

THE LAST WORD / DIE LAASTE WOORD

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARSHA KINDER

In her book, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (University of California Press, 1993) Marsha Kinder offers the reader an in-depth study of Spanish Cinema set against the global map of world cinema. As a result, the interconnections between the local, the global, and the regional are brought into clear focus, revealing that the very idea of a national cinema and film movement is realized at the juncture of these spaces, which run like faultlines underneath the enterprise, unseen but structuring its topography. By problematizing the very concept of a national cinema - a concept which often bolsters its own claims to authenticity by attacking the dominant/Hollywood cinema, yet at the same time, borrowing and re-inscribing its traditions and conventions, Kinder reveals that no national cinema can be read in isolation of world cinema. The argument becomes more complex when one considers that the medium, as Kinder puts it, "has always been an important vehicle for constructing images of a uni-

fied identity out of regional and ethnic diversity and for transmitting them both within and beyond its national borders"

The historical links between Spain and South Africa are limited, but important parallels exist, not least, Spain's transition from franquismo to democracy which mirrors South Africa's recent move from apartheid to democracy, the implementation of democratic institutions and structures capable of responding to the new vision, the acknowledgement of cultural diversity within the borders of the nation, the re-integration of those returning from exile, the desire to both breach border of the past and yet, at the same time, create new ones that can safely contain and articulate a cohesive national and cultural identity. Thus *Blood Cinema* has much to contribute, not only to one's understanding of world cinema in the last two decades, but to anyone interested in the debates surrounding the question, or possibility, of a South African cinema. In the following interview, Marsha Kinder offers critical insights into what happened to Spanish cinema in the recent past, and in those insights we can dis-

cern the shape of a future South African "national" cinema.

Question:

In *Blood Cinema* you explore how, during the more liberal phase of the Franco period, Spanish film-makers began to carve out a new aesthetic language for themselves in a hybridic process of borrowing conventions from other film movements and schools. Could you explain this process further, and what implications might it hold for the development of a South African cinema in the post-apartheid era?

Answer:

I call this process "transcultural reinscription," which simply means an appropriation of conventions from another cultural region and a strategic use of them within the new context which alters their ideological meanings. Thus, instead of reading such borrowings as merely a form of colonization by the culture from whom one is borrowing (another instance of omnipotent Hollywood colonizing the world), it can be read as an active process of appropriation by the culture performing the reinscription for its own historical and political ends. In the case of Francoist Spain, oppositional filmmakers borrowed conventions both from Hollywood melodrama and from Italian neorealism to oppose the stultifying conventions of the Francoist cinema and in the process

forged a new language that would come to define "the new Spanish cinema" worldwide. These were the films that brought international acclaim to Spanish cinema. What's crucial here is the recognition that these reinscribed conventions must be read simultaneously against both the national and the international contexts--either alone is insufficient. The doubleness of the reading strengthens the film's ideological impact on both registers.

Later, in post-Franco Spain a filmmaker like Pedro Almodovar continued to use this strategy--inventing a derivative form of outrageous comic melodrama that pushed excessive Hollywood melodramas like *Duel in the Sun*, *Johnny Guitar*, and *Written on the Wind* even farther over the top. According to Almodovar he did this to demonstrate how dramatically Spain had changed--from its dour days under Franco (whom he playfully tried to disavow) to the new libertarian ethos of the Socialists. Thus he became the film laureate of the Socialists who used his films to popularize a new cultural stereotype for a hyperliberated Spain. And his films had unprecedented success both at home and abroad. By recuperating the hispanic roots of these conventions (particularly in *Matador*) and by inflecting them with the new libertarian energy of the *movida madrileña*, he gave these conventions new life--a transformation that could be appreciated worldwide.

I think this latter strategy could also be quite relevant to postApartheid South Africa, which has considerable transformational capital. From old myths of social mobility like Horatio Alger, to heroic political transformers like Abraham Lincoln and Malcolm X, to resilient comic survivors like Chaplin, Keaton, and RoadRunner, to childish morphing superheroes like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Power Rangers, and the malleable Jim Carey, the United States has long been obsessed with an optimistic belief in perpetual metamorphosis—a belief that has been promoted worldwide as "the American dream" (despite the "foreign" origin of some of these figures). Yet it's been some time since this myth of transformation has credible resonance on the register of political change or that it can be associated with optimism, particularly on issues of race—and perhaps that is one reason why our nation has been so deeply obsessed with the transformation of pop figures like O.J. Simpson and Michael Jackson from superstar to monstrous suspect. Since we still remain hungry for optimistic stories of transformation, we have to look elsewhere—to Spain's peaceful transition from fascism to democracy (though the conservatives have recently replaced the socialists), or to the fall of the Soviet block in Eastern Europe (whose subsequent nationalist struggles have proved dystopic), or to South Africa which provides the most dramatic transfor-

mation of all! Thus, in the recent HBO movie about the transformation of Nelson Mandela from political prisoner to president, it was not a matter of the veteran black actor Sidney Poitier lending his star power to the great South African leader, but precisely the reverse! I think it is now time for South Africa to produce its own media myths that demonstrate its own transformation and to export them worldwide. And transcultural reinscription could play a key role in that process of cultural production.

