prisoner of the young, beautiful and sophisticated woman (skillfully interpreted by the Mexican actress Rosenda Montero), whom he meant to rapidly seduce on his first day and then insouciantly move on to other conquests. Enticed by a jealous, scheming Ninette to remain inside with her every day of his extended stay, Andrés will even be coerced by her surprisingly traditionalist parents to marry her in order to repair her blemished “honor”, a conservative social discourse that he would not have expected to come across in the libertine Paris of his hedonist dreams.

The political humor associated with this absurdist entrapment situation was passionately denounced by the “progressive” leftists critics of the time, who, according to Mihura’s own declarations, accused him of endorsing the propagandistic interests of the Francoist government (de Miguel Martínez “Conversación con Miguel Mihura” 238). The reason for this angry

¹ Upon finding out about his friend’s plan to take him to a movie after his arrival, Andrés, very excited, asks him if they are going to see an erotic film (i.e., “película verde”), a clear allusion to the attraction of French erotic movies for many Spaniards of the time, who would often travel to Perpignan in order to see such films. He will be extremely disappointed to find out that Armando wants to take him to an art Russian movie. Armando’s role is brilliantly interpreted by a young Alfredo Landa, who efficiently stars a boastful, but timid and repressed Spaniard who had spent more time in Paris than Andrés, thus acquiring the undeserving aura of a morally loose Paris connoisseur.
reception was the fact that he embodied an almost Calderonian discourse of honor in Ninette’s parents, Pedro and Bernarda Sánchez, two Republican exiles in Paris, who had taken refuge in France after the Civil War. Their self-righteous, but naïve figures are constantly but tenderly mocked in this comedy, as they pride themselves on their leftist oppositional stance and their defense of complete freedom, yet when their own daughter remains pregnant without being married they immediately take up a conservative moral discourse that is similar to that hegemonically endorsed in the Francoist Spain of that time, humorously alleging “Somos de izquierdas, pero honrados y trabajadores”, “La política se debe olvidar cuando se trata de una hija.”, or “A la chica hay que casarla por la iglesia, no nos van a criticar a los españoles por la moral.”¹ These conservative values, together with a nostalgic, homesick patriotism, eventually appear more entrenched than their political ideas, which are comically depicted as the automatic repetition of various leftist slogans (e.g., “el factor capital prevalece sobre el trabajo”, “la abolición de los privilegios”, “la lucha de clase”, “la desigualdad social”) and the perpetuation of the outdated image of an impoverished, fundamentally autarkic Spain, where only few can afford to “eat” while the vast majority of the population is dying of hunger. This political satire inevitably consolidated the hegemonic image of a modernized Spain and undermined the image of the leftist Spanish exiles, who appear superficially informed by their political beliefs and utterly ignorant about Spain’s actual situation. Furthermore, they are portrayed just as fundamentally conservative as most right-wing Spaniards, a problematic caricature of the exiled Spanish opposition, which unsurprisingly triggered the fury of the leftist intelligentsia of the

¹ At the beginning of the movie, when Andrés meets his Paris hosts, they boast of their open-minded opinions and of their celebration of complete freedom in their house by showing him the large portraits of Lenin, Pablo Iglesias and (strangely enough) Alejandro Lerroux that dominate their living room and then proudly concluding “¡Qué más libertad quiere usted!”.
Mihura claimed, in his turn, that such characters corresponded to actual people he personally had known in France, “personas sin mucha idea política”, without “una ideología concreta, definida”, “que opinan y protestan, pero no saben muy bien por dónde van”, being only certain that “les jodía Franco” (238).

On the other hand, he might have indirectly taken his own playful revenge not only on some (leftist) politics that he had condescendingly derided from prewar times, as we have already seen, but also on the numerous leftists critics that increasingly indicted his lack of political commitment and his parallel official canonization in the 1960s and, based on this ethical-ideological incrimination, denied him a status of intellectual and artistic distinction in the cultural sphere of the time. The possibility of reading this comedy also as an implicit ludic revenge on such axiological criteria is perhaps best supported by Mihura’s indecorous trivialization of a peremptory political commitment as Pedro Sánchez earnestly admonishes (a privately indifferent) Andrés to resolutely choose and take a stand between the cocido and the fabada, as he cannot like both equally: “Tiene que inclinarse por una cosa, hay que tomar partido entre el cocido y la fabada.” The main problema of such a politically charged satire, however playful and consistent with Mihura’s proud endorsement of an uncommitted stance, is its inherent consonance with the discourse of political reconciliation of the time, which was in practice coupled with a continued repression of political dissenters to the Francoist regime, hence the potential reactionary value of its playfully defamiliarizing humor. By choosing to comically delineate the political “other”, relativizing the moral differences between the right-wing middle classes and the left-wing political exiles, this comedy did not so much legitimize the dominance

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1 For many anti-Francoist intellectuals and artists, Paris represented instead political, not erotic, freedom, that is, a place where they could buy books that were unavailable (usually censored) in Spain, for instance, and where they could meet some of the most important leftist militants against the Spanish authoritarian regime, most of whom had taken refuge there towards the end of the Civil War.
of those in power as it might have effectively strengthened the group identity and self-esteem of those who made up what was called the “sociological right wing”. On the other hand, it is undeniably true that Mihura’s story also sarcastically undermines any triumphalist hegemonic myth about a moral right-wing middle-class through Andrés’ and Armando’s pitiful antiheroic characters (who even openly identify themselves as right-wing in the movie). From Mihura’s cynical point of view, however, neither the right nor the left wing was morally or politically commendable, they were both unlikely to provide any solution, a radical skepticism to the possibility of any real change that many critics have reproached Mihura and the other humorists of “the other generation of 1927”. Mihura’s main (aesthetic) interest, however politically problematic at the time, might have been indeed, as he confessed in an interview with Emilio de Miguel Martínez, “presentar unos personajes humanos y pintorescos.”, which he subjected to his own disenchanted outlook, according to which “la felicidad no está en ninguna parte” (238) and the individual is always eventually crushed by the implacable forces of social conformism (often triggered or embodied by a female figure, as we have already seen). Before turning to the next comedic type under analysis, the costumbrist disparate, which will present a similarly dark visión starting with the late 1950s, it should be briefly remarked that there was a noticeable similarity between Mihura’s dark, misogynist perspective and the humor that was present in the pages of La Codorniz around the same period, an ironical consistency given the humorist’s resolute distancing from the new direction of this magazine after 1946: after roughly 1956 but culminating in the mid-1960s, La Codorniz displays an increasing number of darkly comic caricatures and sketches that focus on domestic and bureaucratic despotic figures and on insecure, passive men that try to avoid marriage but are eventually victimized by predatory,
domineering women, most often driven by pragmatic, even unscrupulously materialist reasons, who lead the erotic conquest and allow no way out of the social game.¹

**The costumbrist disparate: Back into the social game**

The chosen term of “costumbrist disparate” refer to a type of disparate made up of nine surviving comedies (i.e., El hombre que se quiso matar, El destino se disculpa, El sistema Pelegrin, Habitación para tres, El malvado Carabel, Sólo para hombres, Maribel y la extraña familia, Un marido de ida y vuelta, Tú y yo somos tres) that playfully offer an ampler, critical view of contemporaneous society, customs, manners through one or more unusual individuals that, often in a picaresque manner, tend to seek a better social integration. What differences these costumbrist disparates from other costumbrist comedies of the same period, especially from those of the 1950s (e.g., Recluta con niño, El tigre de Chamberí, Así es Madrid, ¡Ahí va otro recluta!, Historias de la radio, Historias de Madrid, Manolo, guardia urbano), is their disenchanted, playful defamiliarization of the Spanish sociopolitical institutions of the time. Similar to the bohemian disparates both through their social critique and through their logical development of an initially nonsensical premise, the costumbrist disparates lack, however, the protagonist’s desire to lead a bohemian, carefree life at the margins of society, frequently putting

¹ “Helena de Troya”, for instance, which appeared in 1962 and was signed by P García, depicts a humorously updated version of the ancient myth, in which Helena talks like a contemporaneous young woman and, full of initiative and posterior interests, asks an insecure, coward Paris to kidnap her. According to José Antonio Llera (294), it was quite common of La Codorniz in the 1960s to sarcastically dwell on the gradual transformation of sentimental conventions and on the alleged (and feared) change of gender roles in large cities, which led to outgoing, active women and insecure, passive men, a reversal that was attributed to the influence of Hollywood movies and nonchalantly provocative female tourists, coming especially from France or the Northern European countries. The portrayal of Ninette as the French educated daughter of some Spanish exiles is thus not gratuitous in so far as she comically embodies both the modern, provocative sophistication of the idyllicized French women and the conservative, pragmatic and marriage-oriented mentality (especially in case of a pregnancy) of a “morally anachronic” Spain.
forth, on the contrary, a shrewd, pragmatic wish to take as much advantage as possible of the available socioeconomic opportunities. While in at least half of these comedies (i.e., Sólo para hombres, Maribel y la extraña familia, Un marido de ida y vuelta, Tú y yo somos tres) the metonymic institution of marriage provides the preferred catalytic ambience that sets in motion the playful social critique of the comedy, all costumbrist *disparates* actually employ the image of marriage to a greater or lesser extent in order to put forth a critical perspective of contemporaneous society. Unlike screwball comedies (whether of commitment or of reaffirmation), no costumbrist *disparate* comedy (and no *disparate*, for that matter) is actually centered upon the establishment or re-establishment of romance, which is viewed through cynical lenses in all *disparate* comedies. As in the case of the bohemian *disparates* previously analyzed, these costumbrist comedies, produced in the same period, between the beginning of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1960s, are in a similar dialog with various autochthonous and foreign film genres (e.g., *desarrollista* comedies, thrillers, comedian comedies) as well as with other contemporaneous media discourses, the most conspicuous being the humorous rhetoric of *La Codorniz*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the hegemonic and/or triumphalist news and editorials of the time. Furthermore, these comedies and the humorists’ plays and novels inspired, in their turn, various other critical Spanish comedies of the late 1950s, particularly those starring and/or directed by Fernando Fernán Gómez (e.g., *La vida privada de Fulano de tal, La vida por delante, La vida alrededor*), which make sporadic use of several ludic situations and conversations.

While an extended, playful parodic rewriting of various types of mystery movies (particularly crime and horror thrillers) defines the third kind of *disparate* comedy under consideration, the mystery *disparate*, which will be last analyzed in this chapter and thesis, some
costumbrist disparities (i.e., El hombre que se quiso matar, Habitación para tres, El malvado Carabel) also display occasional parodic plays upon thrillers, which question the usual ethical distinction between the good and the bad forces of society. Such comedies, like many caricatures and stories published in the contemporaneous La Codorniz, tend to subversively show, on the one hand, that social and economic success belongs to those who are morally unscrupulous and, on the other, that thieves and burglars are often ethically commendable by comparison. Some other instances of nonsensical humor in such comedies verge on the comic incompetence of such positively portrayed antiheroes, while others acquire dark humorous touches of corrosive social critique, particularly in El hombre que se quiso matar and in El malvado Carabel, as we shall soon see.

Released in 1942 under Rafael Gil’s direction, El hombre que se quiso matar is, perhaps, the darkest Spanish comedy of the 1940s, with no immediate film precedent or sequel that could be traced. While it remains unclear how such a mordantly cynical movie could bypass the injunctions of censorship, which could have easily found objections in the very allusion to suicide from its title, there might be some potential explanations, which are all dependent, however, on a still insufficiently formalized censorship apparatus, which frequently acted chaotically, relying on the individual censors’ whims, obtuseness and even laziness. Here we should remember Berta Muñoz Cáliz’ research on humor theater, which shows how, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, many censors signed the release authorization without even drafting a report to justify their approval, hence most probably without even reading the

1 Rafael Gil returned to this story in 1970, when he produced another version of El hombre que se quiso matar, starring an aging Tony Leblanc as Federico Solá, now a fired Latin teacher that tends to live in his imagination. The comedic attempts of this film are quite unconvincing due to an excessive moralizing and melodramatic tone as well as to a painfully slow tempo, devoid of sparkling wit, which dwells too much on the protagonist’s harangues and on his compensatory fantasizing. Furthermore, Tony Leblanc interprets a pitiful character that is always victimized (even by his own pupils), deprived of wit and audacity, which makes his overnight transformation utterly unconvincing. The movie does convey, however, a social and moral critique, which is too overtly moralizing to be very effective.
play whose author was simplistically considered ideologically safe, that is, allegedly sympathetic to the Nationalist coup (“La censura y el teatro de humor” 151). Similar incidents must have happened in the sphere of film censorship, where film adaptations of respectable classics or politically conservative authors (as was the case of the otherwise complex Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, whose novel lays at the basis of El hombre que se quiso matar) enjoyed considerable leniency from the censorship apparatus.1 While Fernández Flórez’ name might have been in itself a sufficient (however ultimately treacherous) guarantee of the original story’s moral and political innocence, the apparently domesticating ending of the comedy (i.e., imminent marriage and subsequent renunciation to the trumpeted suicide) might have tempered, as in many other cases, the well-founded suspicions triggered by the previous development of the plot. Be it as it may, it is interesting to note that this movie, named “comedia humana” at that time (i.e., with a name that attempts to dilute the subversive specificity of its social and moral critique), enjoyed considerable success with the contemporaneous public and received laudatory, if extremely vague, film reviews in magazines such as Dígame, Primer Plano, Radiocinema, Cámara etc. These reviews dutifully mention Fernández Flórez’ name (already famous from his periodical contributions as well) as “el primer humorista español” but shrewdly silence all details about the actual comedic plot—the movie is praised instead for its dynamic pace, its “humanidad y realismo”, and for “naturalidad”, while Antonio Casal’s interpretation is justly extolled. What is also unsurprisingly mentioned is the (commended) happy ending, which is laconically associated, in the case of the review published in Dígame (6), for instance, with an alleged redeeming woman, who supposedly “cristianamente” teaches the would-be “weak” protagonist.

1 The critics who hastily dismiss Wenceslao Fernández Flórez on ideological grounds (i.e., as “conservative” or “right wing”), which transform him into a writer of an aesthetically indecorous work, tend to forget his own problems with literary and film censorship (despite his later job as film censor), which often found problems with his agnosticism, his virulent social and moral critique and with his postwar political interventions for his Republican friends who were on trial.
(i.e., “corazón de bizcoche”) that “ante la adversidad hay que sobreponerse y luchar”. On the other hand, Vicente Casanova, the founder and manager of CIFESA, was understandably very annoyed with this disparate comedy despite its commercial success and positive, if vague revues, and seems to have regretted his trust in Rafael Gil, who was permitted to direct El hombre que se quiso matar as his first feature film (Fanés 198).

The disparate that sets in motion this comedy is Federico Solá’s publicly trumpeted decisión to commit suicide within four days, which enables him to enjoy complete freedom to do whatever he wishes, as, by choosing death, there is no actual punishment with which the disciplinary forces of society can frighten him: coming after several comically failed attempts of suicide (whose fiasco echoes Chaplin’s and other silent comedians’ 1920s characters), a potential death penalty would only successfully take care of what he actually desires. Federico’s constant awareness of his forthcoming death thus ironically reverses the didactic premises of Christian morality (according to which the consciousness of imminent departure from this life is one of the best self-disciplining pedagogues), as it leads him to a behavior that is the very contrary of an ascetic conduct in view of eternal salvation (which is never posited in the comedy). Furthermore, his fellow citizens either have their morbid curiosity piqued enough to let him do whatever he wishes during these four days or are afraid of his courageous resolution not to stoop at anything—this newly acquired freedom from social conventions efficiently protects him of any legal repercussions for his anarchic actions. As in the case of Amaro Carabel, the protagonist of El malvado Carabel, also adapted from one of Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ similarly dark

1 Similar advertising strategies are displayed in the movie’s posters, which mention that the original story belongs to Wenceslao Fernández Flórez and sometimes reframe it along moralizing lines (i.e., “las aventuras de un hombre que encontró la felicidad cuando decidió matarse abrumado por su mala estrella”), shrewdly capitalizing on the star images of the actors Antonio Casal and Rosita Yarza and on the romance that only comes at the end, in between a deus ex machina convenient resolution and a finishing touch on the protagonist’s cynical defiance and denunciation of social conventions and hierarchy.
novels, the civil engineer Federico Solá’s decision is motivated by his unjust job loss (after years of efficient professional devotion to cement), which is followed by his fiancée’s unscrupulous betrayal (after a prolonged nine year relationship in the hope of eventual marriage). Federico is brilliantly interpreted by Antonio Casal, whose fame and popularity is, according to his own words, inextricably linked to his interpretation of analogous downtrodden characters in Rafael Gil’s “comedias humanas” (Casal 21), a contemporaneous label that strangely integrated such different movies as El hombre que se quiso matar, Huella de luz and Viaje sin destino.¹ The portrayal of this repeatedly mistreated character in the first part of El hombre que se quiso matar, cannot really trigger, however, an empathetic identification from the spectators’ part, as the potentially melodramatic discourse that is implicit in Federico’s words and series of misfortunes is constantly deflated by his comically incompetent suicide attempts, by his self-irony, or by other characters’ humorously undermining remarks, efficiently supported by a versatile facial expression and body language (especially in the case of his hostess, superbly interpreted by the secondary actress Camino Garrigó). These mocking comments frequently employ a playful (i.e., “disparatado”) use of logic, often under a paradoxical form or as an ironical take on syllogistic reasoning.²

¹ Only his generally melodramatic interpretations in Huella de luz and in the later El fantasma y Doña Juanita fully deserve, however, various critics’ generalizing comments about Casal’s acting style as embodying an “infinite sadness”, “bitterness” and “constant defeat” (Pena 36), “el tipo de entrañable galán de clase media, modesto y débil, honrado y soñador, finalmente triunfante […] lleva en el rostro la frustración de quien es incapaz de superar unas barreras inaccesibles tanto para su deseo como para su miseria material” (Castro de Paz “Antonio Casal comicidad y melancolía” 20). Antonio Casal’s characters are even generalized as symbolical of “la melancólica e incurable herida” of the entire Spanish postwar period (24).

² An instance of this inverted, paradoxical logic appears when the downcast, recently fired Federico talks to the doorman of the cement factory that employed him, the latter tells him in a mock consoling tone that he has observed that “los que más cobran son los que menos entran”. When Federico complains that he was substituted by the manager’s (incompetent) son-in-law, the doorman matter-of-factly replies: “es normal, nunca entra”. In an example of cinematographic humor, pertaining to montage, the doorman also encouragingly tells Federico to rely on his fiancée’s support (i.e., “¿Qué no consigue un hombre con el cariño de una mujer! […] Le animará a seguir luchando”), after which there is an immediate transition to a scene where Federico’s fiancée condescendingly scolds him and mercilessly reproaches him in the end: “Eres incorregible: ni sabes encontrar un empleo, ni sabes querer una mujer, no sabes nada. Otros sabrán corresponder a mis deseos. ¡Adios para siempre!”
One of the particularly dissolving sources of laughter is the parodic use of the melodramatic and religious rhetoric, which appears united with a hypocritical concern with appearances and as a shallow disguise of a dehumanizing heartlessness, as is the case of Federico’s hostess, who, in front of his confessed depression (due to the recent loss of job and fiancée), sighs and exclaims: “Ah, ¡no hay nada que no podamos soportar con resignación! No es mía, sino de una novela preciosa… Ah, tampoco cobramos hoy… ¡Qué le vamos a hacer! Lo siento mucho, lo vamos a meter a la cárcel y matarlo.” The dark humorous touches of such a break with the system of moral values and (socialized) emotional reactions are manifest especially in the second part of the movie, after Federico announces his decision to commit suicide, which gives rise to his transformation into a public danger, whose proximity to death makes him impervious to any social humiliation or legal repercussion. Like the marginalized, but unsuccessful Amaro Carabel, Federico Solá has an enlightening function, highlighting the callous indifference and the hypocrisy of a society that is visually, socially and morally representative of the contemporaneous postwar Spanish, despite the original story’s earlier publication, in 1934. It could actually be argued that the successful reception of this bleak disparate comedy is indebted precisely to the veracity of its pessimistic social tableau, which the contemporaneous audiences could easily identify, and to the pragmatic, cynical transformation of the film’s protagonist in his original search for social advancement, which must have constituted an alluring possibility for many spectators, thus playing an important part in the comedy’s audience success.

