

## Book review

**Hilborn, Matthew (2025). *Film Comedy and Spain: Humour, Genre, and the Nation 1970-2020*. Legenda Books.**

This volume offers a solid analysis of Spanish film comedy from 1970 to 2020, in connection with the construction of the Spanish notion of nation (pun intended). The volume is erudite and insightful, demonstrating the author's deep knowledge of filmic language, multimodal humour, and Spanish contemporary history. The book consists of nine chapters, with seven core chapters where the author analyses some of the most emblematic works by Spanish film directors, namely José Luis Berlanga, Juan Antonio Bardem, Pedro Almodóvar, Bigas Luna, Álex de la Iglesia, Santiago Segura, Emilio Martínez-Lázaro and Javier Ruiz Caldera, from the Spanish Transition after Franco's Dictatorship up to the present decade. However, Hilborn's case-study analysis is not simply chronological but articulates around the idea of nation construction, which in the case of Spain, and after a 40-year isolation due to Franco's dictatorship, raises as a problematic issue also for the development of a characteristically Spanish onscreen humour.

In the Introductory chapter, Hilborn clearly establishes his aims by stating that the seven core chapters analyse comedy's response and impact on "pivotal sociohistorical moments" (p. 1) of Spanish contemporary history. He highlights humour's power both to construct but also to dismantle national identities, drawing on a solid theoretical background.

Chapter 1, "Impossible homecoming", focuses on the Transition (1970-1977), that is, the convulsive period surrounding the end of Franco's long-lived dictatorship. New notions of openness (mostly through foreign tourism, democracy and both political and sexual freedom) came to the fore. However, these new constructions clashed with long established identities such as the typical Spanish male, often short, hairy, sexually active but repressed by a long tradition of religious control and bigotry, which often led to marital infidelity. At this 'hinge' of a time, both Spain as a nation and Spanish cinema were going through a big crisis of identity. This is clearly reflected in the two films analysed in this chapter: Luis García Berlanga's *¡Vivan los novios!* (*Long Live the Bride and Groom!*) and Juan Antonio Bardem's *El puente* (*Foul Play*). Despite their different plots (a funereal *esperpentic*<sup>1</sup> wedding and a road movie), both films explore ambivalent representations of machismo, tourism, and marital infidelity, ultimately reflecting an "impossible homecoming".

Chapter 2 examines what Hilborn terms the "Pedro paradox", focusing on Almodóvar's early films *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls from the Heap*) and *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*), paradigmatic of the Spanish *Movida* (1980s). In my view, one of the chapter's strengths (other than the thorough and thought-provoking analysis) is its convincing argument that previous

---

<sup>1</sup> The term *esperpentic* alludes to the theatrical genre developed and epitomized by Spanish playwright Vallé-Inclán. The "*esperpento*" is characterized, among other things, by the use of the grotesque as social and political critique, and the presence of dark topics like death, usually presented from a dark humour perspective, where tragedy is mixed with comedy to caricaturize reality. The influence of *esperpento* on Berlanga's films has been widely reported by scholars (e.g. Sánchez López, 2022; Torres Begines, 2012).

scholarship has overlooked Almodóvar's humorous mechanics from a Humour Theory perspective, particularly what Hilborn calls *comic-kazi* and *premature ejokulation* characteristics (pp. 53-54). Parallely, the chapter challenges the tendency to dismiss these early films as merely experimental, as examples of Almodóvar *before* 'serious' Almodóvar. Instead, Hilborn imbues these 'early' works with Spain's political and somehow nostalgic view of Francoism, still not having found its real place as a democratic nation. In other words, as the chapter's title states, feeling homesick.

Chapter 3 analyses Bigas Luna's Iberian Trilogy: *Jamón, Jamón* (1992), *Golden Balls* (1993) and *The Tit and the Moon* (1994), produced during Spain's moment of economic optimism and international visibility thanks to two major international events: Barcelona's Olympic Games and the International EXPO of Seville (both taking place in 1992). In this context, the trilogy explores and caustically laughs at Spain's name-branding and 'selling' of shallow stereotypes, particularly the hypersexualized, even grotesque 'Iberian macho' embodied by Javier Bardem in two out of the three films of the trilogy. The chapter also stresses the importance of 'local' knowledge for understanding the humour, though more explicit discussion of intertextuality (e.g. Tsakona, 2020) would have strengthened the analysis. Nonetheless, the chapter fills a notable gap on the Iberian Trilogy, whose theorization remains rather scarce despite its fascinating allegorical, parodic and esperpentic readings.