Question:

One of the most important features of the new South African national space is the re-incorporation of those who were exiled during the apartheid era. (This term could also include the idea of an internal exile through imprisonment or house arrest). The representation of exile has had a long history in South African literature (Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head are just two names that spring to mind), but it has only just begun to emerge in television drama such as *Molo Fish*, and documentaries. Since the idea of exile and return is so potent in shaping current South African discourse, (an example perhaps of the global paradigm you talk about in your discussion) could you explain that idea further and give some examples of how the discourse of exile takes form and shape, or is challenged in Spanish cinema?

Answer:

What I find most interesting about the issue of exile in the Spanish context is the way it is both a unique experience that helps distinguish Spain from other nations (because, as Rockwell Gray puts it in his essay on "Spanish Diaspora," "no country in the world exhibits a chain of persecutions and exiles like ours") and also a global paradigm that gives Spain a central position within a unified international field. Moreover, this same paradox is also characteristic of Spain's most famous exile-filmmaker Luis Bunuel, who is both the paradigmatic case of exile and its unique exception. Over several decades Bunuel experienced many successive periods of exile involving several different cultures (France, the United States, and Mexico) and virtually all of the reasons people have for leaving their homeland. Hence his unique individual experience of exile represents the whole paradigm. Moreover, despite his perception of himself as a perpetual outsider, he is the only filmmaker in the world who has been described (however incorrectly) as the singular embodiment not only of a major film movement like surrealism but also of two national cinemas, the Spanish and the Mexican. Thus he has come to be emblematic of nomadic subjectivity, that liminal position at the slipzone between center and periphery.

What also interests me is the representation of exile in recent Spanish

cinema of the 1990s--the way several filmmakers are now trying to address cultural and ethnic diversity within Spain. There's been a shift from seeing Spaniards as exiles in other countries to addressing foreign exiles who come to Spain. Although this issue was repressed in the past, it is now very charged in the entire European context. On the one hand, Spaniards take pride in showing East European workers who have come to Spain looking for a better life (both in economic and political terms). I'm thinking specifically of the Polish craftsmen in *El sol del membrillo*, the Russian construction worker in *¿Hola, estas sola?*, the Bulgarian house painter in *Malena es el nombre de un tango*, and the Polish bartender in *Boca a boca*. The situation is very different for immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. An African foreign worker is the protagonist in *Las cartas de Alou*, a 1990 film by Basque filmmaker Montxo Armendariz, which focuses on issues of prejudice and racism. Yet the situation is much more dire in two films from 1996, Imanol Uribe's *Bwana* and Carlos Saura's *Taxi*, where the African exiles (along with other marginal groups) are mute victims threatened by right wing death squads and genocide. Positioned as scapegoats for current economic frustrations within the European Union, these exiles reveal a deep fear about a possible resurgence of fascism.

Question:

In view of the re-structuring of the SABC and the opening of a new tv channel which is being lobbied for at both the national and the regional level, Spanish Broadcasting's switch from a national right wing mouth piece to a decentralized system within a macro-region (Europe) seems very pertinent to our local experience. Could you talk more on the idea of micro and macro-regionalism in Spanish cinema and television in general.

Answer:

I argue that regionalism is an ideological construct like nationality which refers to areas both smaller and larger than a nation. Functioning co-dependently, the terms "microregionalism" and "macroregionalism" fluidly shift meaning according to context and thereby serve as an effective means both of asserting the subversive force of any marginal position and of destabilizing the hegemonic power of any center. Once regional structures and the center are seen as sliding signifiers or open positions to be occupied, then there is a movement toward the proliferation and empowerment of new structural units both at the micro and macro level.

Spain has a long history of regions struggling for autonomy, a desire that was rigorously suppressed during the Francoist era. Thus one of the first

important political moves during the post-Franco period was the decentralizing of the nation into 17 autonomous regions, who would have their own regional governments with their own cultural agendas. This diversity was highlighted in the 1992 World Exposition in Seville and generated interesting dynamics.

The regional cinemas had their greatest political impact during the Francoist era, where they could be used to expose the provincialism of the xenophobic nation and its official cinema through their own intertextuality with French stylistics and Hollywood genres. Yet once Spain was open to world cinema in the post-Franco era, the regional cinemas of the new autonomous communities, like films from Madrid, had to struggle against North American domination both in their own local theaters and in the domestic market throughout Spain. Hence, to make films in their own regional languages, or even worse (to dub foreign imports into Catalan) was to risk a further marginalization and a further weakening of the outreach of their own cultural production.

In the case of television the situation was different, for the dailiness and immediacy of the medium could be more responsive to local issues. It was the global/local nexus that here had the greatest immediate effect in weakening the center—ie, the hegemony of TVE, the national Spanish network that formerly had a monopoly

on broadcasting within Spain. The proliferation of channels--both public stations at the regional level as well as private stations in both contexts--soon inaugurated a competitive Spanish market that privileged commercial programs. Moreover, the privatization of television admitted channels controlled by European multinational conglomerates, which increased the percentage of North American programming. As Richard Maxwell has so persuasively argued, ironically the democratization on the micro regional level was accompanied by a global consumerism which could hardly be seen in utopian terms.

Television at the University of Southern California. In addition to Blood Cinema (University of California Press, 1993), her most recent books are Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games (California, 1991) and Remapping the PostFranco Cinema, a special edition of Quarterly Review of Film and Video (1991). She is the editor of and a contributor to Refiguring Spain: Cinema/Media/Representation (Duke University Press, forthcoming June 1997) -- a new collection of essays that explore the central role played by film, television, newspapers, and art museums in redefining Spain's national and cultural identity during the post-Franco period.

Biography

Marsha Kinder is Professor of Critical Studies in the School of Cinema-