1 His hostess will thus bring him a lavish breakfast the next day, unctuously telling him: “Puede usted quedarse si de todos modos va a suicidarse en tres días. ¡Qué van a decir los vecinos, que lo abandono en los últimos días! Es que tengo corazón, pero no admite huéspedes. […] Si lo encuentran gordito como cadáver, pensarán que en esa pension se come bien y nunca está de más acreditar la casa.” Another important target of dark humor is the unscrupulous business interests of the owner of the vermouth La Pardala, who tries to persuade Federico to commit suicide with a bottle of vermouth in one hand and with a notice on his chest that says “La Pardala es insuperable. ¡RIP!”, which would appear in all newspapers after his death.
Federico Solá’s fellow citizens are shown as eager and uncaring prospective spectators of his announced suicide, either for its inevitable sensationalist thrills or as a revenge for the physical and psychological damages that the protagonist defiantly caused during these days, when he enjoyed any food or drink without paying, took revenge on various fraudulent business owners (e.g., who made cheap liquor concoctions for the poor clients), forced a butcher to feed an impoverished, famished reporter on a daily basis, etc. His restorative justice does not appear to be motivated by compassion or a sense of moral rectitude, however, but by a vindictive desire, with which many spectators could easily identify, to see the former humiliators put down and ridiculed, on the one hand, and, on the other, by his own personal desire of showing the extent of his newly acquired power and freedom. His apparent Robin Hood odyssey begins with a public conference, originally scheduled to be about his formerly favorite topic (i.e., the cement), but which he uses as a platform to announce his decision to commit suicide in four days and to fully enjoy life after thirty six years of failures and desillusions, which brought him to the awareness that “la vida es profundamente estúpida” and is not worth living. The undoubted subversiveness of this statement—in respect to the hegemonically endorsed Christian values and to the politically triumphalistic rhetoric that harped on the virtues of an ascetic, sacrificial life in the harsh autarkic context of the Spanish postwar—is further enhanced by Federico’s corrosive treatment of his listeners (openly called “ídotas”, “ridículos y cursi”) or of various fellow citizens in the street, who are mercilessly shown how their own lives are equally or even more devoid of meaning and happiness.

The only positive, if artificial, figure in this overall bleak comedy is Inés, the daughter of the famous architect and affluent businessman Argüelles, who is the only one who takes pity in Federico’s unhappy life and suicide decision and briefly tries to persuade him not to commit
suicide but to resolutely struggle against any “adversity”. Unsubstantially consolidated outside her short, impassioned speeches, her moralizing figure is quite unconvincingly delineated, nevertheless, functionally reminding of various other female characters from comedian comedies, who seek to domesticate the main character and to re-integrate him into the social order. While she remains the only person who tries to prevent Federico’s death, he seems persuaded less by her moralizing-melodramatic words and more by her beauty and her wealth—he openly acknowledges that he always wanted to enjoy such a beautiful, seemingly inaccessible woman’s love and to possess her parents’ luxurious mansion. Furthermore, before his alleged suicide, he shrewdly threatens Inés’ father with murder (in order to have an intelligent “compañero de viaje” after his death), thus obtaining from him Inés’ hand and an enviable position in his company (seemingly “para tener categoría en las esquelas de defunción”). Federico will later abandon his initial decision, however, running away with Inés, to the great disappointment of all the citizens who were morbidly and vindictively expecting his public suicide.¹

While there are no similarly dark disparate comedies in the 1940s, the disenchanted humor of El hombre que se quiso matar seems to echo that sense of daily absurdity and “filosofía de la vida cínica” that Vázquez Montalbán saw in many popular songs of the age (36-37), perhaps best embodied by Ramón Evaristo’s song, which caustically asserted that “para darse la gran vida/ es cuestión de cara dura” (53-54). Furthermore, between 1941 and 1942, La Codorniz published some of Fernández Flórez’ corrosive stories (e.g., “La atracción amorosa”, “No hace falta morirse”), that put forth a similarly subversive, disenchanted outlook, echoing the Freudian and the Marxist perspectives: romantic love is depicted as a mere sublimation of desire, while

¹ Inés’ carefree elopement with Federico at the end of the comedy, after he shrewdly obtained what he had wanted (i.e., “novia y colocación”), also casts serious doubts on her moral integrity, especially on her filial loyalty and love.
family appears as a merely necessary socioeconomic unit. Moreover, many contemporaneous caricatures and stories (e.g., Tono’s “Diálogo antropófago”) published in La Codorniz between 1941 and 1942 feature dark humorous takes on death, often associated with sadistic doctors and barbers, as well as impious takes on religion (e.g., in Neville’s “diary” of Adam and Eve), which helps us situate this original disparate comedy within a cultural environment that not only produced other dark, cynical stories but also enjoyed, in all these cases, an important, uncontested popularity. The successful reception of such a counter-hegemonic vision and its very presence in various venues of great public impact is yet another proof for the existence of an important alternative public sphere in postwar Spain, which was shaped also by disparate comedies like El hombre que se quiso matar, an otherwise trivialized sample of the alleged “escapist” cinema of the age.

If El hombre que se quiso matar is situated in a provincial setting (that is not united with the entrenched moralizing discourse of regerationism), El malvado Carabel, directed by Fernando Fernán Gómez in 1956, is set in Madrid. Based on a 1931 novel by Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, this disparate comedy operates an even darker social and moral critique of contemporaneous society, lacking a redeeming female figure and ending in a circular manner: its humble protagonist, the real estate agent Amaro Carabel, does not succeed to improve his fate and socially advance by wit and cunning, remaining a poorly paid, oppressed employee that is also dominated by his frivolous, materialist fiancée, Silvia. The disparate mechanism of this movie is again set in motion by the protagonist’s undeserved job loss (after ten years of faithful service to the same company) and the subsequent betrayal of his disappointed fiancée, which, together with his failed attempts to find a job or to impress Silvia, catalyze his sudden decision to

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1 One could also think of a tempting analogy with the incipient literary tremendismo as another example of an overall dark, cynical vision that unsurprisingly emerged around the same time, at the beginning of the 1940s.
“seguir el camino de los hombres malos” and become “el enemigo de todos los madrileños”. While he equally fails to become a successful professional criminal (e.g., as petty thief, hotel robber, child abuser etc.) and comically ends up at his former agency, with a diminished salary, his frustrated forays into the world of crime put forth not only a cynical social and moral ambience, deprived of model characters, but also a kind of amoral protagonist. Carabel (and, to a considerable extent, also his aunt, his friend, Gregorio, and his fiancée) seems completely unconcerned with ethical distinctions as long as he is not endangered by an immediate threat to his life (as it happens in a hotel room from which he tried to steal) or by a disciplinary social retaliation (through a legal system enforced by the police). He and his aunt are thus shown in a dark comedic sequence as they matter-of-factly try to forcefully bend an orphan child’s legs in order to transform him into a lucrative beggar, a scene that strongly resonates not only with one of Fernández Flórez’ own stories, “El niño y sus aplicaciones”, published in La Codorniz in 1942, but also with Azcona’s dark humorous stories contemporaneously published in the same humor magazine (e.g., “¿Se pueden aprovechar los niños enfermos graves?”).

Carabel and his aunt might not carry out their plans in the end, but their blatant temporary insensitivity to the child’s crying protests is likely to trigger an uncomfortable, disturbing laughter in the audience, which undermines both the empathetic identification with his plight (including his somewhat justified desire to become a petty criminal) and the condescending distancing from his comical failures: the tension built in the child abuse sequences disrupt a potentially uncritical film-viewing (i.e., as something not to be taken in earnest), offering no

1 As he further claims that “[s]e acabó el Amaro Carabel el bueno, que temblaba ante los jefes y se enternecía delante de una mujer.”, his aunt, brilliantly interpreted by the secondary actress Julia Caba Alba, will humorously break the system of expected moral outrage, welcoming his decision to change and even encouraging him to selfishly do whatever makes him happy. She also comically reminds him that “de muchos hombres malos se habla después de que desaparecen, de los desgraciados nunca” and confesses that she would like to be “mala” as well.
safety net from the awareness that the movie has more serious implications. Comic interludes thus seem to reinforce the unsettling impact of the disturbing material, which clearly plays with sociocultural decorum, that is, with the limits of what is acceptable to treat humorously: abuse, especially inflicted on defenseless children (who are even portrayed as orphans, as the last finishing touch), is not meant to be depicted as funny, yet dark comedy and humor are inseparable from the pessimistic image of an overall “decline” in moral values, which brings about a broader questioning about ethics and society. While this episode of child abuse might have also parodically played with the conventions of melodrama and of crime fiction, Carabel’s and his aunt’s heartless attempt to transform the child into a source of easily earned money (which is indifferently viewed by Gregorio, Carabel’s former colleague) appears normalized in a social environment that is utterly unconcerned, even cruel, with individual predicament (as was the case of Carabel’s superiors, for instance) and that is primarily interested in selfish, lucrative solutions, even at the expense of an ethical relation with the other human beings. These dark moments thus add up to the social and moral critique interspersed throughout the comedy, which shows how financial gains is more important than friendship (Carabel was fired because he inadvertently revealed his company’s investment scheme to a friend of one of the owners of the real estate agency that employed him) and how money and position are the leading reason for marriage (Silvia abandons Carabel after he is fired, preferring a pedantic dentist, but she will later return to him as Carabel confesses that he robbed his company’s huge safe box).

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1 This disquieting sense is further increased by the passing mention that the abused child became orphan because of his (probably single) mother’s suicide, an allusion to an extreme case of unalleviated individual despair and alienation.

2 As Silvia is impressed by the newly enterprising Carabel and is easily persuaded by his asserted necessity of evil (i.e., “hay que ser malo, los malos son los únicos que prosperan”), she quickly concedes that he is right, at which Carabel humorously retorts: “solo con el robo, la estafa y el engaño se puede conseguir una mujer como tú”.
The dark touches of Fernán Gómez’ 1956 versión were not discursively isolated, however, in the cultural panorama of the age: starting with the second half of the 1950s, La Codorniz made extensive use of a dark skepticism on romance and friendship (e.g., in various caricatures by Gila or Chumy Chúmez as well as in several stories signed by Serafín and Cebrián). The mid-1950s actually meant a clearer turn to a costumbrist satiric bent for La Codorniz, which became increasingly cynical and dark, an attitude that permeated not only the portrayal of personal relationships of friendship or love, but also social relations: financial lords, rich industrialists and business owners and managers are depicted as selfish and insensitive to the point of dehumanization, while the space of the office becomes a kind of merciless tool of social disciplining for the lower middle classes, as apparent in the famous series “La oficina siniestra”, introduced in 1953 and signed by Pablo. The numerous caustic allusions to the massive, unscrupulous real estate speculation of the age (e.g., in Cebrián’s articles after 1956) parallel the subversive transformation of the initial bank (where Carabel worked in Fernández Flórez’ novel) into a real estate agency in Fernán Gómez’ adaptation, which undeniably added a contemporaneous critical touch that was present in some later, more well-known films of the time, such as El inquilino, La vida por delante, La vida alrededor and the starkly dark El pisito. Neither the conservative movie reviewers of the age nor the contemporaneous film censors must have been missed this shrewd critique—the latter qualified this comedy as 3M (i.e., “apta para mayores”).¹ The latter tended to silence it or to shrewdly attribute all social and moral critique to an overall satiric tendency of Fernández Flórez’ work (written in the 1920s and 1930s), thus displacing the corrosive elements to a conveniently chosen prewar time, even if Fernán Gómez’ screen adaptation was clearly updated—not only in respect to the contemporaneous real estate

¹ Other undeniable allusions to the contemporaneous social unrest is implicit in the suspicious, verging on the menacing attitude of Carabel’s boss (i.e., “ahora si es usted un revolucionario, un promotor de huelgas…”), when the protagonist humbly asks for a raise before his prospective marriage.
speculations but also in so far as the characters’ dress, speech, setting and overall relations are concerned. The Primer Plano critic laconically decried, however, the comedy’s insistence in “la humana fatalidad de vivir” and its “patetismo amargo y a veces cruel”, a perspective that is accompanied by a “tono primordialmente humorista y superficial” at first, which is gradually destroyed by “el peso de las situaciones más o menos graciosas”, an implicit allusion to the increasingly disturbing sensation triggered by the moments of dark humor. It is precisely this dark comic visión, inseparable from an overall disenchanted social and moral outlook, that prevents the application of the more optimistic label of “utopian costumbrism” to El malvado Carabel and El hombre que se quiso matar, a classifying tag employed by José Carlos Mainer in respect to Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ original novels. It is problematic to endorse his view of the main characters as fundamentally kind and structurally unable to be evil, a characterization that was also conveniently advanced by the films’ contemporaneous reviewers (most probably not devoid of conservative beautifying reasons, in their cases): if Federico Solá’s actions are propelled by vindictive, ostentatious motives and his elopement with Inés is not at all idyllic but cynically pragmatic, Carabel eventually accepts his former job, with an even more diminished salary, not because he was “fundamentally good”, but because it was the easiest (i.e., most familiar) way of earning his living after a series of failed, exhausting attempts to be a successful criminal.

This utterly pessimistic image of society, offering no solutions of overcoming one’s miserable situation nor of a better social integration, is quite different, for instance, from Neville’s 1935 version of El malvado Carabel, judging by the very brief surviving fragment of this adaptation. This toned-down, melodramatic comedy featured the chaplinesque Antonio Vico as

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1 The main advertising poster of this comedy also silenced its fierce critical tendency, by choosing to focus on various close-ups of Carabel and Silvia, showing different moods and attitudes, thus highlighting a potentially melodramatic imbroglio and misfortunes of the male protagonist.
Amaro Carabel, whose attempts to become a successful criminal were tenderly pathetic, hence gently ironized, in so far as he was indeed portrayed as a structurally kind protagonist that could not inflict evil but was exclusively victimized. On the contrary, in the 1956 version even Carabel’s conscience is caustically portrayed through a cynically matter-of-fact voice-over that makes mock-Nietzschean allusions, prompting him to evil and easily dismissing any potential remorse or fear of disciplinary retaliation (e.g., “todo puede ser tuyo”, “tienes derecho como cualquier otro”, “déjate de buscar empleo, esto es para los débiles”). The occasional use of this voice-over, which ironically opens and closes both El malvado Carabel and El hombre que se quiso matar, shrewdly emphasize the plots’ alluring originality and wish-fulfilling character (i.e., “una experiencia que muchos soñaron llevar a cabo” in El malvado Carabel), anticipating the potentially subversive identifying mechanisms that these comedies can set in motion. Furthermore, the voice-over also ascribes a universalizing, parable-like value to the two stories, responding, besides, to Fernández Flórez’ self-referential, metanarrative tendency, which was also present in the 1945 disparate comedy El destino se disculpa, based upon the humorist’s 1930 novel El fantasma. Both in this story and in its screen adaptation, the metanarrative comments are placed in an unlikely mouth, belonging to (a personified) destiny looking straight into the camera, who claims that he invented the upcoming “fábula absurda y disparatada” for didactic purposes, in order to show how unjustly “he” is accused of manipulating people’s fates, which are allegedly determined instead by their own choices (i.e., “libre albedrío”).

The situational disparate that sets in motion this comedy, based upon a story-within-the-story framework, can thus be first linked to the corporeal and bureaucratic image of destiny (i.e., who introduces himself as a “modesto y digno funcionario”), which, despite its trumpeted self-advertising as “simpático”, puts forth a rather uncanny, Kafkian picture of a metaphysically and
socially disciplinary power that condescendingly plays with individual lives. This despotic, moralizing figure that makes everything didactically visible while remaining invisible is unsurprisingly depicted as a bureaucrat, which can easily prompt a tempting reading of contemporaneous Spain, whose disciplinary regime was bureaucratically enforced. This peculiar embodiment also starkly reminds Foucault’s account of modern surveillance and punishment, which are carried out precisely by the paradigmatic “petit fonctionnaire de l’orthopédie morale” (Surveiller et punir 17), whose figure replaced the former public spectacle of suffering.

On a second level, the disparate operating within the destiny’s parable is a result of the friendly pact between Teófilo and Ramiro, according to which whoever dies first will come back to guide the surviving other, thus proving the existence of the other world. This unusual pact is put into practice, after Teófilo’s sudden death, by his ghost, which has thirty days to guide his friend, Ramiro, on the (moral) path that is best for him, which entails a dissuading counseling against Ramiro’s intended marriage and business investment. The subsequent development of the plot actually dwells on a kind of “conductismo espiritual”, as Santos Zunzunegui aptly observes (“El destino se disculpa 1945” 186), which is manifest through Teófilo’s ghost, who even rescues his friend from suicide through this final intervention. The comedy concludes with a seemingly contrite Ramiro, miraculously in possession of a small shop of food supplies and suddenly aware of and then responsive to Valentina’s selfless love, an enforced moralizing happy ending that conservatively reintegrates Ramiro into the contemporaneous society. This didactic finale takes place after a brief return to the seemingly benevolent figure of destiny, who unconvincingly finishes his illustrating “fable” by pragmatically advising the audience to appeal to “la moral cristiana y el sentido común” in case of dilemmatic situations. Only the virtuous Valentina and Ramiro’s sister, Benita, relied, nevertheless, on this values, while Teófilo’s ghost
unsuccessfully tried to instill this perspective into Ramiro as well—the moralizing ending of the story is more the outcome of a felicitous *deus ex machina* solution to the protagonist’s misfortunes than of a convincing narrative development of how useful it is to depend upon common sense and a (loosely defined) Christian moral code.

It is important to mention here that especially Benita, but even Valentina to some extent, provide some uncommonly empowering role models in this movie. Strong-willed, practical and successfully self-dependent, Benita disobeys her brother’s request, that is, to buy costly furniture for his projected future house (where he would live after marriage with Elena, the film’s embodiment of *femme fatale*) and uses part of the inheritance money to successfully invest in a business project, a shop that she names Mantequerías Arnal, using her and Ramiro’s family name. Benita’s pragmatic disobedience of a masculine figure as well as her unusual freedom, assertiveness and power to become a successful businesswoman, who will eventually rescue her vain, weak and impractical brother as well, stand in a stark contrast in respect to most postwar Spanish women’s rights and work opportunities, thus providing a subversively emancipating image. On the other hand, this powerful female image can be linked to similar empowering women figures that appear not only in many folkloric and screwball comedies of the time, but also in the writings of various female fascist activists of the age.¹ As already mentioned in the first chapter, dedicated to screwball, even if these role models advocate a kind of “domestic” and not public feminism (the latter being quite impossible at the time), which is eventually meant to bring about man’s redemption, the skills and actions that are employed for this justifying purpose nonetheless provide contemporaneous women spectators with very different images of

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¹ For more details about this latter presence, see the articles by Jo Labanyi (i.e., “Resemanticizing Feminine Surrender: Cross-Gender Identification in the Writings of Spanish Female Fascist Activists”) and Sonia Núñez Puente (i.e., “The Romance Novel and Pop Culture in the Early Franco Regime in Spain: Towards the Construction of Other Discourses of Femininity”).
femininity in respect to the hegemonically enforced, which harped upon women’s passivity, silence, and marginality, on their apparent psychological and intellectual weakness, and on their incapacity of autonomous thought and action. Even Valentina’s submissive, seemingly angelical figure is endowed with such empowering practical traits that will significantly find their reward not in the romanticized, hegemonical image of marriage that she passingly mentions (i.e., “El matrimonio es el major medio de embellecer la vida”), united to the vision of a home in “un rincón aislado”: she will eventually stay with Ramiro (owner of a business) in Madrid, after coming from a provincial small town where she could not successfully prove her efficient practical, organizing skills. Leaving aside these qualities, her exalted virtuous image is quite bland and overly didactic, being unable to compete in persuasiveness with the sophisticated, cosmopolitan Elena (interpreted by Mary Lamar, a convincingly beautiful actress, besides), whose mundane, refined image must have proved much more appealing in its modernity and glamor than that of the righteous, small-town Valentina (interpreted by María Esperanza Navarro, who had played a similar role in the earlier comedy Tuvo la culpa Adán).

