

Irony, esperpento, and Parody in the Music of ¡Bienvenido Mister Marshall!

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¡Bienvenido Mister Marshall! (*Welcome, Mister Marshall!*) is probably the most closely studied film that Spain has produced. It is said to be anti-Francoist despite receiving official approval because the censorship board understood it to be anti-American. It has also been described as a mockery of outdated cinematographic genres of post-war Spain, even though it was initially conceived of as yet another work of the so-called “folk comedy” typical of that period. Although heralded as marking a renewal, various authors view it as a descendent of the *sainete* of Arniches and Valle-Inclán’s *esperpento*. Under the guise of a tale, folk comedy, *sainete* or *astracanada*, *Welcome, Mister Marshall!* encompasses a multitude of readings that testify to its richness and sociocultural value.

Having studied a large part of the research into the film, it seems to me that the aspect least studied is its music. Scholars of Spanish cinema are not known for their interest in music; and apathy is widespread among musicologists towards cinematographic music or popular music, which falls outside the traditional canon. On top of the elitist prejudices that dominate twentieth-century Spanish musicology, methodological blind spots have impeded proper analysis of film scores as integral elements of an audiovisual text in terms of their technological, economic, ideological, and cultural factors.¹ Before analysing the role and meaning of the music in *Welcome, Mr Marshall!* we need to contextualise the film within the frame of Francoist cinema.

Cinema under Francoism: an Introduction

The evolution of Spanish cinema after the Civil War was conditioned by a film industry debilitated by violent conflict and a dictatorial regime that sought to impose its ideology on the cinematic medium. However, in Franco’s *Nueva España* such attempts at establishing a common vision of culture, and of the role of mass media, proved complicated. The different factions that made up the winning side had contrasting ideas; while some groups backed a strengthening of nationalist symbols, others advocated for a cinema free of portrayals of the *España de pandereta* prevalent in the musical folk cinema of the day.²

¹ Julio Arce, “La música en el cine mudo: mitos y realidades,” in C. Alonso, C. J. Gutiérrez, and J. Suárez-Pajares, eds., *Delantera de paraíso: Estudios en homenaje a Luis G. Iberní* (Madrid: ICCMU, 2008), 560-62.

² José Enrique Monterde, “El cine de la autarquía (1939-1950)” and “Continuismo y disidencia (1951-1962),” in R. Gubern, J. E. Monterde, J. Pérez Perucha, E. Rimbau, and C. Torreiro, *Historia del cine español* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1995), 181-219.

In contrast with Italian fascism, under which the State directly promoted film production, Franco left the industry in the hands of private entrepreneurs. He did nevertheless develop a policy of incentives favouring producers who toed the fascist line. Francoism exerted an ironhanded control over subject matter via two means. Firstly, the Church exercised prior censorship by which means any elements not adhering strictly to the most conservative form of Catholic morality were removed from the script. The second method employed was to make dubbing in Castilian Spanish obligatory for films in other languages. This further prevented uncomfortable questions from being aired, and had the secondary effect of benefiting enormously the North American film industry. Since then, Hollywood's presence in Spain has been overwhelming.

During the Civil War and the first half of the 1940's, Spain experienced an abundance of so-called *cine de cruzada* (crusade cinema), a sub-genre of war movie laden with patriotic rhetoric and propagandist intentions, whose mission was to justify and legitimise the military uprising led by Franco (Miranda 2010, p. 161).³ The most exemplary film of this genre is *Raza*, written by Francisco Franco himself. The director, José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, who completed the film in 1942, employed his friend Manuel Parada to compose the music. Parada, a disciple of Conrado del Campo, combined Germanic influences—notably Wagner and Strauss—with practices common to Hollywood from the thirties onwards. These included the sonority of large orchestras, the use of existing melodies—such as the *Marcha Real* and the Falangist anthem *Cara al sol* in *Welcome, Mr Marshall*—and the articulation of the musical sections based on themes or *leitmotifs*.

Following the end of the Second World War, patriotic and militaristic rhetoric subsided due to social and international changes. After the defeat of the Axis, Spain was left isolated in southern Europe as the only fascist state. Nationalist discourse infiltrated historically inspired cinema and the popular productions widely known as *españoladas*.