After the economic optimism of the 1990s, also colloquially termed as "Aznar's economic miracle",<sup>2</sup> Chapter 4 centres on the new millennium by analysing Álex de la Iglesia's dark comedy *Muertos de la risa* (*Dying of Laughter*, 1999). As rightly argued by the author, de la Iglesia questions Spain's supposed overcoming of Francoism. His dark comedy pits Bruno (a clever and cruel clown played by The Great Wyoming) against Nino (the dumb and passive clown played by Santiago Segura, who would also become the infamous Torrente). With a success based on a monster slap, the pair stresses Spain's enduring divisions and, especially in the case of Nino, the "slappee", namely Spain's symbolic passive indifference. I particularly agree with Hilborn's reading that *Muertos de la risa* refuses *historical amnesia*. In fact, an ongoing division in Spain puts those who argue that sleeping dogs should be let asleep (alluding to Civil War's crimes) against those who supported the Law of Historical Memory (passed in 2007 and updated in 2022). In this respect, it is rather telling that the film ends with both characters dead and alive, just as Franco's dictatorship seems to be.

Chapter 5 explores the *Torrente* saga. Written, directed and played by the Spanish well-known actor Santiago Segura, Torrente depicts an infamous, racist, dirty (in both senses of the word) and nostalgically Francoist ex-policeman. His fatness, self-complacency and, it could be argued, extreme *cuñadismo*,<sup>3</sup> shows a character that depicts "what we are but we wish were not" (p. 151). The saga includes five films which became blockbusters and led to a series of spin-offs (like a comic or a video game). However, beyond Torrente's shabbiness and seediness, Segura (who put on up to 45 kilos for the first film) embodies Francoist trauma and *nostalgia*. In fact, fatness was regarded in post-war Spain as a symbol of health and beauty, given the extended hunger most part of the population endured. In my view, however, Torrente's tackiness also

---

<sup>2</sup> José María Aznar was Spanish prime minister from 1996 to 2004. During this period, Spain experienced a strong economic growth, based on privatization of public companies, and strong liberal measures, and state agent speculation, which eventually led to a huge economic crisis (known as the "bubble bursting").

<sup>3</sup> *Cuñadismo* is a Spanish term referring to a modern social phenomenon where someone (the *cuñado* or brother-in-law) acts as a "know-it-all", frequently giving unsolicited, uninformed, or superficial opinions on any topic with excessive confidence. Often linked to the Dunning-Kruger effect, it represents a smug attitude of superiority, frequently appearing in family gatherings or social media. As a phenomenon, it has long permeated Spanish humour but has arguably reached its peak in the last five years, most likely as a result of social media, which might explain why it has not been included in this volume.

helped to ridicule Francoist's nostalgics, a phenomenon that has reverted now with the advance of the extreme-right party Vox (see below).

Chapter 6 analyses another saga, the three romantic comedies (up to date, as the saga is likely to expand given its popularity): *Ocho apellidos vascos* (*Eight Basque Surnames*) and its two 'sort-of' spin-offs *Ocho apellidos catalanes* (*Eight Catalan Surnames*), and *Ocho apellidos marroquíes* (*Eight Moroccan Surnames*). The series, directed by Emilio Martínez-Lázaro in the mid-2010s, depicts three love stories between culturally diverse couples, playing with ethnic and cultural stereotypes. However, as rightly argued by Hilborn, rather than merely reproducing the romcom genre, the films also exemplify three peculiarly Spanish sub-genres: the bomb-com (with terrorism such as ETA as a backdrop), the mom-com (which foregrounds coveted motherly love) and com-com (which depicts Spanishness as a "disputed, fabricated construct"; p. 195). In my view, a major asset of the chapter is the fact that the author focuses on the political implications of utopian unificatory politics in a fragmented Spain, where especially right-wing politicians always brandish the sword of national rupture by independentist movements together with providing a reading of gender disturbance, both of the female and male protagonists of the saga.