Adapted to the screen and directed by José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, the otherwise well-known conservative director of the ill-famed Raza, the playful audacities of El destino se disculpa (which included such religiously dubious phenomena as a corporeal “destiny” or a guiding ghost, which could materialize itself in various objects) were unsurprisingly clothed under the contemporaneous label of “comedia fantástica”. Its marketing subtitle, “Fantasía occidental”, might have also sought to capitalize on a noteworthy tendency of various Hollywood comedies of the time, when fantasy had to become associated with the populist components. The celebration of honest labor and of traditional, small-town values (best

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1 It is quite ironical, nevertheless, that the public and commercial failure of this type of comedy (which might have been indebted to its overtly didactic purpose, which both opens and closes the narrative) led Sáenz de Heredia to
embodied by the female protagonists Benita and Valentina in *El destino se disculpa*, as well as of young, idealist leaders who rose from the people was increasingly difficult in the bleak, disenchanted afterwar context of “the doubting 1940s”, when complete suspension of disbelief through fantasy had to be introduced in order to offset the audience incredulity (Gehring *Populism and the Capra Legacy* xvii). Given Steven Marsh’ persuasive analysis of the parodic take on populism in *El destino se disculpa* (see “Negociando la nación: Tácticas y prácticas del subalterno en la comedia cinematográfica de los años cuarenta” 103-04), this chapter will not dwell on this satiric aspect, which is especially through Quintana’s figure, skillfully interpreted by Manolo Morán. What should be added, nevertheless, is the fact that Ramiro himself is another antiheroic, parodic populist character, standing for a naïve youth, associated precisely with a provincial origin and pretense, who will not fail to become a successful business leader or a practical manager of his own inheritance, falling instead prey to his own presumptuous gullibility. Another undeniable populist target of parody in *El destino se disculpa* is this protagonist’s figure as a (fortuitous) soccer commentator, an occasion that in the film catalyzes his future radio employment for his flaunted rhetorical skills. Ramiro’s narratively mocked bombastic verbosity, associated with histrionic radio commentators, also implicitly criticizes the consequential rise of the soccer fever in the Spain of that age, a popularity that was shrewdly enabled by the increasing protagonism of this sport in the existing media, a politically demobilizing, ideologically interested trend that will be more sarcastically indicted in *La

_abandon his directorial work with comedy, which he really enjoyed, according to his own posterior declarations (Castro 371). While he confesses himself a fan of Lubitsch in this interview, his style is more clearly influenced by Capra’s, as Gómez Tello’s movie review in Primer Plano lucidly remarked, if we take into consideration Capra’s narrative preferences that were mentioned before. On the other hand, all contemporaneous film reviews unsurprisingly praised the movie and its director, employing the customary vague terms (e.g., “ternura”, “humanidad y calor”, “intención moralizadora”), however, which shrewdly avoided any significant mention of the plot details. As for the posters of this comedy, they tend to underline a melodramatic story along horror and noir lines (accompanied by the self-defensive subtitle of “Fantasia occidental”), trying perhaps to also capitalize on the already existing success of these genres in their contemporaneous Hollywood versions.

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Codorniz in the later years, as was the case of the 1948 attack on NO-DO’s alienating broadcasting of soccer games and bullfights (i.e., “¡Ataquemos al cine!”). The playful parodic style of this disparate comedy was indeed perceived at the time as unmistakably related with the humor of La Codorniz, triggering the label of “codornicesco” to this disparate comedy (Zúñiga 21), which points to a joint participation, through humor, in the alternative public sphere of postwar Spain in which the sociocultural phenomenon represented by La Codorniz was essential.

El sistema Pelegrín, released in 1952 under the direction of the popular comedy director Ignacio Iquino 1952, is an extensive parody of the world of soccer, which can be read within the same overall interpretive paradigm that was also present in La Codorniz around that time. The story once again belongs to Wenceslao Fernández Flórez and, unlike his former novels adapted to the screen as disparate comedies, El sistema Pelegrín was written in 1949, shortly before its cinematic conversion, which makes it easier to integrate within the afore-mentioned sociocultural critique of soccer present in La Codorniz in 1948. This story also puts forth a new version of pícaro, as José Carlos Mainer perceptively observes in his brief review of Fernández Flórez’ novel (370). Héctor Pelegrín, brilliantly interpreted by a young Fernando Fernán Gómez, whose figure is very similar to that of the prewar theatrical fresco, is endowed with a cunningly pragmatic eloquence that is nonetheless updated to fit the new sociopolitical setting of the age: his professional identity is that of a shrewd, dazzlingly loquacious insurance agent. His job failure and subsequent reconversion can be ascribed not to his poor qualifications, but to the poverty of his potential clients, who could not afford to buy insurance, a transparent allusion to

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1 Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ article, “Filosofía de un deporte”, published in La Codorniz in the mid1940s (qtd. in La Codorniz. Antología (1941-1978)) is another parodic take on this sport and on its popularity.

2 Among Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ many contributions to La Codorniz in the early 1940s was a parodic story, “El fantasma en peligro”, that also involved a ghost, which humorously complains that it is no longer credible nor frightening in a century that had already experienced so many horrors.

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the lingering underdevelopment and hardships of a Spain that was slowly exiting its autarkic period and timidly initiating various modernizing policies.

The disparate that sets in motion this comedy is quite typical of Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ favorite humourous strategy, that of an ingenious defense of an apparently incompatible perspective, which here is manifest by the original soccer profile implemented by Pelegrín, whose job reconversion leads him to the position of a highschool teacher of physical education: due to his confounding rhetorical skills, often based on playful syllogisms, he convinces the highschool director not only of the necessity to invest in the students’ physical education (by hiring him) but also to radically transform this sport into a gentlemanly, generous game, devoid of any violence or competitiveness, an attempt that is not based on Pelegrín’s real beliefs but on his sheer incompetence to teach the mechanics of a actual game. His original lessons will culminate into a final sequence showing two elegantly dressed teams, whose players bow to each other before each move, walk leisurely on the field to the goalkeeper’s gate and effortlessly score due to the goalie’s ceremonious withdrawal from the gate.

Leaving aside this mockery of the soccer fever and the overall critique of widespread incompetence and backwardness, perhaps the other clearly parodied discourse in this movie is the moralizing harangues of the Sección Femenina to justify its postwar disciplinary use of sports for women: Pelegrín thus self-advertisingly attempts to persuade the highschool director (and, sometimes, the rich students’ parents) to create a job opening and to invest in its development by eulogizing the benefits of a “Christian, moral” sport (i.e., “como Dios manda”) for both body and soul. This mordant parody of one of the important hegemonic discourses of the age is visually enforced by subsequent ridiculous spectacles of training (showing awkward, puny children and a comfortably seated Pelegrín that exhortates them to healthily move). Another important satiric
target of this comedy is a sociopolitical critique of a despotic ruling class, which, as in the case of the previous focus, was consonant to similar humorous articles in the contemporaneous *La Codorniz*. In the case of this *disparate* comedy, we witness a ludic, defamiliarizing display of humor in Pelegrín’s shrewdly accommodating attempts to please the rich parents of some of his students that are utterly inept to play soccer and whose self-esteem will be boosted through an original method: the incapable children will have the opportunity to score according to their wishes, without any hindrance from the others, while when the poorer, competent student score, the highschool director will “equitably” distribute these goals among the others. The underlying critique of social injustice that is playfully carried out here will reach dark touches as the affluent parents that support Pelegrín’s team will find a homeless child that is a remarkable goalkeeper, who will become an enviable asset that is auctioned between two rivaling highschools and is eventually bought by the parents-investors in Pelegrín’s team (who will also ironically resort to clothing and feeding him decently so that he can perform well, without feeling awkward in the presence of the “señoritos” of the team).

These sarcastic touches of social criticism unsurprisingly triggered the *Primer Plano* conservative reviewer’s irritation, who sel-defensively attributed all “ridiculing” and “depressing” facets of humor in this comedy to the director’s (i.e., Ignacio Iquino) inability to make a good film that would distance itself from the literary model, which was, however, paradoxically praised (while dutifully ascribed to Wenceslao Fernández Flórez). Most other conservative film reviewers (not only from the contemporaneous *Cámara* or *Dígame*, for instance, but also the later Méndez Leite) used the typically vague praise of the comedy’s humor, without saying anything concrete about its plot while at the same time eulogizing the original novel and its writer. The advertising posters of the movie also mentioned Wenceslao Fernández
Flórez’s name beneath the title (which, in this case, relied on his uncontested journalist popularity), but chose to focus on an astute marketing choice of comedic allusions, linked to the metonymic image of the soccer ball, and of melodramatic hints to Pelegrín’s romance with Luisa, the music teacher. Although displaced to a secondary position in this comedy, this romance enables the (necessary) finishing touch in the male protagonist’s eventual social integration, a functional use of romance that was otherwise very common in comedian comedies.

This relegation of romance to a subservient role, together with a mordant critique of the bourgeois discourse of morality is also visible in the 1951 Habitación para tres, directed by Tono, who lucratively capitalized on the enormous audience success of his earlier play, Guillermo Hotel (a ludic pun on Wilhelm Tell, whose Spanish equivalent is Guillermo Tell). If we take into consideration that the playfully nonsensical humor that defined the first period of La Codorniz was primarily indebted to him and to Mihura, it is unsurprising that this movie, stylistically kindred to that epoch, was labeled as “codornicesca”/“codornizada” both in its posters as in its movie reviews. Whereas the posters sought to capitalize on this popular association, the movie reviews of the time were vague and not very laudatory, indicting the film’s excessive theatricality. The critics nonetheless passingly acknowledged this comedy’s resounding success in Madrid, a success that was inseparable from the innumerable bursts of irrepressible audience laughter and that testified to the powerful impact of this disparate movie in the alternative public sphere, especially if we take into account the administrative and commercial punishment of this comedy through its ranking as a third category film (Herdero “El abrigo, el sacacorchos y el valor de cambio” 95), an unsurprising disciplinary action given the
corrosive allusions to various social and moral conventions, as evident from the very subversive title of the film adaptation.¹

The disparate premise that is later developed in this comedy starts from a clerical error, which accidentally places both Alicia (engaged to be soon married to a soccer referee) and a young lawyer, Carlos, into the same hotel room, which they will also share with a thief (brilliantly interpreted by the actor Manuel Gómez Bur), whom they find casually lying under the bed and whose continued presence is allegedly needed as an eye witness of Alicia’s unblemished honor under the circumstances. The subsequent narrative humor (including visual gags and playfully comic replies as well as nonsensical assertions) logically derives from this potentially promiscuous situation, which is aggravated when both Luisa’s and her fiancé’s families make their unexpected appearance in the hotel.² The ingenious defense of an apparently incompatible stance, based on absurdist inversions, has two main targets: the existing bourgeois conventions of female moral behavior and the disciplinary, hierarchical distinction between criminals and law agents. This social and moral delineation is humorously undone in the episodes corresponding to the lawyer’s brief stay in prison (for misleadingly using a valet uniform to unconspiciously get out of Alicia’s room) and, respectively, to the thief’s unproblematic substitution of the lawyer in a trial, where his dazzling knowledge of both law and human psychology makes him eventually obtain the acquittal of someone who murdered his own grandparents.³ Brilliantly parodying the melodramatic discourse, he efficiently transforms the

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¹ Javier Hernández Ruiz mentions the movie’s classification as second category, which still represented, if true, a considerable punishment (“Habitación para tres 1951” 302).
² An example of such visual gags is when Felipe, the soccer referee, immediately blows his whistle as he wakes up confused from sleep or when the hotel receptionist puts on his glasses to better hear someone on the phone. Another example is when Carlos and the thief, who were hidden in the bathroom, come out disguised as hotel waiters, an exit that confounds the two families, given that only one waiter enters the bathroom (who was asked by Alicia to bring two other waiter outfits) and three waiters are casually going out afterwards.
³ The thief, who is subversively named Enriqueta (allegedly because of his parents’ endearment with this name), boasts of knowing the penal code by heart due to his considerable trial and prison experience and he effortlessly
murderer into an innocent victim of his family and of the entire society, awakening the judge’s and the audience’s compassion. The insouciant murderer, comically named Inocencio, accompanies the thief to the hotel room and humorously puts himself at their disposal, “modestly” alleging that he is not a professional, but only an “aficionado” killer, in a scene that is entrenched in a dark, dehumanizing humor that Tono more clearly displayed from the time of his participation in the wartime _La Ametralladora_.\(^1\) It is important to mention here that the caustic satire of an unjustly stratified, oppressive society, based on surveillance and punishment, frequently appears in this comedy, most often by means of logically incongruous replies and situations (e.g., the thief advises his grandmother by phone to carefully look underneath the bed to make sure there is no policeman hiding there, a stern mother cautions her child to take care and not touch a jail prisoner, in case he might be rabid, after which he condescendingly throws him some bread crumbs).

Alicia’s “feminist” vindication of emancipation is, in its turn, comically carried out as she bombastically tries to persuade her dull and irresolute fiancé, Felipe, that she actually needs and wants to use trousers, a tobacco pipe and even a safety razor (which he found in the hotel room and belong to Carlos). On the contrary, Felipe is depicted as an effeminate, immature and gullible man, excessively dependent upon his domineering mother who, in her turn, embodies the sanctimonious bourgeois woman that was a frequent target of satire both in _La Codorniz_ and in the humorists’ postwar and prewar writings. This problematic gender unbalance was recurrently featured in _La Codorniz_ especially after 1944 and continued into the 1950s, gradually reaching a climax in the 1960s, when women were almost exclusively depicted as domineering, predatory

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\(^{1}\) Tono himself asserted that he is particularly interested in in “explosive dialog” and a type of absurdist humor that prevents characters and situations to acquire “humanidad” (qtd. in Aguirre “El humor de Tono” 17).
and/ or heartlessly materialistic and selfish, an image that will surface in almost all disparate comedies of that period as well, as we shall soon see. In Tono’s comedy, Alicia can readily become an empowering woman model, not only through these mocking allusions to the hegemonically enforced standard of female modesty and domesticity, but also through her quick, biting and witty retorts and her carefree, unconventional moral and social attitude in general. Furthermore, she eventually forfeits her (financially and socially convenient) marriage prospects with Felipe, cynically gloating over his and his mother’s narrow-minded, self-righteous morality by pretending that the newly emerged Carlos (dressed in the thief’s ragged clothes) is the alleged father of her would-be children. Moreover, her final open declaration to Carlos, in contrast to the gender conventions of the age, together with their seemingly civil wedding further expand the valuable alternative horizon put forth by this comedy, despite portraying a final social integration through marriage. A mordant satire of the reactionary bourgeoisie, the social class that was the strongest supporter of the Francoist regime, unsurprisingly enhances, in its turn, a peculiar comic vision that playfully reframes the contemporaneous hegemonic discourse.¹ The strongest epistemological impact of this disparate movie relies, however, on the curt, playfully nonsensical assertions and replies, which operate an essential estranging of the contemporaneous quotidian, plagued by innumerable platitudes and conventions. Furthermore, the defamiliarization of such an automatized everyday life through the ludic undoing of its verbal hinges echoes Bergson’s conception of humor, which greatly influenced the Surrealist perspective, according to which laughter springs from the perception of the mechanical

¹ As Carlos gets out of the bathroom in ragged clothes and is introduced as Alicia’s secret husband, Felipe’s morally outraged mother cannot prevent her condescending, already automatized (clearly uncompassionate) gesture of apparent generosity. She thus gives Carlos some money, sactimoniously saying “tenga usted una limosnita”. The comic critique of the contemporaneous discourse of (hypocrite) charity will become more and more pervasive in La Codorniz as well starting with the second half of the 1950s (especially in Azcona’s dark articles and in Chumy Chúmez’ somber caricatures), finding its best illustration in the dark comedy Plácido, based upon Azcona’s script.
incrustated upon the human, an awareness that has undeniable politicized connotations in the authoritarian Spain of that time.

A similarly stifling vision of the contemporaneous social and moral conventions (as evident in the socializing visits and the courtship rituals) is brilliantly carried out in the 1960 Sólo para hombres, directed and starred by Fernando Fernán Gómez, who adapted Mihura’s tremendously successful play from 1955, “¡Sublime decisión!”.

While the plot is, perhaps self-defensively, situated in the last years of the nineteenth century Spain, this disparate comedy can easily be read as a playful comment upon the contemporaneous women’s increasing emancipation and incorporation in the workforce and in the university, a consequential change that was enabled by the economic development of the age and that triggered a rising male anxiety. This uneasiness was manifest not only in Spain (being conspicuous, through different lenses, in both disparate and desarrollista comedies, for instance), but, as was already mentioned, it was also transparent in many earlier and contemporaneous Hollywood movies.

Unlike in most other comedies by Mihura, Florita, the female protagonist of this comedy (effectively portrayed by the Argentinean actress Analia Gadé), is portrayed not only as beautiful, but also as intelligent, witty and professionally efficient. Within the stern patriarchal world of late nineteenth-century Spain, when the plot occurs, her daring decision to start working in a ministerial office is functionally equivalent to a disparate, setting in motion the entire narrative development. Considered an outrageously “anarchist” and “revolutionary” “feminist”, with an objectionable “modernist” interest in arithmetics and accountancy, Florita becomes the preferred national topic of gossip—her story soon gets extensive media coverage and even parliamentary attention. Her probationary work period gives rise to even more fiery debates and

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1 The advertising posters of this disparate film comedy unsurprisingly mention the movie’s kinship to Mihura’s play, which must have proved an efficient marketing strategy that contributed to the enormous success of this film.
accusations (i.e., about immorality, female intellectual capacity and, especially, the woman’s “proper” place), which clearly satirize, through absurdist exaggerations, the reactionary conservative discourse that dominated the hegemonic public sphere especially throughout the 1940s, in the immediate postwar, and which extolled women’s domesticity, making femininity incompatible with intelligence, wit and professional efficiency. While this rigid perspective might have already seemed anachronic when Mihura wrote the play in 1955 and even more so when Fernán Gómez’ screen adaptation was released in 1960, the mid-1950s and early 1960s continued to witness considerable misogyny, linked to an underlying sense of male anxiety and frustration, which accompanied contemporaneous women’s increasing presence in offices and universities and the overall decline of conservative moral values. Sólo para hombres does sarcastically deconstruct the recurrent public accusations of working women’s immorality, showing how these entrenched opinions actually stem from frustrated, unhappily married, middle-aged men, belonging to an older generation (i.e., her workmates, who cannot have an adventure with Florita), who are also mortified by their own glaring professional inefficiency in contrast to her unostentatious effectiveness: Florita is thus shown to have completed in few days all the unfinished bureaucratic work of the (ridiculed) Ministry of Public Works, which makes her receive even more work from other similarly slow ministries. This hyperbolic satire of bureaucratic incompetence and delay as well as of political instability and ineptitude is here deprived of the customary regenerationist touches that accompany this long-standing Spanish critique in other writers (e.g., Cadalso, Larra, Arniches) or even in the contemporaneous La Codorniz.  

Whereas during Mihura’s initial leadership of this magazine there have been

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1 The administrative and political chaos that is caustically portrayed in this comedy (e.g., through countless changes of governmental parties and policies) seems to make an obvious reference to the (democratic) politics of the nineteenth century, with its implied critique of that national form of democracy. At the same time, this chaos enables Florita and her husband, Pablo (both employed in the same ministry), to obtain just enough remuneration so that
occasional playfully hyperbolic allusions to the inefficiency of various governmental employees, starting with the second half of the 1940s but more resolutely in the 1950s, under Laiglesia’s leadership and in a gradually more permissive environment, La Codorniz introduces several set columns (e.g., “¡No! Crítica a la vida”, “¿Por qué?”, “El dedo en la llaga”, “Los derechos del público”) that put forth a more and more virulent critique of daily life. Some of the preferred foci of this satirical attack are the public services and the local administration, in a political context that did not allow a direct critical confrontation with the higher governmental authorities. Even if he was personally uninterested in any sociopolitical commitment and was skeptical of any regenerationist pretenses, Mihura paradoxically succeeds in offering such a subversive critique, which could be easily read against the contemporaneous Spanish setting, by conveniently displacing the action to the end of the nineteenth century, in a different political setting. The sense of immediacy and spectator involvement is further enhanced, besides, by Pablo’s and Florita’s recourses to voice-over and direct interpellation to the audience’ opinions.