Spanish historical cinema, in vogue between 1944 and 1950, is sometimes labelled as reactionary “papier-mâché cinema,” supported by Franco to glorify the united and imperial Spain of the past. The genre was not, however, peculiar to Spain, but also present during the same period in Britain and North America. According to Jo Labanyi, historical cinema is a celebration of the alliance between the aristocratic and working classes, and rather than being retrograde should be understood as a renegotiation of the past from a position of conservative modernity.⁴ Just as with Italian fascism, Francoism sought to attract audiences not through explicit propaganda but rather through escapist films that worked on a subliminal level. The government felt that overt propaganda would, in the end, arouse nothing but contempt. Besides, mainstream Spanish

³ Laura Miranda, “The Spanish ‘Crusade Film’: Gender, connotations during the conflict,” *MSMI Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 4/2 (2010): 161.

⁴ Jo Labanyi, “Costume, Identity and Spectator Pleasure in Historical Films of the Early Franco Period”, in S. Marsh, ed., *Gender and Spanish Cinema* (New York and London: Berg, 2004), 38.

productions needed to follow the guidelines set by North American film houses, which had come to dominate popular taste. Needless to say, this was much to the detriment of Spanish cinema. The most notable productions of the historical genre are those of Juan de Orduña, among them *Agustina de Aragón*, *La leona de Castilla*, *Pequeñeces*, *Alba de América* and *Locura de amor*. The music is influenced by what is known as “cinematographic classicism,” utilizing a predominantly diegetic form that incorporates late-Romantic symphonism, and concentrates on the most subjective elements of the filmic narrative. Where Juan de Orduña was the genre’s foremost producer, the principal exponent of this style of music was Juan Quintero.⁵

Another widely popular genre of the forties was the *españolada*, a term denoting films in which the traits of Spanish identity are highly exaggerated. The term is normally used in a derogatory sense, although it also appears in academic discussions. The *españolada* finds its roots in literary and theatrical forms of the 1800’s, drawing heavily from nineteenth-century travel writing and the French novel, comic theatre, farce, and the Spanish *género chico* (a subgenre of the *zarzuela*). The genre is characterised by an excess of connotation through stereotype, cliché, and characters such as bullfighters, Gypsy women, bandits, and flamenco singers. Regarding the influence of the *españolada* in cinema, we need to add some nuances. Contrary to popular belief, folk cinema was not a product of Francoism, but already existed during the Republic. In reality, it was one of the few cultural expressions to endure the transition, although its folkloric aspect did strengthen under the dictatorship, and remained this way until the 1970’s. Further criticism of the *españolada* has dubbed it reactionary cinema. However, recent studies emphasize its capacity for generating alternative discourse to dominant ideologies. Eva Woods, for example, highlights the role of *folclóricas*, whose characters develop within plots that follow their path to success, often contrary to the social conventions and conservative morality of the time. Moreover, Jo Labanyi points out that the folk song acts as a vehicle for voicing alternative situations, attitudes, and behaviours to those extolled by the regime. Further, we need to revise the term itself, which has become somewhat of a cliché. By referring to “folk cinema,” we are alluding to films that utilize popular music of an urban, mass-produced character, distributed via the media. A more fitting term might be “folkloristic cinema,” given that it alludes to the modern re-elaboration of tradition and identity within mass culture.⁶

The beginnings of dissent in Spanish cinema

Historians of Spanish cinema recognize the beginning of the fifties as a new era, breaking with the previous decade, marked by post-war society and politics of national

⁵ See Joaquín Lopez, *Música y cine en la España del franquismo: el compositor Juan Quintero Muñoz (1903-1980)* (Tesis doctoral, Universidad de Granada, 2009).

⁶ Eva Woods, “Radio Libre Folclóricas: jerarquías culturales, geográficas y de género en Torbellino (1941),” in *Hispanismo y cine*, ed. J. Herrera and C. Martínez-Carazo (Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2007), 45.

self-sufficiency. Although during the fifties the aforementioned genres continue, a new type of cinema appears on the fringes that proposes a new vision of reality and marks the beginning of dissidence towards Franco's regime. This change is consonant with the new political and social conditions arising after the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War. There is a further change in the attitude of the United States towards Spain. Francoist anti-Communism makes economic and military agreements possible between the two countries. Eisenhower's visit in 1959 becomes the defining moment in Spain's new position within the international arena.⁷