Chapter 7 covers the final years in the volume, with a focus on Javier Ruiz Caldera's comedy *Superlópez* (2018) and other superhero spoofs of the 2010s. Still focusing on Spanish stereotypes, *Superlópez* is a self-deprecating parody of Hollywood superheroes. In fact, the self-deprecating contrast between the triumphalism of USA and Spanish defeatism is also a recurrent leitmotif in other genres such as stand-up comedy. For example, Goyo Jiménez (one of Spain's best known stand-up monologists and actors) released *Aiguantulivina América* in 2004 and its sequel *Aiguantulivina América 2* in 2020. The name of the show is the prototypically Spanish pronunciation of the English sentence "I want to live in America" (which also plays with the homonymous song by the Puerto Ricans in the well-known musical *West Side Story*). However, according to Hilborn, these superhero spoofs are more than merely self-deprecatory parodies of the genre but serve to signal "a broader feeling of national uncertainty, struggling for a clear roadmap toward social harmony" (p. 235). Even more, they tackle the notion of Spanishness at its core as its hero, Superlópez, has to navigate his own identity simultaneously as Spaniard and as a triple-immigrant.

The volume closes with a summary of the different chapters and focal points in the Conclusion. In my view, the volume makes it apparent that, despite its sociodemocratic advances, Spain still struggles to find a national identity, being somehow subject to its dictatorial past, with the dictator dead but always present. Arguably, Spain is now more divided than ever after the Transition period, Franco's 'ghost' still hovering over an increasingly polarized society. Indeed, far from being grotesque (as depicted in *Torrente*), fascism is increasingly making a strong comeback in Spain's political context. This division became more evident than ever after Franco's remains were exhumed from his pharaonic tomb in Cuelgamuros on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019. An interesting addition to the present volume would be the comedy "*La cena*" (*The Dinner*), directed by Manuel Gómez Pereira and released in 2025. The story is set in 1939, just two weeks after the end of the Civil War, with Franco wanting to hold a dinner party at the Palace Hotel (still turned into a hospital and whose staff is mostly anti-Francoist and republican). This tragicomedy depicts, once again, Spain's division into two sides. Interestingly, one of the protagonists, played by Spanish movie star Mario Casas, is a Francoist soldier (reminiscent of Francoist actor Alfredo Mayo) who is a closeted homosexual and eventually falls in love with the hotel anti-Francoist director, escaping together into France. Films like this show that Hilborn's argument is not only solid but enduring. His insightful analysis could hence be easily extended to newly released films. Another interesting addition to the present volume might include the work by female directors (a limitation acknowledged by the author himself). For

example, Arantxa Echevarría's recent work *Políticamente incorrectos (Politically Incorrect)* (2024) also plays with the romcom genre in this satire laughing at Spain's current political polarization.

Overall, Hilborn's volume stands as a significant contribution to the study of Spanish cinema, humour, and national identity. By tracing how comedy has both mirrored and shaped Spain's political transformations, the book demonstrates that humour is not merely entertainment but a cultural barometer revealing deep-seating anxieties, aspirations, and contradictions. Its interdisciplinary approach, combining film analysis, humour theory, and historical context, offers a robust framework for understanding Spain's ongoing struggle to articulate a cohesive national narrative. The volume also opens fruitful avenues for further research, particularly regarding the work of female filmmakers. In this sense, Hilborn not only maps the past fifty years of Spanish film comedy but also provides essential tools for interpreting its future directions.

**Carmen Maíz-Arévalo**

Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

[cmaizare@ucm.es](mailto:cmaizare@ucm.es)

## References

- Echevarría, A. (2024). *Políticamente incorrectos (Politically incorrect)*. Lazona Films.
- Gómez Pereira, M. (2025). *La cena (The Dinner)*. Crea SGR.
- Sánchez López, F. (2022). Luis García Berlanga y la representación de La Guerra Civil española: La vaquilla (1985) como esperpento cinematográfico. *Doxa Comunicación. Revista Interdisciplinar de Estudios de Comunicación y Ciencias Sociales*, 35, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n35a1574>
- Torres Begines, C. (2012). *El esperpento y el cine de Luis García Berlanga*. [Doctoral dissertation, Universidad de Sevilla].
- Tsakona, V. (2020). Scrutinising intertextuality in humour: Moving beyond cultural literacy and towards critical literacy. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 8(3), 40-59. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2020.8.3.Tsakona2>