The other major satirical targets in Sólo para hombres, the bourgeois visits and middle-class cursilería, are, however, among his favorite topics of humorous defamiliarization of moral and social conventions, which, given Mihura’s own entrenched misogyny, are unsurprisingly ascribed to women. As in the case of the earlier and the contemporaneous La Codorniz, the secondary female characters, especially those belonging to the older generations, embody the habitual conservative forces of society, who are automatized, tedious and sanctimonious in their they can eventually get married—they need to take turns in being employed, depending on the “progressiveness” of the political leaders in power (i.e., when Florita and then other women, who follow her emancipating example, are employed, Pablo is unemployed, while when he retrieves his position, she remains at home). These professional shifts can dubiously imply, however, that women’s massive employment leads to men’s loss of jobs, which can only exacerbate the already existing male anxiety and frustration underlying the pervasive contemporaneous misogyny. This conservative ending, which was probably added to avoid any potential problems with the existing censorship, does not belong to Mihura’s play nor to its theatrical performance, in which Florita opens a “negocio para señoritas”, a professional independence that, no matter how plagued by lucrative failure, puts forth a much more empowering image of this female protagonist.
social intercourses and, at the same time, shrewdly manipulating and materialist in their underlying intentions. Notwithstanding Florita’s emancipating figure, this comic costumbrist scapegoating on women is particularly caustic in the depicted ritual of finding an affluent suitor for the unmarried young women of the house, who are ludically shown as capable of freezing on the balcony during wintertime (as they attempt to attract the passing men’s looks) or of resorting to absurd lies about their domestic skills (in the effort of luring the potential suitor to make a proposal). Most eligible young men are not cast, nevertheless, in a very flattering light, an unsurprising image given Mihura’s fundamental skepticism. Men are thus presented as driven by unscrupulous pragmatic reasons (e.g., they often pretend to be interested in a marriageable woman in order to eat and drink freely in her house) and employing a reprehensible language, typical of commercial transactions, when referring to a potential marriage agreement (e.g., “si me gusta, me la quedo”, “a mí, si me conviene algo, me la quedo y Santas Pascuas”). It is against this sordid transformation of unmarried young women into a kind of advertised and carefully inspected merchandise that Florita defiantly protests when she decides to break the reigning social game and to curtly and mordantly ask her alleged suitor, to her family’s mortified outrage: “Pero, ¿le convengo o no? ¿Se queda usted conmigo o no?” Furthermore, it is in this oppressive ambience that she courageously resolves to work and earn her existence in a dignified way (a public solution that was only available to men), even if the encountered harassment and social and moral prejudices of her future workplace will not represent a truly enviable alternative. Her final social integration thus represents a kind of compromise between the conservative necessity to get married and eventually have children, on the one hand, and, on the other, the “progressive” desire to have a job on the same footing as men, a position that she will only intermittently exercise in her apparent sociopolitical context.
A completely different version of marriage appears in the 1960 *Maribel y la extraña familia*, directed by José María Forqué, who adapted another very successful play by Mihura.\(^1\) This film comedy was seemingly unanimously praised by contemporaneous film reviewers (e.g., from *ABC, Digame, Primer Plano*) for its successful cinematographic adaptation of the original play, being otherwise extolled in the usual vague terms (e.g., “humanidad” and “ternura”) that avoided any direct reference to the uncomfortable plot. It also enjoyed a tremendous public popularity, which might have been linked both to the playful humor of this comedy and to its increased (even if toned down) melodramatic touches, especially in the ending. The underlying disparate of this film, the middle-class Marcelino’s tenderly undoubting and ultimately redeeming courtship of and marriage to the prostitute Maribel, is further amplified by his mother’s and aunt’s uncommon kindness and unsuspecting openness towards the female protagonist (skillfully interpreted by the Mexican actress Silvia Pinal) and her “work” companions. Unlike what happens in *Sólo para hombres*, in *Maribel y la extraña familia* the focus seems to be precisely on a desired conservative social integration into the middle-class, whose unusual members (i.e., Marcelino’s family) are very distanced, however, from the customary reactionary profile that appears in other narratives written by Mihura. The elderly and old-fashionedly dressed doña Paula, Marcelino’s aunt (brilliantly interpreted by the actress Julia Caba Alba), humorously listens enchanted to jazz and to Elvis Presley’s “modern” music and even resorts to “renting” a couple to visit her weekly without saying anything, which allows her to vent her problems without resorting to the usual social conventions (e.g., pretending to be interested in the visitors’ illnesses). Both doña Paula and doña Matilde (i.e., her sister, Marcelino’s mother, impressively interpreted by the actress Guadalupe Muñoz Sampedro)

\(^1\) The humorist’s name astutely appeared in the movie posters, under the title of the comedy, for obvious marketing purposes, which sought to capitalize on the original play’s impressive public success.
comically insist in telling a provocatively dressed Maribel, who smokes in their face and whose profession they apparently ignore, how much they appreciate a modern, unprejudiced, self-confident woman, full of initiative and enjoying more freedom than in the past. Using a similitude that is inherently critical of the existing status of contemporaneous Spanish women, the two old ladies also ironically compare Maribel to the emancipated French and German women, who were associated with a morally loose femininity at that time, due to the incipient wave of foreign tourists. Moreover, they even dismissively talk about their own youth (i.e., “¡Qué horror de juventud la nuestra!”), mocking the traditional custom of not letting even married women go out in the street unattended, and about provincial women as “palurdas y anticuadas”, two targets of satire not deprived of subversiveness in the contemporaneous context of the play’s representations and of the film comedy’s release. The playfully humorous clash between Maribel’s and Marcelino’s worlds is further increased by the contrast between the two older women’s outdated dressing (in consonance with the museum look of their old-fashioned houses for Maribel) and their modernizing attempts when they talk to Maribel and her fellow prostitutes, an antagonism that is strengthened by the rare, unquestioning kindness and generosity of Marcelino’s mother and aunt, which has a decisive importance in Maribel’s eventual melodramatic redemption and in her implicit integration into the middle-class through her eventual marriage to Marcelino, who teaches her that “uno no es como piensa que es, sino como lo ven los demás”.

This melodramatic motif (i.e., the redemption of the fundamentally golden-hearted Maribel), which could have easily transformed Mihura’s story into one of the “folletines” that he often caustically parodied, is very delicately approached, nevertheless, being close to Mihura’s repeatedly endorsed “ternura” and is efficiently counter-balanced by his usual ludic humor of
implicit social and moral critique, based on absurdist contrasts and situations and on playfully unexpected assertions and replies. Maribel’s gradual change is accompanied, besides, by even more subversive allusions to a dangerously increasing trend of domestic violence (i.e., “los hombres matan mucho estos días, hay muchos casos de mujeres desaparecidas”), with which one of Maribel’s cynical friends tries to dissuade her from accompanying Marcelino to his provincial estate, thinking that he would attempt to kill her there. This assumption, based on the mysterious death of his first wife (who drowned in the lake there), seeks to rationally explain, for a pragmatic person, the reason underlying such uncommon kindness and unsuspecting trust. This disturbing social picture is strengthened by Maribel’s insinuation that, for a woman of lower class, formerly a seamstress, prostitution became the only available job that gave her the opportunity to sustain herself, hence her joyful and grateful embrace of a domestic prospect, unlike the middle-class Florita of Sólo para hombres, for whom work was not a real necessity but an envied desire of emancipation. Despite their differences, both female protagonists ultimately want to get out of a stifling environment and an unconventional romance is useful in this respect, especially in Maribel’s case, where it is united with her desire of social integration. It is quite ironical that, as she becomes closer to Marcelino and his family, Maribel gradually loses the visual signs of her initially alluring “modernity” (which shrewdly appeared on various advertising posters of the film comedy), associated with smoking, a low-cleavage dress, a lot of make up and, last but not least, a provocative look, which was responsible for the timid, provincial Marcelino’s interpretation of her alleged interest and “cariño” towards him. Skillfully interpreted by Adolfo Marsillach, whose nuanced, delicate acting makes a convincing introvert

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1 In an interview with Gabriel de los Reyes, Mihura also confessed his womanizing tendencies, which included his close familiarity with the prostitutes, whose alleged passion, spontaneity and unconventional devotion he admired (19-20). He also offers a disenchanted vision of their apparently carefree existence and “easy money”, asserting that they do not enjoy their life, which is often plagued by suffering, especially when their potentially sentimental involvement is always frustrated by social conventions, which cause any man to eventually abandon them.
Marcelino (never appearing slow-witted or effeminate, despite his close relationship with his mother and aunt), the male protagonist is quite uncommon in Mihura’s and the other humorists’ disparates in so far as most of his qualities could have easily made him a sarcastic embodiment of a weak, naïve man, who is dominated by a strong, pragmatic woman, as occurs in the last two comedies that I will comment upon in this section, both based upon Jardiel’s earlier plays.

The 1957 *Un marido de ida y vuelta*, directed by Luis Lucía, was considered by Jardiel as one of his best comedies and use of an inverisimilar, surrealist humor (qtd. in García Pavón 92), which is particularly evident in the structural disparate that underlies this comedy: plagued by jealousy because his best friend, Paco, did not respect his promise not to marry his recently widowed wife, José returns as a ghost after his heart attack in order to frustrate any potential moment of intimacy and happiness between Paco and Leticia, his former wife. Most of the comedy thus consists in comic accidents engineered by José’s ghost, brilliantly interpreted by Fernando Fernán Gómez, who once again stars an initially weak, insecure and humorously misunderstood and mistreated man that will eventually become playfully cunning and vindictive in his newly acquired position of power through his invisibility and invulnerable dematerialization (e.g., he trips Paco as he gets out of church holding Leticia’s hand after the wedding, publicly embarrasses him at the wedding party by making him dance to a fast pasodoble instead of the customary opening waltz, makes a tree fall between them as they dance, causes a flat tire as they drive to their honeymoon location etc.). The funniest moments of verbal spark belong to Leticia’s conversations, however, a character that is otherwise misogynistically depicted not only as shallow, frivolous, materialist and confoundingly garrulous but also as insensitively dominating both José and Paco—her domestic tyranny even makes her own aunt cynically comment that José must have obtained a well-deserved martyr status in the afterlife.
Both before and after José’s death, Leticia (interpreted by a brilliant Ema Penella, with a
dazzlingly dynamic body and facial language) appears as a shrewdly materialist woman,
extremely concerned with her social projection and with money (e.g., one of the first things she
wants to find out after his death is when can she cash his life insurance money). When he is still
alive, she constantly victimizes him on account of her ambitions for a better social integration, a
desire that continues to dominate her after his death—it is implied, besides, that Paco (skillfully
interpreted by a conveniently reserved Fernando Rey) will be similarly mistreated as her
husband. What is particularly corrosive is the lack of a disciplinary ending of this *disparate*
comedy, whose finale presents analogous power relations in the afterlife, where both Leticia
and Paco also eventually arrive (by accident). The subversive, trivialized image of an “other
world”, which is dubiously akin to the terrestrial realm in the alleged power relations (an
inversion of the actual relations in contemporaneous Spain), continues to be linked, besides, to
the underlying racy innuendo of the entire movie, which deals with an inseparable triangular
relationship of undeniable suggestive connotations. Furthermore, Jardiel carries this mischievous
connotation even further, in so far as his imaginary afterlife allows the (more or less) harmonious
coexistence of the erotic triangle, no longer hindered by the necessity of Leticia’s choice
between Paco and José. These playfully erotic allusions were understandably silenced by the
movie reviewers of the time, who justly praised, however, the impressive cinematographic
qualities of this dynamic screen adaptation and defensively branded Jardiel’s humor as
“illogical”, “abnormal”, “descoyuntado”, “extravagante” and, especially, “sin trascendencia”,
using, in this last case, a qualifying remark that was no longer used in the 1950s, especially in the
latest part of this decade, which can easily be read as a conscious or unconscious attempt to
downplay the morally subversive elements of this film.
In any case, *Un marido de ida y vuelta* enjoyed great audience popularity, as was the case of all 1950s and early 1960s screen adaptations of Jardiel Poncela’s earlier plays. One of the potential reasons for this tremendous success, in contrast to the modest public appreciation of his 1940s movie adaptations (with the exception of *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, directed by Rafael Gil) clearly relies on the better cinematographic qualities of the later film comedies, enabled by a better endowed cinema industry. This technically superior medium could better convey Jardiel’s *disparate* “reality” to come to life, giving more dynamicity and verisimilitude to the logical construction underlaying his comedies, based upon playfully absurdist premises, as it happens in the 1962 *Tú y yo somos tres*. This film was skillfully adapted to the screen by Rafael Gil, but was received with less laudatory remarks than *Un marido de ida y vuelta* by the contemporaneous movie reviewers. Most of their criticism targeted the more explicit racy innuendos of the comedy (i.e., Manolina’s rescue by the fireman or her dashing convertible ride, dressed in her wedding gown). They again silenced again, nevertheless, the even murkier connotations of her unusual marriage that once more alluded to a triangular desire and relationship, which provides the *disparate* title and premise of this film: Manolina gets married by proxy to the Argentinean Rodolfo, after an epistolary relationship and an exchange of photos, but she later finds out that her husband has a conjoined twin, Adolfo, which makes any intimacy with her husband impossible. Even after the twins are eventually separated by a doctor, they

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1 Her insouciant ride in a convertible, all by herself and dressed in a wedding down, triggered many risqué male comments and minor accidents. Furthermore, a later potentially melodramatic and suspense moment is parodically deflated: as she lay hanging from the window (after she tried to commit suicide in a fit of despair as she saw her husband), all the male employees of the underneath office (including the older manager in a wheelchair, brilliantly interpreted by José Isbert) take turns at the window in order to peak at her legs and under her dress, an attempt that is also maliciously made by the fireman who eventually rescues her.

2 Various melodramatic clichés (related to the increasing long-distance infatuation between Manolina and Rodolfo) are parodically deflated at the beginning of the comedy, a generic subversion that is cinematographically enabled by montage: while Manolina’s voice is heard (as she writes Rodolfo) that she has his photo “por todas partes”, the camera mischievously shows Manolina’s room full of pictures of Real Madrid; after she tells him how a movie she
continue to communicate telepathically and Rodolfo even feels pressured to do whatever the other is doing, which often makes him suffer from his brother’s self-inflicted wounds, who repeatedly frustrates the newly weds’ moments of intimacy (e.g., Adolfo decides to passionately dance flamenco for hours during the couple’s attempt of spending their first night together, which makes Rodolfo do the same in front of an astonished and disappointed Manolina). Their telepathic and neural dependence is apparently logically explained in medical terms, yet the doctor who offers this interpretation is quite cynically portrayed as incompetent, a ridiculing image that is consistent with Jardiel’s recurrent caustic depiction of doctors, which can be linked to his personal repudiation of their disciplinary power over the body (through their would-be possession of a superior knowledge).

Sometimes accompanied by suggestive images (e.g., bare legs, low cleavage etc.) that were condoned in the more permissive ambience of the 1960s (when there was also a rising number of daring sexual allusions in La Codorniz, for instance), the innumerable erotic innuendos of this comedy do not merely provide a spectator gratification that, from the point of view of the hegemonically trumpeted standards, was at best morally dubious. The strongest impact of the erotic allusions lies, perhaps, in their successful parodic defamiliarization of various melodramatic conventions, particularly that of romantic love, which was, besides, traditionally associated with women more than with men and which had been frequently resignified by some conservative postwar discourses and institutions along moral and religious

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1 Before he died of cancer, Jardiel himself refused any doctor to see him. Furthermore, in Un marido de ida y vuelta, for instance, José, immediately after his heart attack, chases the doctor who comes to consult him away, humorously saying “quiero morirme de muerte natural”. The doctor Ansúrez is indeed portrayed as incompetent, causing José’s death due to his inability to realize it was a heart attack: Ansúrez asserts that José’s merely suffers from rheumatism (his standard diagnostic, irrelevant of the patient’s condition). This doctor is previously presented as complaining about an alleged “epidemic good health”, which brings him financial problems, a remark through which Jardiel sarcastically makes doctors thrive on the others’ deterioration of health.
lines. Jardiel, like Mihura and Fernández Flórez, sarcastically undermines, nevertheless, the
idealized image of love, family and marriage, a trend that was also visible and increasingly
darker in *La Codorniz* throughout the 1960s. The main problem of this otherwise useful
alternative approach is its misogynist lenses, both in the humorists’ comedies and in *La
Codorniz*, a tendency that thus participated in the unjust gender policies of postwar Spain, even if
it might have also provided women spectators with subversively empowering female images. In
*Tú y yo somos tres*, for example, the capricious and pragmatic Manolina is frequently portrayed
as more disappointed and frustrated than (the poet) Rodolfo at the prospect of their impossible
intimacy—it is him, not her, besides, who seems to be content with what he parodically exalts as
a love “casto y puro de nuestra alma, una amistad romántica, con gozos del espíritu, sin
tentación”, an unsatisfying solution that he eventually embraces as he leaves Manolina and
prepares to go back to Argentina. The constant deflation of melodramatic clichés that surround a
sentimental discourse of love is even more subversively enhanced by the parodic take on
religious asceticism, which is evident in Manolina’s frivolously modernizing view of a potential
life as a nun in a convent (i.e., “he oído que hay unas muy modernas”), where she would
romantically flee after her frustrated romance and marriage: in exchange for donating all her
considerable fortune, she considers going to a monastery with lavish swimming pools and
Balenciaga swimsuits. Leaving aside the inherent misogyny of her shallow image, connected to a
confounding rhetoric, often based on vague and long speeches, Manolina is a much stronger and
appealing character than Rodolfo or Adolfo (both unimpressively interpreted by Adolfo de
Mendoza), a prominence that is inseparable from Analia Gadé’s provocative beauty and her
skillful use of nuanced facial and body expression. Her pragmatic endorsement of a lavish,
carefree existence, in which erotic gratification occupied an essential position, more obviously
corresponded, besides, to the actual desires of the comedy audiences, especially at the beginning of the *desarrollista* 1960s, when *Tú y yo somos tres* was released and when economic concerns were so important. It could be actually argued that the delineation of her character, together with the pervasive parodic bent of this comedy, make this screen adaptation of Jardiel’s comedy sarcastically undermine the contemporaneous Catholic technocrats’ hegemonic discourse, which reactionarily joined economic progress and traditional moral values.

The playful questioning of institutionalized moral and social distinctions is also a staple characteristic of the last section of *disparate* comedies under discussion, which parody the conventional thriller movies, a loose generic category under which the detective, crime, noir and horror subtypes are included.

**The thriller disparate or the disparate thriller? Loose taxonomies and powerful parodies**

While the convenient umbrella-concept of thriller is preferred here, as it can be more convincingly envisioned, in our opinion as a noun that is inflected by various adjectival subtypes, following Altman’s solid theorization of genre, there clearly are numerous other taxonomic possibilities to define the targeted generic subtypes enumerated in this section (e.g., others could include thrillers themselves in the mystery, suspense or crime categories). The very preference for a strong noun like “thriller” brings about, however, another important taxonomic difficulty, which pertains to the awkward inflection of *disparate*, the peculiar comedic genre under discussion in this chapter, with “thriller”, now used in a qualifying adjectival position. While stylistically it is unclear which one sounds better, “the thriller *disparate*” or “the *disparate* thriller” (some might say the latter), the adjectival position of “thriller” seems to better define the
comedic attempt of these films, in which humor is not a mere occasional relief of tension but fundamentally structures (i.e., re-writes) the usual plot of these various thriller subtypes, inverting even its basic premises, which will be briefly described. These comedies are thus also based upon a central disparate that, in this case, is the reshuffles the customary narrative elements that underlie a thriller, providing an unlikely development and/or conclusion. Given their problematic intermediary (i.e., intergeneric) position, this section will not dwell so extensively on individual analyses, but will present instead some of their more salient aspects in so far as they could be arguably serve as (limited) examples that further enlarge the contribution of a disparate comedic strand to the alternative public sphere of the time.

Before entering the issue of the humorists’ parodic takes on thrillers, it is first advisable to respond the potential question as to why they were all so interested in this suspense genre and why they all worked with its conventions in one way or another. Leaving aside their comic defamiliarization in Mihura’s, Jardiel’s, Tono’s and Fernández Flórez’ plays and novels, whose screen adaptations will be analyzed here, Neville (e.g., La torre de los siete jorobados, Domingo de carnaval, El crimen de la calle de Bordadores) and López Rubio (e.g., Crimen en el entreacto) also occasionally indulged in the thriller and action genres, yet their respective cinematic endeavors will not be studied in this section in so far as they cannot be labeled disparates, even if they employ several moments of playful comic relief. Furthermore, equally cast aside is Eduardo García Maroto’s 1954 film, Tres eran tres, based on Tono’s script and echoing Mihura’s prewar experiment (e.g., Una de..., directed by the same director), as this tripartite parody is not based upon a central disparate that structures the entire plot, but it is made up of three sketches instead, whose only narrative connection is their overt parodic rewriting of some commercial
Hollywood genres (i.e., “Una de indios”, “Una de monstrous”, Una de pandereta”), which are ironically indicted for plagiarism in front of an international tribunal.