With regard to the early fifties, we must mention the rupture of the monolithic rule that had characterised the dictatorship's first decade. Little by little, Spain came out of its isolation and abandoned its politics of self-sufficiency. Slowly, the diplomats of the principal Western powers return to Madrid. In these years, Franco begins to replace the men of the Movimiento Nacional and Falange with Catholic politicians, especially those of Opus Dei. At the same time, a process of modernization begins that aims to erase the remaining vestiges of economic isolationism. In time, this liberalisation gives way to progressive industrialization and unprecedented economic growth. These changes are accompanied by new problems: migration from towns to the city, and the shortage of housing and basic infrastructure. Despite this progress, the fifties remained a period of hardship, struggle, and suffering, during which civil liberties continued to be curtailed by an authoritarian and paternalistic regime.

It was during this period that resistance within the country became apparent. Catalanian and Basque workers, along with university students, were the first to express their discontent with the dictatorship. Others joined them from academic, artistic, and cultural backgrounds. Within cinematographic circles, important changes took place that transcended industry ranks. A small sector of professionals and enthusiasts promoted film-related activities with a spirit of open opposition towards the regime. These included criticism, essay-writing, and film clubs. However, films offering alternatives to dominant thought remained scarce. That said, the few films that were produced have proved highly significant. In 1951, *Surcos* premiered (a film by Juan Antonio Nieves Conde) the same year in which *Esa pareja feliz* was produced, the first joint production by Bardem and Berlanga. The film did not reach the screen until 1953, a year after the premiere of another emblematic feature of the same decade: *Welcome, Mister Marshall!*

A new group of socially and politically motivated filmmakers, influenced by the Italian neorealists, replaced what was known as the Generation of '39. Many of these directors of the New Spanish Cinema movement came from the Instituto de Investigación y Experiencias Cinematográficas. This institution was a government initiative founded in 1947, and its mission was to offer theoretical instruction and practice in diverse professions within film production. It was there that Juan Antonio Bardem and Luis García Berlanga met—the creators of *Welcome, Mister Marshall!*

⁷ Monterde, 239.

Something about Berlanga

Luis García Berlanga, who died in Madrid on November 13, 2010, was born in Valencia in 1921. From early on he showed an interest in poetry and painting, but he did not excel in either. After the Civil War, he joined the Blue Division, which was a unit of Spanish volunteers within the German Army. His motivation, it seems, was to prevent retaliation against his father, who had been civil governor of Valencia during the Republic. Shortly after his return to Spain, Luis enrolled in a directing major. His studies coincided with those of Antonio del Amo, Florentino Soria and, of course, Juan Antonio Bardem, with whom he commenced his cinematographic adventures.

Following several failed attempts, in 1951 Bardem and Berlanga finally began work on *Esa pareja feliz*, a film about working-class dreams that offers a poignant representation of post-war Spain and is narrated in the style of the *sainete*. The film anticipates characteristics of Berlanga's later work: wit, rapid dialogue, social critique, and highly detailed descriptions of the frustrated dreams of common people. *Esa pareja feliz* heralds a new form of cinema embodying critical postures, humour, and a complete lack of spiritualist dogma, thereby creating a kind of Spanish neorealism. Despite its importance, the film was held back for more than two years, until after the success of *Welcome, Mr Marshall!*

Thinking and composing *Welcome...*

In 1952, Bardem and Berlanga were required by a small production company (UNINCI) to write and direct a musical folk comedy as part of a marketing strategy for the debut of a young singer named Lolita Sevilla. It was made clear to them that the film had to be comic and set in Andalusia. Their ideas evolved from an initial proposal that centred on a rural drama in the style of Mexican director, screenwriter, and actor Emilio "El Indio" Fernández. In order to achieve a humorous tone, they then chose to incorporate Coca-Cola and wine into the plot. The duo found further inspiration in the Jaque Feyder film of 1935, *La kermesse heroique*, in which a town survives an invasion through flattery. Once the text was finalised, the production company enlisted the help of satirist and playwright Miguel Mihura to supervise and retouch the dialogue—perhaps out of fear of the young directors' inexperience. Bardem pulled out of the project before filming began due to economic disputes with the production company, although he still appears in the credits as screenwriter together with Mihura and Berlanga, who took charge of direction.⁸

The film opens with the arrival of a bus to Villar del Río, a small Castilian town, while a narrator's voice introduces the characters, as if in a tale. Aboard the bus is Carmen Vargas, the "biggest star in Andalusian song," accompanied by Manolo, her