Some of the reasons underlying the humorists’ attraction to the thriller can perhaps be related to their vanguard (especially Surrealist) gusto to parody established, popular genres (through a playful defamiliarization of their basic narrative conventions) and to mock the underlying epistemological and moral assumptions of thrillers, namely, their dependence upon logic and reason, on the one hand, and, on the other, upon a clear, socially beneficial, delineation between good and evil (usually in the confrontation between the detective or the police agent and the criminal who is eventually punished as justice is restored). Hermeneutically, the thriller is a genre of search and revelation of “truth” by means of a correct, careful deciphering of various visible, but apparently irrelevant, signs. These clues can be read by a well-trained “private eye”, that is, by a detective that tends to be loosely integrated into the social game. In other cases, they are interpreted by a (usually exemplary) police agent, who is paid for his job and is integrated into a disciplinary institution, the police, which Foucault associates with the birth of the modern disciplinary society and its necessity to domesticate the anarchic drives of the individual (Surveiller et punir 248-49). It is thus unsurprising that the detective genre, which emerged through Poe’s Auguste Dupin series in the 1840s, rose at a time that, as Peter Brooks perceptively remarks, also witnessed the rise of the modern police force and an increasing social concern with identifying the criminals (Realist Vision 225). This preoccupation appears to have been inseparable from an identity anxiety of the modern urban bourgeoisie, whose compulsion to classify the “deviant” social elements was connected to class uneasiness (i.e., the alleged threat of the lower or working classes). The rise of the detective genre can be therefore also linked to the rise of the modern mass society and, more specifically, of the “urban jungle”, which had to
be made legible in order to be mastered (134). It is an aspect upon which Benjamin also focused in his discussions of Baudelaire and the related image of the flâneur as the modern urban spectator, alienated from a consumerist capitalist society, which could easily trigger some interesting associations with the humorists’ prewar positioning in the artistic and cultural field.

Their playful takes on thrillers thus unsurprisingly parody the logical and rational springs of such hermeneutics through the very nonsensical premises and plot development of their stories as well as through the occasional image of the incompetent investigator (e.g., in Intriga, Los ladrones somos gente honrada), a police employee who is usually outwitted not only by the criminals but also by some other amateur detectives. This other figure acquires such unexpected profiles as a nun in Melocotón en almíbar, an actor in Intriga and a reporter/ writer in Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada and in its later version, Fantasmas en la casa. Through their occupational adscription, all these amateur detectives unsurprisingly have, nevertheless, a traditionally close relationship with close reading and hermeneutics as essential in the production of both “truth” and (epistemological) authority.

On the other hand, comedies like La pandilla de los once (based on Tono’s story) and Los ladrones somos gente honrada (which adapted one of Jardiel’s plays) put forth sympathetic portrayals of (petty) criminals despite their ongoing practice of their trade, thus humorously reverting the customary moral division of the parodied genre. Furthermore, the humorists and their screen adaptors often choose closures that are actually morally ambiguous, being devoid of the habitual poetic justice of thrillers (i.e., the exemplary punishment of the outlaw). Even when the criminals are eventually handed to the legal system, this conservative ending is based upon a vilification of some other criminal figures that remain unsympathetic to the audience (i.e., in Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada, Fantasmas en la casa, Melocotón en almíbar) or upon the
dubious presentation of the social disciplinary structure as fundamentally benevolent (i.e., in *La pandilla de los once*).

The humorists’ parodies of thrillers also paradoxically reaffirm the targeted genre, to whose critical re-evaluation and revitalization they contribute to some extent, in so far as their parodic attempts are inseparable from both mockery and a sense of tribute to the original genre—all humorists participated, after all, in the Spanish and even Hollywood production of more “serious” takes on thrillers through their scripts and/or dialog adaptations.¹ Among the original elements that they unsurprisingly tend to take over without significant changes is their misogynist treatment of women, which is consistent with their overall attitude. Jardiel in particular puts forth a very caustic portrayal of women, often reveling in the commonplace noir image of the woman as a problematically sexualized victim, as is evident in his plays “Eloísa está debajo de un almendro” or “Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada”, a lucrative stereotype that was present in their respective screen adaptations. Another implicitly misogynist characteristic of his plays (i.e., “Los ladrones somos gente honrada” or “Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada”), preserved in their film versions, is the ugly, middle-aged woman as criminal or even murderer, which corresponds to a widespread predisposition to use a female image as a (comic or serious) scapegoat figure for larger social and moral problems. As in many cases of disparate comedies that we have already analyzed, women are thus associated with a kind of unscrupulous materialism and desire of social advancement that remain unredeemed, unlike what happens with some fellow male criminals, whose “soft”, fundamentally good side eventually

¹ In the second half of the 1940s, Mihura probably has the most relevant professional collaboration in the sphere of thrillers, often with psychological or noir inflections (e.g., *Confidencia, Vidas confusas, Siempre vuelven de madrugada, La calle sin sol, Una mujer cualquiera, El pasado amenaza, La corona negra*). He otherwise repeatedly confessed, besides, that he was an avid reader of detective novels. Mihura also participated in two parodies of spy movies: as a dialog adaptor in Perojo’s *Yo no soy la Mata-Hari* and as a “provider” of the original idea that lay at the basis of *Suspenso en comunismo*. Given his limited intervention in these comedies, they will not included, however, in the current discussion.
prevails and even rescues them from social disciplining (through imprisonment). This misogyny, which sometimes acquires dark touches, was consonant with a similar contemporaneous tendency of La Codorniz, in which, both in the 1940s and after 1956, women were frequently portrayed as unscrupulous domestic tyrants, trampling upon men’s desired independence and drawing them to the most objectionable moral compromises. The contaminating influence of female characters, which comically internalize and reproduce a larger social corruption through their alleged stronger attraction to money and power, can of course be read within the humorists’ general exaltation of a utopianly free, bohemian bachelor status, as is best illustrated in Miadorado Juan: their resolute rejection of the social institution of marriage is inseparable from their repudiation of a more binding social regimentation, which would undermine their critical distance and their moral and socioeconomic independence.

Despite this regrettable misogynist tendency, these mock thrillers must have had a crucial defamiliarizing importance for their contemporaneous audiences in so far as these playfully humorous takes on narrative conventions cannot be separated from a connected socioeconomic and political critique. As Geoff King perceptively remarks in his discussion of film parody (18-10) parody and satire always overlap, as the latter is more easily achieved through the former, particularly in totalitarian regimes, which do not allow more direct critical comedies. The parodic play upon formal and aesthetic conventions of seemingly innocuous products of mass entertainment (like thrillers) can thus have a corrosive impact on key mythologies and familiar conventions circulated by the hegemonic sociopolitical discourses (e.g., the autarkic rhetoric of ascetic self-restraint, the triumphalist image of the united Christian family with many children, the competent, trustworthy image of police and authority, the moral label socially ascribed to criminals as part of a broader disciplinary distinction between good and evil etc.). Furthermore,
through its exercise of the spectators’ self-reflexive, critical faculties, parody can undeniably sharpen the audiences’ awareness of the formal conventions underlying any narrative, including the triumphalist hegemonic constructions. This emancipating questioning is even more enhanced in *disparates* like *Intriga*, for instance, which not only makes a character who (diegetically) is an actor be the only efficient detective, but also ends with a openly confessed revelation of its fictional fabrication by a director, thus training the spectators to read what they see on the screen (the prior NO-DO news bulletin included) as a construction and not as a representation of a “reality”. This doubting stance is also promoted by comedies like *Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada* and *Fantasmas en la casa*, which show a reporter, a playwright and an actor as actively involved in the revelation of “truth”, which thus once again appears under the guise of fiction. Moreover, the paranoid reading advanced by thrillers, which continues to be present in these *disparate* comedies, can easily be displaced towards more politicized interpretations of the narrative situations and characters (e.g., the shallow modernization and americanization of the Spanish society in comedies like *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* or *La pandilla de los once*, which often parodically dwell on the mixture of apparent sophistication and actual “chapuza”).

While this section will not pursue an extensive analysis of the seven *disparate* plots under consideration in this section (i.e., *Intriga*, *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, *Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada*, *Fantasmas en la casa*, *Melocotón en almíbar*, *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* and *La pandilla de los once*), which are much more twisted than in the case of the previous comedies, it will provide some details in the corresponding plot appendix at the end of the thesis. Some of the most interesting parodic elements and characters of these parodies will be
touched upon, however, as well as their potential critical, alternative value at the time of the film release.¹

Based upon Wenceslao Fernández Flórez’ 1936 novel, Un cadaver en el comedor, Intriga, directed by Antonio Román in 1942, also benefitted from Miguel Mihura’s work as a dialog adaptor.² A caustic parody of thrillers that is subversively full of metanarrative comments (e.g., the profesional actor as the only efficient detective, the film director as the one who is “guilty” of the preposterously exaggerating series of abductions, murders and fake identities), this disparate comedy ludically enhances the usual escalating complications of the thriller genre by leading the murder suspicions to the grotesque figures of El Club de los Cien Kilos (which also gave the name of one of Fernández Flórez’ stories published in La Codorniz in 1941), an ominous-looking, secret organization of “golosos por profesión” that obligatorily weighed more than one hundred kilograms.³ Considered within the bleak autarkic context of the time when Intriga was released, this absurdist scapegoating of carefree, gourmand, rich people must have had politicized critical connotations for the contemporaneous audiences of this comedy, given who could actually afford to be such a gourmand during those “years of hunger”. Another interestingly mocked thriller convention is the usual displacement of guilt on the social (i.e., lower-class) other, as was the servant’s figure, which appears as the only potential murderer for the rich, middle-aged Maldonado couple as they hypothesize about the potential assassin of a

¹ The labels of the five essential parodic techniques (i.e., inversion, misdirection, literalization, extraneous inclusion and exaggeration) that will soon be mentioned are indebted to Geoff King’s discussion of parody (115-18), in his turn influenced by Harries’ book, Film Parody.

² The poster of this sarcastic comedy chose, nonetheless, to focus on the well-known and popular actor images of Julio Peña (starring the amateur detective) and Blanca de Silos (interpreting Elena, the Maldonado’s daughter). They appeared in a posture that could easily give rise to a classification of this thriller parody as a noir melodrama, which would have astutely tried to capitalize on the clear marketing success of this contemporaneous Hollywood genre.

³ As the thin amateur detective and the police inspector attempt to enter this club, the obese doorman denies their entrance under the reason that they “no dan el peso reglamentario”, humorously adding: “Ya me ven a mí y no soy más que el portero.” He remains unimpressed by their humorous spontaneous resolution (i.e., “¡Engordaremos!”), yet he quickly changes his mind and lets them in as they bribe him, an implicit allusion to the widespread corruption of the time.
movie they are watching. In a brilliant touch of parodic exaggeration, the murderer eventually appears to be an orangutan, a hilarious caricature of the detective scapegoating of otherness.

Given the already extensive analyses (e.g., in Martín García, Mañas Martínez, Green’s *From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage*) of the 1943 *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro*, inspired in one of Jardiel Poncela’s plays and directed by Rafael Gil, this chapter would just like to draw attention to some dark humorous touches of this comedy, which was ambivalently received by the movie reviewers of the time (e.g., from Primer Plano, Radiocinema and Dígame), who reticently commented upon its “escenas truculentas” and about the pervasive atmosphere of madness, obsession and angst of this film.¹ Judging by the movie posters and by the prior audience success of the Hitchcok’s *Rebecca* (which was released a year before in Spain and must have influenced Rafael Gil’s adaptation), *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* must have actually also tried to capitalize on the noir atmosphere and characters of this famous Hollywood precedent, skillfully preserving, besides, numerous examples of playfully humorous replies, characters and situations that belonged to Jardiel’s play. This disquieting ambience could of course be symptomatically read not only against the widespread foundational violence of the early postwar years of autarchy, but also against the generalized, licensed violence against women, an oppressive impression that could not be erased by the numerous moments of absurdist humor.² The latter type of violence can be linked to Fernando’s naturalized, seemingly

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¹ The anonymous reviewer from Radiocinema labels this film an “abnormal”, “extravagant tragedy”, while the Dígame critic uses the harshest tone, saying that Mariana’s family is entirely composed of people who should be in a mental asylum, thus revealing his strong disciplinary tendencies in front of a disturbing otherness that was very distanced from the exalted moral and social exemplariness of the contemporaneous hegemonic discourses. He also indictes Fernando for his compulsive sense of duty to his dead father to find out the truth about Eloisa’s death, sarcastically remarking that his mentioned doctoral studies were completely useless.

² On the very contrary, such moments (unsurprisingly indicted by the Radiocinema critic for “desenfrenado”, that is, indecorous type of humor) even further increase the overall disturbing sensation triggered by this comedy, contributive to the peculiarly dark, secretive atmosphere that surrounds the Ojeda and Briones families. It is interesting to mention that, in the bleak setting of aurachic Spain, this unusual kind of humor was apparently very
justified chloroform drugging of Mariana in order to find the truth about his father’s death, a manipulation of a female figure that could easily be read in psychoanalytical terms. Even more disturbing is his uncle Ezequiel’s torture of female cats (with individual names) that are believed to be women by Clotilde, who finds a kind of diary where he details his frustrated encounter and subsequent torture and murder of “Felisa”. The misogyny inherent in this gender-specific violence, foundationally carried out in the name of science (i.e., to find a cure for pellagra), is further amplified towards cynical masochist touches: both Mariana and her aunt, Clotilde, are thus shown to be drawn to Fernando and respectively Ezequiel in so far as they appear to be mysterious and/ or criminals.¹ A similar caustic antimelodramatic account of women, which, in this case, is consonant with many thriller and noir conventions, is the insane Micaela’s image, who is the eventually revealed criminal and, implicitly, the responsible character for the bleak, maniacal transformation of her family (including her brother’s disenchanted voluntary choice of vicarious trips from his bed immobility and house reclusion). As I have previously mentioned, this kind of misogynist displacement of (social) guilt on a “mad woman in the attic” image also surfaces, to some extent, in the 1946 Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada, unanimously indicted for its excessive “theatricality”, and its later 1961 remake, Fantasmas en la casa, which was extolled for its successful cinematographic adaptation, even if this was carried out at the relative expense of Jardiel’s humor, which was more scantily preserved. Unlike the blatantly parodic version of 1946, directed by Gonzalo Delgrás, in which even the soundtrack invited to a constant sarcastic take on the exaggerated horror conventions, Fantasmas en la casa relies more extensively on suspense and on melodrama, which is narratively linked to a significant change in

¹ Clotilde romantically sighs as she mentions Ezequiel under the name of Landrú, alluding to a famous French serial killer who was nicknamed Bluebeard as he first married his female victims. As she finds out that he “only” tortured cats, not women, she contemptuously calls him “pelagatos”.

successful, judging by the reviewers’ assessment—the movie generated not only hearty burst of laughter but even spectator applauses.

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the plot: the playwright and amateur detective Raimundo does not accidentally encounter the shrewdly terrorized young woman (Cristina in this movie, no longer parodically named Sibila as in Jardiel’s play and in its earlier film adaptation), but he is actively looking for his former fiancée, who disappeared both before their upcoming wedding some years ago and immediately after a later, brief encounter by train, when Cristina laconically conveyed him a sense of oppressive danger and gave him the address of a hotel in Madrid.\(^1\) Furthermore, the numerous visual gags of Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada, relying on a poor cinematographic setting (which must have triggered the contemporaneous and posterior accusations of theatricality), make the 1946 film a kind of parody of the silent horror movies (e.g., featuring Boris Karloff), whose anachronism (in 1946) is so evident that no spectator could actually take this adaptation seriously at any point.

Both versions of Jardiel’s play parodically caricature, however, the noir, typically Hitchcock conventions (including the sexist sexualized image of the innocent, beautiful woman, who is induced to believe she is crazy), literalizing, that is, making explicitly diegetic and hence comic, for instance, the presence of the ominous horror music that is usually present in noirs and horror movies. The two comedies displace a potentially horror story, set in a seemingly haunted house, onto a socioeconomic rationale, according to which this house provided a self-defensive strategy for some money counterfeiters. According to Stuart Green, Jardiel could have this idea from the 1921 silent comedy The Haunted House, featuring Buster Keaton, in which a group of counterfeiters frighten off unwanted visitors by making the house appear haunted (From Silver Screen to Spanish Stage 133). Perhaps the most corrosive aspect of social critique of these disparate comedies appears in the 1961 Fantasmas en la casa (adapted to the screen by the

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\(^1\) Even the advertising posters of these two versions show a different weight of the parodic discourse: while the 1946 poster clearly triggers an ironical take on the horror conventions, the parodic elements of the 1961 screen adaptation are much more subdued and the apparently endangered and scared female protagonist becomes highlighted.
popular director Pedro Luis Ramírez), which could effortlessly be read against the contemporaneous Spanish setting. This social setting is pictured not only as massively and easily corruptible (which enabled and facilitated the young Cristina’s inconspicuous abduction and prolonged sequestration), but also oppressively and tyrannically functioning at an institutional level to ensure the triumph of some evil, unscrupulous motifs. This latter foreboding image is achieved through the insensitive doctor Baselga, a clearly parodic figure of contemporaneous relevance, who is associated with a sarcastically sinister take on psychiatrists and mental asylums, part of a heartless, automatically functioning discipline that, as Foucault would say, blindly implements socially institutionalized parameters of normalcy. This disquieting image of an ominously undiscerning, Kafkian punishment machine, which can produce diagnostics in the absence of any actual review of the alleged “symptoms”, appears when Doctor Baselga unquestioningly agrees to come and lock a potential patient (i.e., Cristina) in a mental asylum based not even on an actual medical examination but only on a simple phone call from a male relative (i.e., her tutor), who claims that she has gradually lost her sanity and therefore needs to be confined. While her tutor’s reasons are socioeconomic (i.e., his desire to collect her inheritance by declaring her mentally irresponsible), the grotesquely humorous portrayal of this psychiatrist (who eventually comes and is inadvertently offered not one but several patients, whom he all immediately places in the mental asylum van) is particularly hideous if we take into consideration the existing juridical status of Spanish women in the first postwar decades: as it was mentioned in the first chapter, they were dependent upon male guardianship, being legally considered as a kind of “eternal minors”, whose status was indeed similar to that of the insane—or of the minors and the convicts—in their institutionalized lack of rights (Ruiz Franco 115).
Money, hence an economic chain, as underlying crime and even murder around another young woman’s coveted inheritance also appears in the 1956 *Los ladrones somos gente honrada*, directed by Pedro Luis Ramírez, a director whose confessed favorite genres were comedy and thriller, hence his obvious familiarity with their conventions, which makes this movie similar to his later *Fantasmas en la casa* in so far as they are both more an ironical tribute than a caustic parody of thrillers. In *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* the truly repulsive criminal figures are not the petty thieves and burglars (i.e., El Tío del Gabán, Castelar and El Pelirrojo) so endearingly portrayed by José Isbert, José Luis Ozares and, respectively, Antonio Garisa, but the unscrupulous, heartless Germana, who dominates and threatens even her kinder, eventually contrite brother and does not stoop even in front of murder, killing the loyal housekeeper Andrea (who threatens to reveal her plans of swindling Herminia of her inheritance). There is a clear striking moral and social disparity, therefore, between the upper class Germana, who lives in a lavish mansion, and the three poverty-stricken, ostensibly lower class thieves, who often resort to petty thefts and hoaxes out of actual need. While the latter frequently embody, through a parodic inversion, such ethical values as integrity, generosity and humanity (reaching parodically ironical touches as they come to pay with their own money the medications of a couple they had initially planned to rob), the greedy Germana merely wants to increase her already considerable resources by any means, murder included. This undoubtedly misogynist displacement of guilt, which accompanies an underlying social critique, should be situated in a decade when the humor of *La Codorniz* radicalized its sociopolitical critique towards dehumanizing proportions, while also displaying increasingly mordant takes on women, seen as unscrupulously interested in money and social advancement, often causing men’s moral destruction (as Germana attempts to do with her “softer” brother). Chumy Chúmez and Azcona,
in particular, often cast upper class women in despotic stances, as they humiliate and even mercilessly destroy some weak, effeminate men, a posture that is paralleled by images of social and military tyrants. _La Codorniz_ actually put forth a harsh criticism of the rich middle classes, who, engrossed in their own selfish schemes of expanding their wealth, were frequently depicted not only as cynically indifferent to the plight of the poor but were also subversively linked to a ruthless social violence, which could be easily read in political terms in a period that, especially starting with the mid1950s, saw many brutally repressed strikes and protests.

Unlike the apparently inferior, theatrical 1942 film adaptation directed by Iquino (which seems to have been lost), Pedro Luis Ramírez’ 1956 skillful cinematographic version of Jardiel’s play constructed a dynamic story whose brilliant humorous touches rely on some popular secondary actors (i.e., José Isbert, José Luis Ozores and Antonio Garisa) and very rarely to the attractive actors who cast the romantic couple (i.e., Herminia and Daniel, a former thief and their past boss), as it also happened in the case of _Fantasmas en la casa_, whose comic interludes belonged almost exclusively to Tony Leblanc (a train waiter, a former secondary actor and Raimundo’s unwilling aide) and to the actors who interpreted the fake specters (e.g., Manolo Gómez Bur, Xan das Bolas), not to Fernando Rey and Luz Márquez (i.e., starring Raimundo and Cristina).¹ Ramírez’ efficient use of those secondary actors, particularly José Isbert and José Luis Ozores, brought an incredible audience success to _Los ladrones somos gente honrada_, whose marketing strategies also capitalized on the director’s first comedy, _Recluta con niño_, which was tremendously popular, setting a box-office record. Both comedies were produced by ASPA, which emerged as a film producing company openly promoting “Catholic movies” (e.g., _Balarrasa_), yet it gradually made its initial moralizing bent more accommodating. A clear case of

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¹ The advertising posters of this 1956 screen adaptation astutely capitalized on these three popular secondary actors (i.e., Tony Leblanc, Manolo Gómez Bur and Xan das Bolas), whose names were accentuated with bold, large letters, heading the cast, and whose comic facial expressions, employed in the movie, were also unsurprisingly highlighted.
such flexibilization is Los ladrones somos gente honrada, whose sympathetic image of the thieves or of their former chief (i.e., Daniel), somewhat melodramatically reformed through Herminia’s (otherwise playful) love, cannot erase many other subversive elements of this disparate comedy, as we have already seen. Another moment deprived of the traditional moral exemplarity is the three petty thieves’ caustic assessment of Herminia’s “disparaging” effect on Daniel (which they misogynistically see typical of women’s disastrous transformation of men), a parodic reversal of the morally redeeming woman stereotype, so commonly exalted in the hegemonic public sphere of postwar Spain. Furthermore, this disparate comedy does not actually provide a morally uplifting ending, given the thieves’ implicit return to their former dubious picaresque adventures in the Rastro after Germana is handed to the police and they conclude their exonerating collaboration with the official representatives of social order and discipline (i.e., the police).  

An even less exemplary image of petty thieves and burglars appears in the 1963 La pandilla de los once, based upon Tono’s story and script and directed by Pedro Lazaga, who made a similar parody of crime thrillers (dwelling on the criminals’ personal lives) in Sabían demasiado, released a year before, in 1962. Both comedies seem to have been based on some Hollywood precedents that are already parodies (i.e., Ocean’s Eleven and, respectively, The Man Who Knew Too Much), yet Pedro Lazaga effectively adapts these Hollywood-based parodies onto a Spanish setting, a translation that revels in numerous comically extraneous inclusions that are inextricably linked to the contemporaneous Madrid. The disparate catalyst of the entire plot

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1 Their fortuitous abandonment of these activities in favor of a trip to La Habana, due to Daniel’s generous, last-minute offer, is not only a clear *deus ex machina* resolution but it does not even provide a clear sense that there they will actually lead honest lives. The only would-be solution that it provides is the implicit “cleansing” of Madrid of their disturbing social and moral presence.

2 A somewhat similar parody of a comically failed bank robbery appears in the 1963 Atraco a las tres, where the autodidact criminals are some of the employees of the bank, who attempt to copy the successful heist elements that they saw in some popular Hollywood thrillers.
development thus resourcefully relies on some castizo thieves’ desire, parodically put into practice, to become as glamorous as their American counterparts, a naïve mirroring attempt that they base upon the alluring images of gangsters and mafiosos in some popular Hollywood crime thrillers. This corrosive parody puts forth a morally dubious transformation of the 1960s Spain into an apparently modernized (i.e., Americanized) space, whose main staple is the underworld of shady bars, where ostentatious criminals (who carry such humorous names as Al Gómez, Toni, Dick, but also the more castizo El Coco, El largo, El Zampa) subversively coexist with rich upper-class business men and with provocative but easy women, who dance to the rhythm of the latest jazz and cha-cha-cha music. While this morally questionable, counterfeited sophistication can undeniably be read against the contemporaneous triumphalist rhetoric of modernization that can be linked to desarrollismo, this hegemonic discourse is further undone by the revelation of the ubiquitous chapuza (e.g., unreliable measuring and electronic devices, administrative chaos, shoddy state of public works) that will eventually undermine the eleven criminals’ plot to rob the Bank of Spain through the underground tunnel that they dig and in which they almost resort to cannibalism (when they no longer know how to get out and no food supplies are left). The police only conveniently appear in the end, under a benevolent light, taking the pathetic robbers from their tunnel exit (into the bank) directly to jail, an enforced moralizing ending of this comedy that is cannot eradicate the numerous subversive connotations of this movie, especially the comingling of criminals and apparently respectable businessmen in the bar setting (where both categories are attracted by the loose women that are present there) and various allusions to a widespread social corruption, which permeates even the medical profession (under the parodic guise of the plastic surgeon who facially transforms the chief of this criminal band). Another unusual presence in this film is the satirized homosexual (i.e., “afeminado”) figure of the
sentimental thief named El Mercedes, who is depicted as obsessively concerned with appearances and fawning upon the band chief, a constant catalyst for El Mercedes’ melodramatic sighs and long glances. Its presence in the shady world of criminal Madrid is likely to trigger an ambivalent reception, in so far as, theoretically/hegemonically, this realm is morally reprehensible (hence any association with it can be seen as negative), yet, on the other hand, his fragile person, however comically treated, can paradoxically and subversively soften this pragmatic underworld.

The 1960 *Melocotón en almíbar*, based upon Mihura’s play (adapted to the screen by Antonio del Amo), also dwells on the world of inefficient, but presumptuous robbers, who strive to imitate the screen models put forth by Hollywood crime thrillers. The most extravagant character of this *disparate* comedy is, however, the amateur detective, Sor María de los Ángeles, a nun and nurse, who will gradually succeed in uncovering the robbers’ true identity, retrieve the stolen jewels and even trigger Nuria’s (i.e., the female thief) redemptive abandonment of her shady past. While Sor María’s eccentric presence in a criminal setting undoubtedly brings an original humorous touch of playfulness, her redoubtable hermeneutic efficiency as a detective (which can be easily related to her vocational affiliation) seriously undermines, nevertheless, her religious and moral profile, which might account for the negative and neutral movie reviews of the time. Her Christian image remains unconvincingly portrayed, being limited to few condescending moralizing exhortations to Nuria and to some didactic harangues to the robbers and to Doña Pilar, the owner of the apartment rented by the thieves, humorously interpreted by a confoundingly fast-talking Guadalupe Muñoz Sampedro. Her would-be exemplary image as a nun is damaged even more by her self-righteous speeches, feigning a Christian humility and complete devotion to God that sound quite hollow, hypocritically disguising an inquisitive
penchant towards surveillance and a meticulous collection of data that can be later used to construct a disciplinary body of knowledge (i.e., that will be used to juridically convict the robbers) or to bring about the salvation of a “lost soul” (Nuria) that strikes the audience as a proud, self-congratulating feat of personal persuasiveness more than an actual concern for the other.¹ Her questionable roundabout rhetorical skills are also employed to manipulate other people in view of material benefits, an impression that is particularly powerful as she shrewdly and repeatedly praises Doña Pilar’s handmade macramé in a way that eventually makes this widow feel obliged to donate it to Sor María’s monastery. Her hermeneutic prowess as an amateur detective brings about the conservative ending of this comedy, which safely and redemptively places a contrite Nuria in the nun’s convent, a refuge that exonerates her from a legal punishment, unlike what happens to her fellow robbers, which end up in prison.² Her investigating skills are also subversively contrasted to an inefficient police force, whose disciplinary incompetence she ironically counterbalances as her private efforts eventually bring about the capture and punishment of the undesirable elements of society within a plot development that thus implies an oppressive union between two social institutions that appear as similarly based upon surveillance and punishment.

¹ As Doña Pilar is more and more astounded by Sor María’s uncommon observation and interpretive skills, she defensively remarks: “Soy muy observadora, pero todo lo pongo en servicio de Dios.” This explanation hardly justifies her dubious curiosity for all private details (e.g., whether they use the same toothpaste tube, which would indicate if they are married or not) or her constant spying, allegedly important for the salvation of the soul. Her proud, boastful consideration of her alleged Christian actions, whose value appears to lie more in her self-complimented personal accomplishments than in her service to a higher cause, resonates with the implicit discourse of many Spanish religious melodramas of the first half of the 1950s.

² The advertising poster of the movie unsurprisingly features this moralizing ending by placing Nuria in an enlarged frontal position, side by side with Sor María, and the three male robbers’ (minimized) faces encapsulated in a green rectangle in the background, which can point to their presumable future prison cell. The film ending significantly changed, however, Mihura’s more realistic, unredeeming picture of Nuria, who is also arrested in the play, despite her prior moments of occasional remorse.
Epilogue: The (dark) road not (yet) taken

Rather than dutifully recapitulating the main contentions of this thesis, which have already been extensively expounded and recurrently revisited, this epilogue attempts to be a kind of postscript more than a customary review of some research conclusions, which have been otherwise delineated in the Introduction to this dissertation. Taking this into consideration, this epilogue focuses instead on a possible direction for future examination.

The previous chapter has already extensively discussed the gradual resuscitation of “the other generation of 27” in the 1980s, followed by an academic institutionalization trend that becomes more evident starting with the 1990s and that is often accompanied in Spain by several attempts of national cultural legitimation. These problematic endeavors are even more conspicuous in the post-1990s critical reception of the postwar Spanish dark comedy, a cycle that flourished in Spain between the late 1950s and the early 1960s. This genre appears to constitute an object of recurring battles of national and cultural appropriation, as can be seen in the exceptionalist accounts of some Spanish film historians, especially in Santos Zunzunegui (e.g., _Los felices sesenta_, “Del cine adánico al costumbrismo de lo grotesco”, “De cuerpo presente: En torno a las raíces literarias del ‘Nuevo Cine Español’”), in Carlos F. Heredero (e.g., “1951-1961: Conformismo y disidencia”), and in Juan A. Ríos Carratalá (e.g., “Lo sainetesco en el cine español”). The canonized number of postwar dark comedies produced in Spain usually consists of four films, directed by Luis García Berlanga and Marco Ferreri (i.e., _Plácido_, _El verdugo_, _El pisito_, and _El cochecito_), even if their actual number seems to be closer to twelve if we move beyond the entrenched “masterpiece approach” and the related auteurist paradigm that have
jointly been prevalent in Spanish film studies. Given the overlapping temporal frame (i.e., the late 1950s and the early 1960s) and the noteworthy generic convergence between these postwar dark comedies and the *disparates* that were previously analyzed, a natural continuation for this dissertation would be reevaluating dark comedy’s materialist, anti-melodramatic discourse as well as the impact of its more radical critique within the Spanish public sphere of the time, an influence that seemed similar to the alternative importance of screwball and *disparate* in the aftermath of the Civil War. At the time such dark movies were released, they were even seen as a kind of *disparate* that was significantly indecorous for both sides of the political spectrum (for its radicalized cynical look and for its lack of a clear political commitment), a reception trend that, as we have previously mentioned, seems to parallel that of the absurd theater at the beginning of the 1950s. What is important to also bear in mind is the essential explanatory functioning of *disparate* and of the humor present in *La Codorniz*, which acted as an identifiable horizon of expectation that prepared the reception of dark comedy for the Spanish audiences and critics.

This afterword would therefore like to briefly dwell on this (dark) road not yet taken by the current thesis, namely, that of the postwar Spanish dark comedy, after a first necessary review of some preliminary findings.

The ongoing genealogical analysis of the filmmakers and of the critics associated with the limited, institutionalized samples of Spanish dark comedy appeared to point to an analogous reclaim of an authentic, politically progressive “Spanishness” that has been significantly linked to a celebrated, highly selective national tradition in arts and literature (e.g., Quevedo, Goya, the Baroque picaresque fiction, Solana, Valle-Inclán etc.), which was usually substantiated by the

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1 Santos Zunzunegui has actually expanded this narrow canon by also including *El extraño viaje*, a dark comedy directed by Fernando Fernán Gómez and produced later, in 1964 (see *Los felices sesenta o Paisajes de la forma*), and which is also analyzed by Steven Marsh’s study on postwar comedy, whose last part focuses on these five dark comedies. Zunzunegui’s analytical focus, which unsurprisingly favors his usual formal approach, seems to be indebted, nonetheless, to the same exceptionalist discourse of Spanish authenticity that he often uses in his research.
hermeneutic authority of Pedro Salinas, Ortega y Gasset and/ or even Baudelaire. It is noteworthy that, as in the case of screwball and especially of disparate, the exceptionalist accounts of a typically Spanish dark humor, allegedly manifest in the postwar comedies of the late 1950s and the early 1960s, was again grounded in formal analyses that dismiss any consequential weight of foreign generic discourses in the delineation of a postwar Spanish dark comedy. It should be observed in this respect that, while most researchers of this limited corpus of Spanish dark comedy exalted Rafael Azcona’s role in the reincarnation of a castizo dark humor, they often downplayed the directorial work of Marco Ferreri (though, significantly, not of Luis García Berlanga) and his prior filmmaking experience in Italy—even his later filmography was sometimes read as a radicalization of an artistic apprenticeship that was fundamentally shaped by his Spanish stay and by his collaboration with the autochthonous dark humor, as resuscitated by Azcona’s seminal contributions.¹

Upon an examination of various Italian studies and DVD covers of El pisito and El cochecito, directed by Marco Ferreri, we can ironically see how they downplay any real significance of Ferreri’s directorial experience in Spain, reclaiming these two dark comedies as authentically Italian, indebted to the ardently defended (and “authentically Italian”) legacy of commedia all’italiana, a seemingly long-standing cultural heritage that is also conflated with a historically defined cycle that emerged in the late 1950s, around the same time as the Spanish dark comedy, and gradually disappeared in the 1970s.²

¹ This type of nationalist-formal criticism usually ignores Azcona’s prior trajectory, linked to La Codorniz, as well as the joint consideration of various contemporaneous forms of dark comedy and humor that cannot be encapsulated within the preferred “masterpiece approach”.

² It would be interesting to study if Nino Manfredi’s acting presence in El verdugo might have accounted, to some extent, for this dark comedy’s enthusiastic reception by the Italian critics that saw it at the Venice film festival, given that by that time this actor was already iconically related to the Italian dark comedy of the age.
Any thorough discussion of the Spanish dark comedy of this age should, however, go beyond the institutionalized “masterpiece approach”, attempting to reconstitute all cycles and even isolated instances of dark comedies that were produced before and after these few consecrated films. On the other hand, these dark comedies should be analyzed within a larger framework of contemporaneous humor, which would enable a broader understanding of its generic characteristics and historical evolution. We already saw how, starting especially with the mid-1950s, there is an evident darkening of humor: not only are there conspicuously dark touches in various disparate comedies under analysis (e.g., El malvado Carabel, La pandilla de los once), but there is also a progressive protagonism of dark humor in the pages of the humor magazine La Codorniz, especially through the well-known contributions of Rafael Azcona and Chumy Chúmez. All these dark narratives seem to focus on the plight of individuals that are stifled by oppressive socioeconomic institutions, which are frequently embodied by cynical, heartless female characters that are depicted as more susceptible to the shallow lures of desarrollismo. The postwar Spanish discourse of dark humor thus appears as virtually inseparable from misogynist lenses, a vantage point that is, in its turn, associated with a disenchanted materialist focus on what Kathleen Rowe would call, following Bakhtin’s discussion of carnival, the “grotesque body of the unruly woman”, making “a spectacle of herself” (The Unruly Woman 33).

This customary gender scapegoating should perhaps be studied in conjunction with the later cultural phenomenon of destape, which also coincided with the end of the disparate cycle and seriously undermined the critical weight of the humor present in La Codorniz, as we have previously mentioned. It is also interesting to see how the rise of the destape phase was parallel

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1 Such broader interdiscursive investigation should also attempt to convincingly account for the somewhat solitary phenomenon represented by the already analyzed El hombre que se quiso matar, produced in 1942, within a different socio-historical background.
not only to the cultural aging and eventual disappearance of the typically *disparate* humor and comedies but also to some gradually more and more misogynist accounts of dark comedies. This genre cannot be convincingly limited, however, only to the initially envisioned period (i.e., between the late 1950s and the early 1960s), which anyway witnesses the production of many more than those five canonized dark comedies that are recurrently mentioned. Several dark comedies were actually released after the mid-1960s as well, sometimes combined with zany thriller plots. As a genre, the Spanish dark comedy cannot even be restricted to a clearly delineated period, as was the case of Spanish screwball and *disparate*, which were discussed in this thesis, and much less could we speak of a limited temporal frame situated within roughly the first two decades of the Francoist regime, which has remained the framework of this thesis. Dark comedies continued to be produced throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, being impossible to contain even within the historical limits of the Francoist regime—there are some recent examples of Spanish dark comedy as well, which should not be artificially separated from the previous productions of dark comedy. A thorough interdisciplinary genre analysis of this cinematic narrative should take into accounts all its historical instances in order to better understand its varied generic deployment and its changing sociopolitical and cultural conditionings. Dark comedy thus deserves a complex study that could not be persuasively carried out here, within the limited scope and temporal framework of this thesis, but that will hopefully be thoroughly pursued in the near future.
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Appendix I. Spanish screwball comedy plots

Ángela es así/ Ángela Is the Way She Is (Ramón Quadreny, 1945)

Ángela, an orphan, and her governess friend leave the French boarding school, where the protagonist feels abandoned and utterly bored. In order to avoid any disciplinary repercussions, they write a letter, allegedly coming from a distant uncle (Gonzalo), who summons them urgently to Spain for Christmas. The two women actually arrive there on New Year’s Eve to find a bachelor’s house full of idle, womanizing men and frivolous women. The carefree party group is chased away by Ángela’s false alarm about a fire, which enables her to start the conquest of her “uncle”. Throughout the next month that she forcefully remains in Gonzalo’s house, she resolutely proceeds to pampering him with her flaunted domestic skills and to changing his idle routine and the household appearance. Ángela also makes him jealous by feigning a romance with a younger man, which facilitates Gonzalo’s separation from his interested, frivolous girlfriend, Mar. He will eventually propose to Ángela, who thus finally succeeds in securing a good match and in permanently abandoning the dreaded boarding school.

Boda accidentada/ Eventful Wedding (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1942)

Katie is a very frivolous, emancipated young woman who is accustomed to being courted and flattered by all the men she comes across. She is about to get married to Cándido (older, plump, slightly bald, yet kind and generous), who is the owner of a canning factory in Pontevedra, a possession that takes up most of his time and even makes him leave her alone in the seaside resort. During this absence, Katie spends a lot of time with Niko, one of Cándido’s childhood friends who was recently impoverished. Their sarcastic verbal skirmishes trigger a
love-hate relationship between the two protagonists, yet neither of them confesses his true feelings until the very end, prior to her projected wedding to Cándido. As the absent-minded businessman is late for his own wedding because of urgent factory issues, Katie and Niko merrily run away and get married after they openly reproach Cándido for his blind dedication to his job.

Cinco lobitos/ Five Little Wolves (Ladislao Vajda, 1945)

After he is notified that his girlfriend left for Lisbon with a an unknown man, Don Félix, the owner of a cement factory, rashly decides to fire all his female employees and to substitute them with men. Marisa, an accountant, also finds herself among the unjustly dismissed women and her financial situation is very bleak. She consequently decides to found the agency Lobo, which specializes in household services. Taking advantage of the (male) servants’ discharge from Don Félix’ house, the five sisters infiltrate into his mansion to substitute them and thus prove him that women can do (better) whatever a man can. Admiring her skills in managing his household finances, Don Félix makes Marisa his private secretary, which triggers Pedro’s envy, as he was his secretary until then. Pedro starts a fierce professional competition with Marisa, which is paralleled by their mutual falling in love. Don Félix is also gradually falling in love with her, while his former servants are falling in love (while professionally competing) with Marisa’s sisters. After many ruses and verbal bantering, typical of a love-hate relationship, Marisa and Pedro stay together and so do her sisters with the former household employees. In the end, Don Félix also finds out that his girlfriend had to urgently leave for a show in Portugal (together with her manager) and that was the reason for which she could not notify him beforehand.
Deliciosamente tontos/ Deliciously Silly (Juan de Orduña, 1943)

Mari’s Cuban great-grandfather left a will according to which all his considerable fortune would be inherited by the descendant who would marry for love a descendant of his best friend’s family (Ernesto’s great-grandfather). After an initial rejection of such a prospective wedding (due to the prior engagements of the old friends’ grandchildren with other persons), there were only male descendants in each family before Mari’s hopeful birth in Havana. She is reluctantly convinced by her bankrupt uncle and tutor to marry Ernesto, who lives in Madrid, so as not to miss the opportunity to inherit a fabulous fortune, whereas Ernesto wants to marry her because of falling in love at first sight (with her photo). Afraid of Mari’s potential materialist reasons for agreeing to marry him, Ernesto decides to test her by sending her his unattractive butler’s photo instead of his while he secretly goes to Havana and embarks with a different identity upon the same ship that carries Mari to Madrid after their marriage by proxy. The fall in love indeed during their long transatlantic voyage, which determines Mari to abandon her fake husband (the butler) when she meets him in person. Positively impressed by her romantic decision, Ernesto confesses his ploy and they happily stay together, a choice conveniently rewarded by the magnificent inheritance they receive.