⁸ See Alicia Salvador Marañón, *De ¡Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall! a Viridiana: historia de Uninci, una productora cinematográfica española bajo el franquismo* (Madrid: Egeda, 2006).

agent. Following the introduction of some of the town's more characteristic personalities—the postman, priest, school teacher, nobleman, barber, doctor, and town gossips—a siren signals the arrival of a government delegation. In Villar del Río, as in any other town where very little happens, the official visit arouses alarm amongst the inhabitants. The spokesman for the delegate-general informs the mayor of an imminent visit by the representatives of the European Recovery Program, popularly known as the Marshall Plan, and urges him to prepare a grandiose welcome. The anticipated arrival upsets the townspeople's monotonous life and creates a growing expectation that the visitors will bring money and gifts. Manolo, the singer's agent, convinces the mayor that the best form of welcoming the illustrious visitors is to transform Villar del Río into an Andalusian village. He argues that in North America, Spain is best known and loved for its Andalusian folklore. Therefore, they convert the town, whitewashing its buildings, teaching its men the art of bullfighting and the women how to dance *sevillanas*. All is in readiness on the day of the visit, but to everybody's surprise, the visitors speed through the town without stopping. With their hopes of American aid gone, the inhabitants are left with no choice but to contribute what little they have to covering the expenses.

In the credits, Jesús García Leoz appears as “background music composer.” Despite being born in Olite, Navarra, in the north of Spain, he did not form a close relationship with progressive intellectuals or the Generation '27 poets until the thirties. He then participated in the activities of the Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas, especially in Guerrillas del Teatro, where he met María Teresa León, companion of Rafael Alberti. His admiration for Lorca led him to write accompaniments for his poems. He also chose as texts for his songs works by writers such as Antonio Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Rosalía de Castro, Gerardo Diego, and Alberti. During the Civil War, García Leoz composed the music for various documentaries commissioned by the Communist Party and the Republican Government. It was during this time that he met Antonio del Amo, one of the first Spanish directors to formulate an alternative to the dominant genres of the forties, and for whom he would compose several scores.

For having been on the losing side when Madrid fell to Franco, García Leoz was detained and imprisoned for six months. It is likely that his friendship with Joaquín Turina, who was then head of the Comisaría Nacional de Música, explains his rapid reincorporation into the workforce, despite his political persuasion. Turina, who considered García Leoz his protégé and referred to him as his “spiritual nephew,” was responsible for the majority of the composer's cinematic interventions of the forties.

García Leoz remains one of the most prolific composers of Spanish cinema. Beginning with *Sierra de Ronda*, a film directed by Florián Rey in 1934, and ending with *Welcome, Mister Marshall!*, signed shortly before his death in 1953, he wrote more than one hundred scores and received numerous awards.

It is difficult to link film composers of this generation with a particular genre, aesthetic, or even political tendency, given their diverse situations and types of productions. Nevertheless, Juan Quintero shares a close relationship with the historical productions of Juan de Orduña. Similarly, Manuel Parada is associated with the cinema

of patriotic exaltation, having collaborated in two of the genre's most emblematic films: *Raza* and *Los últimos de Filipinas*. García Leoz, on the other hand, appears aligned with alternative cinema. His scores accompany several iconic films, including *Día tras día* by Antonio del Amo, *Surcos* by José Antonio Nieves Conde, and the first two productions of Bardem y Berlanga already mentioned: *Esa pareja feliz* and *Welcome, Mister Marshall!*

In this last title, García Leoz arranges the musical sections around the juxtaposition of malleable themes that allow for the development of motifs. His sparing use of recognizable melodies distinguishes the work from that of previous decades. Instead, he prefers background music containing motifs whose articulation follows the image without dominating it. Take, for example, one of the themes included as the credits roll, which, by using a traditional folk melody, references the rural Castilian setting. We hear the theme again in the “dream scene,” this time with a different quality representing the hopes of the inhabitants of Villar del Río.

Irony, *esperpento* and parody

It has been noted that Berlanga's work contains something reminiscent of the aesthetic of Valle-Inclán. Theorist Camila Segura explains how the tragic and the grotesque give life to the idea of *esperpento*, a trait characteristic of the theatre of Valle-Inclán.⁹ Like the dramaturge, Berlanga adopts a critical attitude towards both historical reality and aesthetic representation or discourse. This explains why characters are based on wildly exaggerated and grotesque stereotypes. We see this clearly in *Welcome, Mister Marshall!* where on arrival of the delegate-general the music interacts with visual elements and other sounds to intensify the grotesque nature of the representatives of power. This is a very common resource in animations and has been coined “Mickey Mouse music.”