Doce lunas de miel/ Twelve Honeymoons (Ladislao Vajda, 1943)

Doña Flora, an old widow, decides to give a generous dowry of forty thousand pesetas to twelve couples that cannot otherwise get married due to financial difficulties. Jaime and Julieta are also among the numerous couples who come for an interview, even if they have just met each other in the elevator: as they have just found out about the original gift, they decide to pretend they are in love and cannot get married because of their poverty. While Julieta needs money to
go to Hollywood to become an actress, Jaime needs financial support to carry out his invention. Jaime’s histrionic gift, more than Julieta’s, succeed in moving the kind widow and in obtaining the coveted dowry after their religious wedding. In love with Julieta, Jaime even offers her half of his part as well so as to facilitate her success in Hollywood, where she will eventually triumph by sheer luck (i.e., a manager was looking for a new face). As she returns to Spain after three years, Julieta meets Jaime again, whose impoverished means made him apply for the provisional butler job at her vacation house, ignoring that she was the owner. The two protagonists will constantly fight, especially due to Jaime’s disguised jealousy and to his embarrassing pranks on her American admirers. Persuaded to formally join him at the three-year anniversary reunion that Doña Flora organizes for the twelve married couples, Julieta will gradually realize that she is in love with Jaime and that she could only be happy if she stays with him and does not return to Hollywood. She will thus eventually decide to obey her heart, a choice that brings about Jaime’s complete happiness (after his invention was finally patented).

**El difunto es un vivo / The Deceased Is a Lively One** (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1941)

In order to reconquer her younger, frivolous and condescending wife, Elsa, as a different man, Inocencio pretends to have drowned in a river (by leaving his clothes there) and, with his best friend’s help, he pretends to be Fulgencio, his dazzling and famous twin brother, who was an excellent performer. Inocencio ensures that he is triumphantly welcome (as Fulgencio) in the town as he pretends to return home after a glamorous success in the United States. Elegantly and modernly dressed, unlike his previous careless, unkempt appearance, the protagonist gets leisurely settled in his own house, enjoying everyone’s undivided attention and care after ridiculing and chasing away all his wife’s interested admirers. Elsa eventually recognizes him,
especially when he calamitously plays the piano, counting on the others’ unavowed musical
calaminousness but disregarding his dead brother’s actual inability to play the piano, which Elsa knew.
As Inocencio proposes to her as Fulgencio, Elsa confesses her awareness of his true identity and

**El hombre que las enamora/ The Man Who Makes Them Fall in Love** (José María Castellví, 1944)

As Fernando’s fiancées abandon him the day of the wedding, due to their hopeless
infatuation with his son, Ernesto, Fernando decides to secretly date Rosario, a neighbor, in order
to avoid another potential humiliation. In the meantime, the widower notifies everyone of his
alleged wedding with the young and beautiful María Elena, whom she actually wants to marry
with his son by enlisting her and her parents’ help in the ploy—Fernando believes that all
obstacles to his marital happiness will vanish when his son, an inveterate, albeit passive,
womanizer, settles down. In order to avoid Eduardo’s suspicions and to lure him into falling in
love with the “forbidden” María Elena, Fernando tells him that he arranged for a different
woman, Beatriz, to be his daughter-in-law. As Eduardo’s butler discovers the ruse, the young
man parades a contemptuous attitude towards María Elena, whom he actually loves but whose
“hypocrisy” he fears since he discovered the complot. As she starts crying and asks for
forgiveness, Eduardo condescendingly grants it and decides to finally marry her. His father is
abandoned once again the day of his wedding, because Rosario also fell in love with Eduardo,
who vindictively pretended to court her after he had found out about his father’s devious plan.
Ella, él y sus millones/ She, He and His Millions (Juan de Orduña, 1944)

The countess Diana marries Arturo Salazar for money, whereas the male protagonist looks for a marriage of convenience that would enhance his social status, as he is a prosperous financier of modest birth. The couple agrees not to consummate their wedding and to enjoy complete independence, but Diana is determined to make her cold husband fall in love with her. Helped by Joaquín, a loyal friend and former admirer, the young countess succeeds in provoking Arturo’s jealousy and in winning his heart, which prompts their mutual decision to have a real marriage.

Eres un caso/ You Are Something Else (Ramón Quadreny, 1945)

Inocencio is a very persuasive salesman in his uncle’s department store, yet he is uncommonly naïve and immature in socializing due to a rigid moral upbringing and a sanctimonious, domineering aunt. With the help of Fernando, his good friend, a shrewd medical student well versed in the ways of the world, Inocencio begins a secret life of nightly escapades to frivolous bars, which is continued even after his tutors find out the truth: his loyal friend parades an authoritative medical knowledge, claiming that Inocencio suffers from split personality, whose best treatment is to leave him alone and pretend that everything is in order. Imitating Fernando’s interested offer to accompany him to bars every night, Inocencio’s uncle is also having fun together with them while claiming a similar humanitarian concern. Humorously disciplined by Elvira, his fiancée and future wife, Inocencio repents of his dissimulation and dissipated life and finds happiness in Barcelona with his emancipated wife, far away from the stifling family environment. His uncle, who claims a similar split personality after Inocencio
leaves home, is also eventually domesticated after an accident puts all his body in plaster and confines him to bed.

**La vida empieza a medianoche/ Life Begins at Midnight** (Juan de Orduña, 1944)

Silvia, an intelligent, emancipated young woman, comes to Madrid from the province in search of a hopeful life of independence as the female writer María Linz’ private secretary. Before she meets the successful romance writer in the hotel at midnight, she stays at a friend’s house in downtown Madrid, where she is confused with her friend’s roommate, an actress and chorus girl who was paid by Ricardo, a promising young composer, to impersonate an uncommon role for a charitable cause: willing to brighten the last days of his stepbrother’s grandfather, who does not know that his grandson, Guillermo, is dead nor that he lied about having a family, Ricardo decides to pretend that he is Guillermo in front of his almost blind grandfather and to have a woman play the part of his stepbrother’s wife, Aurora. As the mistaken identity is clarified and Silvia is enlightened about Ricardo’s kind initiative, she generously agrees to play Aurora’s role, while one of the children of Ricardo’s porter plays the part of late Guillermo’s alleged son. Various unforeseen circumstances make Ricardo and Silvia meet again after she fulfills her charitable role, which draws them even closer and makes them fall in love with each other, an occurrence that is happily paralleled by the tremendous success of Ricardo’s first operetta, “La vida empieza a medianoche”. When María Linz’ briefcase containing a cherished book manuscript is stolen from her hotel room, she unfairly accuses Silvia of theft, but the protagonist’s innocence is soon proved as the writer’s chauffeur and apparent admirer discloses his identity as María Linz’ stepson, who wanted to revenge his unjustly anonymous dead father, whose manuscripts were stolen by María Linz. As the female writer is shown to be a
cynical impostor, Silvia is left without any job in Madrid, but she is interestingly offered the position of Ricardo’s private secretary. This convenient solution is accompanied by a marriage proposal that she happily accepts in the end, while they are at the country estate of Guillermo’s grandfather, who realized the sad truth behind Ricardo’s engineered ploy before astutely inviting Silvia and Ricardo to his home, thus providing a propitious setting for the proposal.

**Mi fantástica esposa/ My Fantastic Wife** (Eduardo García Maroto, 1944)

Caruchi, an emancipated, daydreaming young woman, yearns for an adventurous life, patterned after the enthralling books she avidly reads, which makes her openly despise her older, stout and dull husband Isidoro, a modest bank employee. Determined to reconquer his contemptuous wife, Isidoro follows the advice of a friend with financial resources and dubious connections (due to his short stay in prison) and offers Caruchi a simulated life of international theft. As such, they pretend to be successful socialites who end up stealing jewels during and after various society parties, which makes them lead a would-be fugitive existence. This hectic life is accompanied by Isidoro’s growing irascibility and abuse, whose impersonation stands in stark contrast to his former peaceful, complacent way of being, indicted by his wife for its underlying “lizard blood”. As he notices Caruchi’s marked fatigue and exasperation with this new kind of life, Isidoro engineers a fake police chase and, while sheltered in his parents’ house, where they lived before, she casually remarks that she is pregnant, which makes an emotional Isidoro decide to tell her the truth about his ploy. He is utterly disappointed, however, that she is allegedly infatuated with this kind of adventurous existence and therefore plans a transatlantic trip to start anew. Caruchi also adds that they are really chased by the police, because she stole several jewels on her own, without his knowledge. She finally confesses him the truth, that
everything is but a joke that she devised with her mother, an opera singer, and with her boyfriend, in order to take revenge on Isidoro, whose scheme she had realized a while ago. The comedy ends with an unconvincing scene, namely with Caruchi’s submissive, affectionate attitude towards her husband, who comes back home from work and brings her a candy box for their wedding anniversary, which is meant to contrast the initial scene, when a similar return home occasioned an indifferent and then sarcastic, contemptuous behavior.

**Rápteme usted/ Kidnap Me** (Julio de Fleischner, 1940)

The frivolous and capricious Áurea, a former, mediocre singer and actress, decides to leave her husband, with whom she constantly fights, in order to resume her past career. As she painfully realizes that she needs more sensationalistic advertising in order to reconquer her previous public profile, she hires some (ridiculously incompetent) detectives in order to plot her own kidnapping and ensure a desired publicity. In the meantime, her husband secretly hires the same detective agency to initially monitor Áurea and then to kidnap her. Soon she fearfully realizes that her kidnapping is not the one she consciously engineered, yet she eventually finds out who lies behind the devious ploy and lets herself be persuaded by her husband to abandon her career plans and to leave for America with him.

**Te quiero para mí/ I Want You for Myself** (Ladislao Vajda, 1944)

César Guzmán is a kind, absent-minded philosophy teacher, who works in a private high school for girls, where his timidity triggers various farcical situations and numerous discipline issues that threaten to bring about his dismissal. As he prepares to go to Madrid to buy several school supplies, César is notified of being the sole inheritor of a huge fortune, belonging to a
distant relative abroad. Before leaving for the capital, he discovered a love note in his papers, which was misplaced there by Lili, a frivolous high school senior who was infatuated with the school administrator, Enrique Heredia, to whom the love declaration was intended. Stealthily hiding in César’s car as she wants to go to Madrid and have fun, Lili makes her presence known as the car breaks down and the philosophy teacher attempts to take refuge in a nearby country estate because of a heavy rain outpour. When her tutors find out that she spent the night alone with a rich man at a country estate, they try to persuade César to marry Lili to restore her blemished honor. As he is told about her infatuation with Enrique, who cynically refuses to marry her unless she receives a generous dowry, César offers him five millions from his newly acquired inheritance just to make her happy and secure. When he further discovers that his fortune is actually trivial, César offers to give all his publishing earnings to Enrique, even his monthly wages as a teacher, in order to provide at least something for Lili’s dowry. The school administrator refuses such inconsequential offer and Lili finally realizes the truth about Enrique’s character, which is happily paralleled by a gradual process of falling in love with César, with whom she eventually agrees to marry.

Turbante blanco / White Turban (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1943)

The famous composer Alejandro Marcos reluctantly goes to the airport to meet one of his most faithful, infatuated admirers, who is thrilled to finally meet her idol, whom she has never seen before. He finds himself in this undesired position following his butler’s mocking reply to one of the admirer’s many letters, a reply that used a hopeful, melodramatic phrasing, which successfully imitated the young woman’s hackneyed, inflated style. The same day Alejandro leaves home to meet her, the psychiatrist Alfredo Echarri also goes to the airport to wait for a
patient, Elvira, who is unaware of the treatment in store for her: knowing her suspicious, hysterical behavior, her father told her that the psychiatrist is just a good friend with a very interesting personality, while the doctor had to erase all medical signs of his clinic and to make it look like a private home. Both Elvira and the composer’s fan were supposed to be identified by their white turbans, which generates a humorous confusion: the female admirer and the doctor are the first to arrive, which makes him believes she is his patient, while Alejandro is late for the airport and mistakes Elvira with his admirer. This confusion ultimately generates some better-matched couples and a didactic disciplining and change of all four protagonists, who will conveniently find out the truth only after they are hopelessly in love with each other.

Un ladrón de guante blanco/ A White-Glove Thief (Ricardo Gascón, 1945)

Carmen Rico, a spoiled Spanish girl who is raised by her rich father in Chicago, accompanies him on his trip to Spain, where she dreams to have an adventurous life according to the stereotypical pattern of the 19th century Spanish bandit (i.e., bandolero) stories she was enthralled with. She meets Jaime, a young engineer and her father’s Spanish associate, during her stay in an isolated hotel in Fuencarral and willfully mistakes him with “Guante Blanco” (i.e., “White Glove”), a real thief who was very famous at the time. Carmen’s wishful-thinking confusion is propitiated by the strong sensations of her dream with “Guante Blanco” shortly before waking up and seeing Jaime, who took refuge in her hotel because of the rain and, unable to find the entrance, hastily used a window. In addition, Jaime was coincidentally wearing a tuxedo and had only one white glove when he made his first appearance. As she eagerly makes public an exaggerated story of her encounter with “Guante Blanco”, the real thief’s followers grudgingly suspect that their leader organized a robbing behind their back while “Guante
Blanco” is very envious of this new “usurper”. The thief and his band thus pretend they are journalists who want to find out more details about “Guante Blanco” from Carmen, whose naïve infatuation with her own magnified participation in a sensationalistic event triggers her kidnapping. Knowing her untrammelled imagination, both Jaime and her father do not initially believe that she was kidnapped, yet they are eventually forced to believe its veracity as Carmen’s father is also kidnapped. After a series of confusions and blunders, Jaime unwillingly plans an alleged bank robbery, making the thieves believe that he is a more sophisticated, America criminal, who only devises grand jobs. As Carmen and her father are rescued by the police from their entrapment, they all conveniently arrive in time to save Jaime from the deceived thieves’ lynching, following their common entrapment in the bank due to his engineer skills.

**Un marido a precio fijo/ A Fixed-Price Husband** (Gonzalo Delgrás, 1942)

Estrella is a rich, spoiled heiress who engineers her kidnapping and civil ceremony only to soon discover that the man she eloped with was already married. As he disappears with her jewels briefly after the ceremony, Estrella is desperate to find out a mock husband in order to avoid the potential ridicule in front of her tutor and friends, who think she is already happily married. She fortuitously stumbles upon Miguel, a journalist who was secretly investigating her story, whom she considers a thief but is willing to give up her initial urge to denounce him to the police in exchange for his agreement to perform her would-be husband’s role in society. Professionally interested in the details of her life, Miguel accepts the unseemly proposal and, as he gradually falls in love with her but cannot tolerate her emancipated, frivolous way of being, he decides to exemplarily domesticate her and transform her into a submissive, affectionate
woman. As this didactic task is eventually carried out successfully, they will get married “properly”, in Church.

**Una chica de opereta/ An Operetta Girl** (Ramón Quadreny, 1944)

Don Fabián, the manager of a famous opera singer, Gustavo, makes an original job offer to Silvia: to become Gustavo’s personal secretary, whose main task would consist in keeping away Gustavo’s numerous female admirers so that he can focus on his contracts, avoiding either marriage or more fleeting distractions. Silvia’s eligibility for the job is enhanced by her disguised appearance, which makes her look like the prototypical ugly spinster, hence romantically harmless for Gustavo: very formal and old-fashioned clothes and hairstyle, a farcically exaggerate mouth contour (which makes her lips look much bigger and condescendingly pursed), and black, big-rimmed glasses with very thick lenses that partially hide her eyes and face. Despite Silvia’s unattractive look, there appears a relative erotic tension between the two protagonists, which is to some extent magnified by the love interest that Silvia also triggers in Salvador, Gustavo’s best friend. The baritone falls hopelessly in love with his secretary as he sees her undisguised when Silvia generously offers to replace the sick *prima donna* in a concert, which also gives her the occasion to don a dazzling crinoline and hairstyle. The movie ends with an impending marriage, which will provoke Don Fabián’s feeble protests, soon assuaged by the alluring prospect of an exclusive contract with Silvia.
Appendix I. Disparate comedy plots

El destino se disculpa/ The Destiny Apologizes (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1945)

The film opens with the personified figure of “destination”, who, under the guise of a “modest employee (i.e., a “funcionario”), manifests his irritation against the entrenched opinion that he is responsible for various human deeds that are the mere result of free will. In order to exemplify what he means, he puts forth an invented fable, which begins in a provincial theater, where two friends, Ramiro (a poet and playwright) and Teófilo (an actor), daydream about the future. They consequently decide to go to Madrid, where they will be accompanied by Ramiro’s practical sister, Benita, and by her friend, Esperanza, who is romantically enthralled with Ramiro. After a series of fortuitous events that make Ramiro a radio advertiser, Teófilo dies in a car accident. Before his death, the two friends made a pact that, whoever will be the first to die, will return to guide the other, thus also convincing him of the existence of an afterlife. Faithful to his promise, Teófilo returns indeed as a ghost (which can temporarily materialize itself in animals or objects), having thirty days at his disposal to prevent Ramiro from marrying Elena, a frivolous, materialist woman, and from wasting all his recently inherited fortune in a dubious investment dishonestly proposed by the con artist Quintana. Quintana’s scam invention (an alleged gas substitute) makes Ramiro lose all his invested money and this bankruptcy also leads to Elena’s unsurprising decision to abandon him. On the verge of committing suicide, he nonetheless listens to Teófilo’s ghost, who advises him to open a door, where he will see a dairy store put up by his sister, Benita, with Esperanza’s help. The investment money came from Benita’s secret decision to wisely put aside some money from the lavish sum that Ramiro entrusted her in order to furnish and decorate his future home (before his planned wedding with
Contrite and impressed with his sister’s practical common sense, Ramiro will also realize Esperanza’s unflinching love and will thus consequently decide to marry her and help her sister lead the prosperous business. The comedy returns to the destiny’s figure in the end, who exhorts the audience to guide themselves by the Christian morality and by common sense in similarly dilemmatic situations.

**El hombre que se quiso matar/ The Man Who Wanted to Commit Suicide (Rafael Gil, 1942)**

Federico Solá, a civil engineer passionately devoted to cement, decides to commit suicide as he is unjustly fired and his fiancée subsequently abandons him. After a series of comically failed suicide attempts, he is persuaded by a fellow resident of his boarding house to take full advantage of the short period of life remaining until his planned suicide by fearlessly doing whatever he likes, as no one can inflict him a punishment that would be worse than death. After he publicly announces his decision to commit suicide within four days, he proceeds to eating and drinking plentifully without paying, to openly denouncing his fellow citizens’ social conventions and defects, and to castigating various figures of social and economic authority. He will, nonetheless, give up his decision after he meets the rich, beautiful and supportive Inés, with whom he falls in love. They will run away together, to everyone’s anger, not before Federico shrewdly secured her hand and an important job from her affluent father.

**El malvado Carabel/ The Evil Carabel (Fernando Fernán Gómez, 1956)**

Amaro Carabel, a modest real estate employee, is fired after he inadvertently discloses an investment haven to his managers’ alleged friend. Silvia, his fiancée, also abandons him, as she
loses all hope in his ability to provide the necessary income for a future home. Under these unpropitious circumstances, Carabel decides to turn against the society that rejects him and become a criminal. After several unsuccessful attempts of robbery and child abuse, his penniless state fortuitously ends as he is hired back by his former real estate company, in need of employees after the departure of several employees. Even if he receives less money than he used to do before, he can finally marry Silvia, nevertheless: the future household income will double due to her recent employment by the same company, who takes advantage of the recent social trend of job openings to women.