However, the film is defined above all by its sense of parody. This word – which in its origin alludes to making mockery of song – is used today in a much broader sense. Musically speaking, parody refers to the process of composing a piece from another, like the Renaissance parody mass. We also find an example in *Welcome, Mr Marshall!* when the townspeople return to their houses after seeing a “cowboy film.” García Leoz elaborates a musical section using the same elements that were characteristic of the western.

Above all, the film can be interpreted as a parody of folk comedy, ubiquitous in Spanish cinema from the mid-thirties onwards and a defining part of the Spanish identity. As remarked earlier, folk cinema and Spanish song were not products of Francoism but had been fully developed earlier in the Republican era. However, expressions of Andalusian folklore did receive privileged treatment under Franco's regime, over and

⁹ See Camila Segura, “Estética esperpéntica en *Bienvenido Mr. Marshall* de Luis García Berlanga y *El cochecito* de Marco Ferreri,” in *Espéculo, Revista de Estudios Literarios* (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2004).

above more peripheral nationalisms. The unity of Spain demanded a common identity, and this was achieved by promoting Andalusian folklore in place of other traditions, which were associated with opposing nationalist claims. We see Villar del Río converted into a typical Andalusian town in which the women dress in flamenco costume and dance *sevillanas*, the men are bullfighters, wear the *sombrero cordobés* and, guitar in hand, court women who wait behind wrought-iron-barred windows. All of this they do intending to please their foreign visitors, i.e., to live up to the exotic image of Spain that the North Americans hope to find. In reality, this phenomenon of voluntary “acculturation” or identity reinforcement began in the nineteenth century and presages what became habitual practice in touristic areas from the 1970’s onwards.

In *Welcome, Mr Marshall!* the diegetic use of music fulfils more than a simple decorative function. We must remember that this film was conceived as part of the promotional campaign of a rising star. The desire of the funding entities was to produce a folkloric *españolada* like so many others that were made in the fifties. It was common for the protagonist of folk comedies to be a singer whose rise to fame drove the plot and whose singing played a central role. In *Welcome, Mr Marshall!* this does not occur. Lolita Sevilla, despite heading the credits, interprets a secondary character, with minimal dialogue, and not especially intelligent.

The presence of song is variable. The first two, which are played during the casino scene, are cut or interrupted. Berlanga generally holds little esteem for more conventional song. However the film’s climax takes place when, during rehearsals for the welcome party, the Andalusian star performs *Coplillas de las divisas*—a song in the style of the *pasacalle*—thereby transforming it into the film’s theme song.

In a similarly ironic, and in this case parodic, gesture, the subsequent song begins during the mayor’s dream in which his casino is transformed into a Wild West saloon. Jazz musicians and can-can dancers make way for a singer’s rendition of a popular song reminiscent of *Oh! Susanna*, which ends as a flamenco piece. The effect of this decontextualisation is hilarious: the flamenco performer singing in a saloon, marking out the melismatic melodies, hand movements and postures typical of flamenco before an audience of cowboys.

Most analyses of *Welcome, Mr Marshall!* share an emphasis on its critical attitude toward certain aspects of Spanish society. It has been defined as one of the first dissident films made during the dictatorship, in contrast with an industry that operated largely in keeping with the values of Francoism. Therefore, it is perhaps surprising that the film, once overcoming the regime’s ironhanded censorship, received official approval. Representing Spain at Cannes, it was received favourably as another of the *costumbrista* comedies that appeared periodically in the cinemas. The explanation of this apparent contradiction is to be found in the vehicle chosen by the director for his vision of Spanish society: humor through parody, irony, and *esperpento*. What was groundbreaking about *Welcome Mr Marshall!* was the use of traditional forms from popular culture, especially theatre and literature, in order to subvert official discourse. These forms included the *sainete* and *astracanada*, as well as more elaborate literary forms such as the tale,

esperpento, and the Theatre of the Absurd, in which the grotesque is employed in protest of social reality. The film therefore develops its discourse of resistance through irony, satire and parody, and the music contributes directly to the intensification of these elements.

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