**El sistema Pelegrín/ The Pelegrín System (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1952)**

Héctor Pelegrín, an unsuccessful insurance agent, shrewdly persuades a high school principal to hire him as a physical education teacher, thus introducing this new course in the curriculum. Due to his lack of experience and skill in sports, he will introduce an original, gentlemanly method of playing soccer that is within everyone’s reach: the competent players (coming from poorer families) will score according to their skills, while the inept ones (belonging to richer families) will either be graciously allowed to score without any impediment or will have some final goals retroactively attributed to them, according to the school principal’s higher authority. His unusual lessons and subsequent training of the school’s team will culminate into a final sequence showing two elegantly dressed sets of players, who bow to each other before each move, walk leisurely on the field to the goalkeeper’s gate and effortlessly score due to the goalie’s ceremonial withdrawal from the gate. This appeasing strategy enables his continued employment and thus also his eventual marriage with the music teacher.
**Eloísa está debajo de un almendro/ Eloisa Is under an Almond Tree (Rafael Gil, 1943)**

As Fernando Ojeda returns home after receiving his doctoral degree in Belgium, his eccentric uncle, Ezequiel, gives him a letter from his deceased father, in which he urged Fernando to discover the mystery about Eloísa’s death, with whom he used to be in love. As Fernando encounters her painting and a music box, he finds out from Ezequiel that she was a member of the Briones family, so he decides to go to her family’s home to know more about her. There he meets Mariana, Eloísa’s daughter, and falls in love with her, soon discovering that she has an identical music box and starkly resembles her dead mother. Mariana is otherwise surrounded by bizarre servants and an eccentric family: her father, Edgardo, spends his entire time in bed, making imaginary train travels, while his aunt, Micaela, collects owls and every Saturday chases imaginary thieves through their odd mansion. He also meets Mariana’s other aunt, the absent-minded Clotilde, who will fall in love with Ezequiel, attracted by his mysterious aura of potential women murderer after she finds some gruesome diary notes in his notebook.

Fernando decides to drug and kidnap Mariana, bringing her to their home, in order to find more details about Eloísa’s death. In the Ojeda house, Mariana discovers some blood-stained shoes, sleeve and knife. She also unexpectedly meets Julia, her sister, who supposedly disappeared three years ago, but actually married a policeman who came to investigate the Ojeda family under the guise of a servant.

The mystery will be finally revealed by Edgardo, who tells everyone that Eloisa was killed in that house and buried under an almond tree. Her murderer was his mad sister, Micaela, whose identity he thus wanted to protect. She will not be jailed, but eventually confined to a mental asylum, while Clotilde, somewhat disappointed, will find out that Ezequiel did not actually murder women, but female cats, whom he would name prior to using them for his
scientific experiments (i.e., to find a cure for pellagra). Fernando and Mariana, in their turn, finally confess their love under the neighboring almond trees.

**Fantasmas en la casa/ Ghosts in the House (Pedro Luis Ramírez, 1961)**

Raimundo, a successful playwright, unexpectedly encounters Cristina, his former fiancée, on the same train he rides, going to Madrid. She mysteriously disappeared some years ago shortly before their projected wedding and now appears utterly distressed and seemingly ignorant of who he is. She will, however, secretly visit his carriage later, asking for his help and briefly giving her the name of a hotel where she would be in Madrid. Once there, he cannot find her, but eventually discovers she was taken to an old, seemingly haunted mansion in the middle of nowhere. Helped by Gregorio, a former secondary actor in one of his plays, whom he fortuitously also met on the train, Raimundo will eventually find out that this mansion was actually used by some money counterfeiters. Two of them were also Cristina’s tutors, who not only tried to drive away any potential visits by making the house look haunted but also sought to make her become insane (or at least doubt her sanity) by arranging several fake ghosts’ and monsters’ appearances to frighten her (some of their accomplices used various disguises to carry this task out while Cristina’s older female companion pretended not to see anything as these fake monsters appeared). The purpose of this reprehensible attempt was her tutors’ desire to declare Cristina insane and commit her to a mental asylum, which will enable them to acquire her inheritance. Raimundo and Gregorio will, however, undo their plans, rescuing Cristina and handing all the counterfeiters and their accomplices to the police, which enabled the two lovers’ happy reunion and marriage.
**Habitación para tres/ Room for Three (Antonio de Lara, 1952)**

Due to a clerical error, Alicia, soon to be married to the soccer referee Felipe, finds herself in the same hotel room with another man, the lawyer Carlos. They will also discover a thief, Enriqueta, under the bed, who is urged to stay in order to potentially testify for Alicia’s unblemished honor. The situation becomes complicated as both Alicia’s and Felipe’s families decide to make their unexpected appearance at the hotel, making Alicia resort to all kinds of subterfuges in order to conceal the two men’s presence (e.g., hiding them in the bathroom or in a large laundry basket, finding two waiter uniforms for them, which gives rise to a puzzling scene, where only one waiter enters the bathroom and three waiters get out). As the hotel manager discovers Carlos’ fake identity, he hands him to the police, which, following Alicia’s suggestion, leads to Enriqueta’s successful substitution of Carlos in an important trial, where his dazzling display of legal jargon and melodramatic speeches ensures the defended murderer’s acquittal. As Carlos gets out of prison, he is furious with this substitution, but Alicia convinces him that it was motivated by genuine concern and love, which naturally leads to their eventual marriage.

**Intriga/ Intrigue (Antonio Román, 1942)**

Suspecting a potential thief in their house, the rich Maldonado family calls the police. Upon the arrival of Felipe (a police inspector) and Roberto (his friend, an actor and amateur detective) the house butler mysteriously dies, not before he said that he had seen someone in Elena Maldonado’s (the daughter of the affluent couple) room. Following several contrived situations (e.g., the servant was not actually dead, Elena and her maid are kidnapped after she appeared to have lost a briefcase with some important diplomatic documents, her father is also killed etc.), one of the characters metafictionally points to the director of the movie, hidden
behind the camera, as the only one who is actually guilty for this intricate chain of events. The movie ends with some of the actors’ anger for this unseemly ending, which has ruined their interpretation in a climactic point, at which one of them wryly retorts that all thrillers are similarly ludicrous and that no other logical conclusion was actually possible.

**La luna vale un millón/ The Moon Is Worth a Million (José López Rubio, 1945)**

The multimillionaire Fernando Burgos, who has a plane accident, finds himself lost in a remote countryside area, where he was undressed by a poor Gypsy, Anselmo, who is stunningly similar to him physically. Based on this potential confusion, he puts on the rich man’s clothes and dresses Fernando in his own rags, which makes both male protagonists remain virtually unrecognized by their immediate entourage. This change of fortune enables Fernando to experience the charm of a less constrained rural setting and of a sincere romance with the young, naïve peasant Teresa, while Anselmo is more and more stifled by the multimillionaire’s daily work and dietary restrictions to the point that he will eventually long for his poor but unencumbered existence. The movie ends on an idyllic note, with Anselmo happily returning to his humble, but more relaxed life, while Fernando decides to abandon his business life and to go, together with Teresa, on a twenty-year “vacation”.

**La pandilla de los once/ The Gang of Eleven People (Pedro Lazaga, 1963)**

A gang of criminals led by Toni, “El Jefe”, who strives to imitate the manners and looks of the gangsters and mafiosos they saw in various Hollywood movies, decides to fake their boss’ death and burial in order to avoid chicanery from a rival band. After a plastic surgery, Toni is virtually unrecognizable and they decide to dig a tunnel that would go from beneath the statue of
Cibeles to the basement of the Bank of Spain, from where they plan to steal money and jewels. While eight of them are under the ground, disguised as public workers, some real public workers inadvertently cover up the entrance, thinking the excavations were no longer in use. As the trapped thieves use all their food supplies and lose radio contact with the three gang members who are outside, they decide to randomly choose one of them to be cannibalized for the others’ survival. Their three friends arrive, however, just in due time before this projected human sacrifice and they manage to help them dig faster. Due to a vital miscalculation, however, all of them are caught by the police as they wrongly make their exit into some bank offices.

**La vida en un hilo/ Life on a Thread (Edgar Neville, 1945)**

The recently widowed Mercedes goes back to Madrid, leaving the Basque Country where she lived with her late husband, Ramón, a tedious civil engineer, and his two sanctimonious aunts. On the train, she meets Madam DuPont, a circus artist, who can see the past and what could have been but was not, based on a wrong choice at a turning point in someone’s life. Mercedes thus become aware that she should have married somebody else, Miguel, a lively, bohemian sculptor, who would have made her happy, but she decided to choose Ramón’s and not Miguel’s offer of a ride on a rainy day, which eventually ended up in an unhappy marriage. As she can retrospectively see both her past life of boredom and routine with Ramón and her potential carefree life with Miguel, Mercedes longs for a second chance, which she will come across after she arrives in Madrid and fortuitously stumbles upon Miguel. When she eventually recognizes him and finally accepts his offer of a taxi ride, he is amazed by her detailed knowledge of him, but that does not appear to deter him from romantic advances that are now welcome by Mercedes.
Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada/ The Inhabitants of the Uninhabited House (Gonzalo Delgrás, 1946)

Rodrigo, a well-known reporter, decides to explore a seemingly haunted house in front of which he had to get off because of a car breakdown. A fearful Gregorio, the chauffeur, who even faints as he sees various ghosts, unwillingly accompanies him in this nighttime exploration of the mansion, from where occasional horrified female cries are heard. They will eventually discover that all seeming ghosts are actually money counterfeiters in disguise, who thus sought to chase away any potential visitors. Rodrigo will eventually rescue the terrified maiden, Sibila, who was gradually led to believe she was insane by being exposed to numerous ghost and monster appearances that only she would apparently see. This devious plan was devised in order to collect her inheritance (by declaring her mentally irresponsible). Rodrigo will eventually explain her the truth, thus restoring her sanity. The movie ends with a happy Rodrigo who daydreams about the sensational coverage of this whole story that he will write in his newspaper as he takes off together with Sibila and Gregorio.

Los ladrones somos gente honrada/ We, Thieves, Are Honorable People (Pedro Luis Ramírez, 1956)

Three petty thieves and con artists (i.e., El Tío del Gabán, Castelar and El Pelirrojo) are summoned by Daniel, their former boss, to help him with the robbery of a jewelry store. Bad timing and nervousness lead to a frustrated attempt, but the three thieves are given a second chance, namely, to help Daniel with the robbery of some jewels that are preserved in an affluent mansion’s safe box. As Daniel introduces himself under a fake identity at a party in that house,
making use of his polished manners (acquired during his prior professional improvement in the United States), he nonetheless falls in love with the young Herminia, the future inheritor of the house and of all jewels, which makes him call off the heist. While El Pelirrojo remains in the house as an undercover butler, El Tío del Gabán and Castelar have to return to their humdrum hoaxes at the Rastro in order to earn their living. They eventually plan to rob the jewels, nevertheless, on the very evening that Herminia and Daniel celebrate their marriage. Their plans are repeatedly frustrated by Herminia’s female tutor, Germana, and her accomplices, who also want to rob the jewels and who did not hesitate to kill the former housekeeper, Andrea, who had threatened to ruin her plans. After a series of humorous complications, Germana and her accomplices are handed in to the police, thanks to the thieves’ skillful collaboration with Germana’s honest brother and with an undercover police agent (under the guise of a house servant). Herminia thus remains the happy inheritor of all the jewels, returning to Cuba together with Daniel, the commendable thieves, and her newly discovered mother, who actually summoned the police agent to the house in order to protect her.

**Maribel y la extraña familia/ Maribel and the Strange Family** (José María Forqué, 1960)

Marcelino, a shy and kind young widower who lived in the countryside, falls in love with the prostitute Maribel, whom he brings to his aunt’s house in Madrid so that he can meet her and his mother. Both Marcelino and the two older women are genuinely kind and affectionate towards Maribel, as if they did not suspect anything, but, on the very contrary, they seem to try to ingratiate themselves in front of her, comically parading a modernity of opinions and tastes they did not actually have. As Maribel is gradually transformed by this redeeming, unconditional love, three other prostitutes, her former work companions, become more and more suspicious of
this family’s apparently undoubting kindness, thinking they want to kill Maribel on their country estate, where they invited her and where Marcelino’s first wife had died in mysterious circumstances. Although she is on the verge of leaving Marcelino, suspecting that he and his family already know the truth about her, Maribel eventually decides to come back to him and happily agrees to their imminent marriage, not before she finds out that his first wife actually drowned in the lake.

**Melocotón en almíbar/ Peach in Compote** (Antonio del Amo, 1960)

Federico, Carlos and Nuria, together with the help of the fake beggar Cosme, rob a jewelry store from Burgos and flee to Madrid. On their way out of the store, Carlos shoots and kills the owner, who was on the verge of calling the police. Before the robbers reach their rented apartment in Madrid, to which they drive, they attempt to cover their traces by resorting to all kinds of subterfuges to make everyone believe they actually came from the Seville Feria. In Madrid, they assume the fake identity of Gálvez, pretending to be of Spanish origin but visiting from Cuba. An unlikely character, the nun María, who is also a nurse, gradually discovers more and more details about them and eventually realizes their real identity while taking care of Cosme, who has a double pneumonia. She astutely leaves with a flowerpot that hides the robbed jewels and succeeds in persuading a more and more disenchanted and fearful Nuria to leave her former life of crime and sin and to join her on her escape to the convent. Nuria will thus be the only robber not to be caught by the police and jailed in the end.
Mi adorado Juan/ My Beloved Juan (Jerónimo Mihura, 1950)

In a dock restaurant from Barcelona, various simple, lower class people discuss about a mysterious occurrence, namely, the recent disappearance of several dogs from the neighborhood. They decide to resort to Juan’s help to find their pets and who was behind this reprehensible action. Juan, a well beloved friend of all of them, who gave up a brilliant medical career to live a bohemian life, will eventually discover that it was the rich and glamorous Eloísa, the physiologist Palacio’s daughter, who stole the dogs. The animals served his stern father’s experiments on how to live without sleeping, which he considers a waste of time and a major hindrance to a desired high productivity. Even if Eloísa behaves very coldly and contemptuously to Juan as he first comes to her mansion to rescue the dogs, she will meet him several times afterwards and will gradually fall in love with him, desiring to marry him. The marriage must be, however, on Juan’s terms, which means that she will have to abandon her previous life and be contended not only with modest living conditions in Juan’s apartment, but also with a lack of change in his usual routine (e.g., lack of a fixed employment or salary, dinners and late gatherings with his friends in the café etc.). Doctor Palacios will also gradually lose interest in his studies as he becomes convinced of Juan’s and his friend’s bohemian philosophy. On the other, he is more and more disappointed with his assistant’s scheming to present himself as the only researcher of the sleeplessness project. Manríquez, his assistant, will eventually resort to stealing all the paperwork of doctor Palacio’s experiment in order to present his findings in the United States. He will also attempt to convince Eloísa to accompany him, by abandoning Juan and her strenuous material existence by his side. Although initially tempted by his seemingly glamorous proposal, Eloísa will nevertheless decide to remain faithful to Juan, to whom she comes back after stealing her father’s paperwork from Manríquez, which leaves him deprived of
any documented proof of research. The comedy ends with Juan, Eloisa and her father sailing in a boat, after Doctor Palacios decides to tear the results of his work for the better fare of humanity.

**Ninette y un señor de Murcia/ Ninette and a Gentleman from Murcia** (Fernando Fernán Gómez, 1965)

Andrés Martínez, a repressed, inveterate middle-aged bachelor from Murcia who recently inherited his sanctimonious, domineering aunt’s money and bookshop, decides to spend fifteen days in Paris in search of erotic adventures and of a carefree, bohemian life. He consequently contacts his friend, Armando, who has been working in Paris for a long time and on whose alleged experience he relies to have an exciting stay. Given his ignorance of French, Andrés asks Armando to help him find a host that speaks Spanish, so Armando will put him up with Pedro and Bernarda Sánchez, two Republican exiles in Paris, who had taken refuge in France after the Civil War. Andrés will unwillingly condescend to renting a room in their small apartment for a few days, until he finds something better and more central, yet he will eventually spend more than a month locked inside their Parisian home. There he will ironically be more the seduced than the seducer of his hosts’ daughter, the twenty-three year old Ninette, whose pregnancy will make her morally conservative parents force Andrés to marry her and take her back to Murcia with him.

**Sólo para hombres/ Only for Men** (Fernando Fernán Gómez, 1960)

Within the stern patriarchal world of late nineteenth-century Spain, the beautiful and intelligent Florita, a middle-class young woman is increasingly tired of hypocritically chasing suitors. She will thus boldly decide to start working in a ministerial office, which transforms her
into a preferred national topic of gossip, getting extensive media coverage and even parliamentary attention. Her probationary work period unleashes more and more fiery debates and accusations (i.e., about immorality, about female intellectual capacity and, especially, about the women’s “proper” place inside the house). Most slanders stem from disgruntled fellow workers, who are mortified by their glaring professional inefficiency in contrast to Florita’s effectiveness. The female protagonist thus easily completes in few days all the unfinished bureaucratic work of the otherwise male Ministry of Public Works, which makes her receive even more work from other similarly slow ministries. She will be eventually dismissed, however, on account of stirring a scandal at the work place with her alleged provocative demeanor, but she will intermittently be able to resume her job when a more progressive government takes power. The administrative and political chaos of the country eventually enable Florita and her future husband and coworker, Pablo, to obtain just enough remuneration to get married. They will thus need to take turns in being employed, depending on the “progressiveness” of the political leaders in power, meaning that when Florita and other women (who follow her emancipating example), are employed, Pablo remains unemployed, while when he retrieves his position, she stays at home and fortuitously becomes pregnant.

**Tú y yo somos tres/ You and I Are Three (Rafael Gil, 1962)**

The Spanish Manolina gets married by proxy to the Argentinean Rodolfo, after an epistolary relationship and an exchange of photos, but she later finds out that her husband is physically inseparable from his conjoined twin, Adolfo, which makes any intimacy with her husband impossible. Even after the twins are eventually separated by a doctor, they continue to communicate telepathically and Rodolfo even feels pressured to do whatever Adolfo is doing,
which often makes Manolina’s husband suffer from his brother’s self-inflicted wounds as the latter repeatedly strives to frustrate the newly weds’ moments of intimacy (e.g., Adolfo decides to passionately dance flamenco for hours during the couple’s attempt of spending their first night together, which makes Rodolfo do the same in front of an increasingly astonished and disappointed Manolina). Under these unpropitious circumstances, Rodolfo decides to leave Manolina and return to his home country, yet he will come back from the plane after he suddenly discovers that his brother no longer controls him because he conveniently fell in love with another woman. The comedy ends with Manolina and Adolfo’s wife giving birth to an endless number of twins at the same time, to their husbands’ despair.

**Un marido de ida y vuelta/ A Husband One Way and Return (Luis Lucía, 1957)**

José, an affluent insurance agent, dies of heart attack, to some extent caused by his frivolous, domineering wife, Leticia. On his deathbed, he asks his best friend, Paco, formerly in love with Leticia, not to marry her after his death. Plagued by jealousy because Paco did not respect his promise, José returns as a ghost in order to frustrate any potential moment of intimacy and happiness between Paco and Leticia. As she falls down the stairs and Paco has a car accident, they will all be united, nevertheless, in the afterlife, to José’s great annoyance.

**¡Viva lo imposible! Long Live the Impossible! (Rafael Gil, 1958)**

Don Sabino’s and his daughter, Palmira, decide to suddenly abandon their humble, bureaucratic jobs as state employees and to idealistically join a circus after they destroy or dispose of most of their inconsequential belongings in a fit of destruction. Their intrepid adventure soon proves disappointing, nevertheless, especially for Palmira, because of the
unforeseen monotony and shortages of their itinerant life with the circus. Eusebio, Don Sabino’s son, who grudgingly abandoned his secure life to join the circus, constantly complaining of the absurdity of this decision, will unsurprisingly be the first one to return to his former life, joining the state bureaucracy of the time. His example will later be followed by Palmira, who will eventually return to an existence even more tedious and mediocre than the one she initially fled, as she will become an unhappy housewife, whose fastidious, stingy husband and former fiancé, Vicente, is a well paid state employee. Don Sabino, the only one who resolutely decided to stay with the circus, despite various misgivings, will confess in the end that his eventual prosperous life is not indebted, however, to his performance success but to his accountancy skills, which triggered the prosperity of the circus and hence his own better status. The comedy ends in a melodramatic family reunion, on New Year’s Eve, after which Don Sabino goes back to his itinerant life with the circus.