

## **“Esto no es un juego, es *Acción mutante*”: The Provocations of Álex de la Iglesia**

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Speaking at the Manchester Spanish Film Festival in 2000, Álex de la Iglesia professed that he was not really a film director. “I’m more of a barman”, he claimed, “I just make cocktails”. His films, he implied, were simply an elaborate montage of quotations from other directors, genres, and film-styles, a self-assessment well borne out by *Acción mutante* (1993), the de la Iglesias team’s<sup>1</sup> first feature film, which promiscuously mixes science fiction and comedy, *film noir* and western, Almodóvar and Ridley Scott. Were such a claim, and its associated renunciation of auteur status, to issue from an American independent director, or even a relatively self-conscious Hollywood director, would it even raise an eyebrow, so eloquently does it express postmodern orthodoxy? And does it make any difference when it comes from a modern Spanish director? As a bravura cut-and-paste job, a frenetic exercise in filmic intertextuality, *Acción mutante* is highly accomplished, but it would be a mistake to praise or criticize it on the grounds of its postmodern sensibilities alone without taking into account the intervention it made into a specifically Spanish filmic context where, in the words of the title song “Esto no es un juego, es acción mutante”.

### **AFTER THE LEY MIRÓ**

Álex de la Iglesia has defined his cinema in terms of what it is *not*. He claims that he set out to make films that were “not about childhood, not about the civil war, and not literary

adaptations”. There is no great mystery about what sort of cinema de la Iglesia refers to here – one need not look far into the Spanish cinema of the immediate post-Franco era (1975-1990), just before de la Iglesia started making feature films, to find examples of films from these categories, and sometimes all three at once. If we accept that de la Iglesia necessarily caricatures that cinema to which he opposes his own, it is nevertheless worthwhile examining more closely what he objects to in it. Although the three things to be avoided (childhood, civil war, literary adaptations) overlap, it will be productive to take them one at a time.

1. Childhood. If we ask *whose* childhood is at stake in films such as *La guerra de papa* (Antonio Mercero, 1977), *El sur* (Víctor Erice, 1983), or *Las bicicletas son para el verano* (Jaime Chávarri, 1983), then we quickly come to the crux of the issue. These are the childhoods of a generation of directors who lived through the civil war or at least under Franco, a generation removed from de la Iglesia’s by twenty years or more. The childhoods depicted in these films are almost universally negative, etched by trauma and psychological dislocation. As Marsha Kinder, who has canonized this cycle, puts it, these children have to cope with “the crimes of their devouring mothers and murderous fathers.... They are the children of Franco, who bear the crippling legacy of Francoist cultural and political repression” (Kinder 1993: 215). For de la Iglesia’s relatively privileged generation, this agonized, introspective view of childhood is virtually unrecognizable and clearly no longer necessary.

2. The civil war. With the death of Franco and the coming of democracy Spanish cinema carried out a much-needed reexamination of both the civil war and Franco’s regime, which until that point had been represented within Spain almost entirely from the

point of view of the right. It was considered the political and even moral duty of cinema to “reconstruct” the past, and this was done rigorously in a well-known sequence of films including the ones already mentioned as well as, for instance, *La vaquilla* (Luis García Berlanga, 1985), *¡Ay Carmela!* (Carlos Saura, 1990), *Después del sueño* (Mario Camus 1992) (see Jordan and Morgan-Tamosumas 1998: 15-60). De la Iglesia, on the other hand, was part of the *desencanto*, the period of disillusionment with politics in general and with the leftist parties (PSOE) in particular, which had failed to deliver the changes they promised. De la Iglesia, then, like Almodóvar, would set out to make cinema as if Franco had never existed (see Kinder 1987: 42).

3. Literary adaptations. The mainstream cinema in the years prior to Franco’s death had been dominated by popular and non-literary genres such as the “sexy Spanish comedies”, the melodramas of Pedro Masó, and the horror genre. From 1975 onwards, “serious” directors undertook the task of rescuing the national production from such “cheap and nasty” forms – what better way to elevate cinema than by turning to high culture, to literature? Not only did literary adaptations bring automatic respectability to cinema, but the authors adapted usually possessed excellent liberal or leftist credentials. To take just one example, four of the novels of Miguel Delibes were either adapted directly or inspired screenplays during this period, the most well-known of these being *Los santos inocentes* (Mario Camus, 1984). This emphasis on the literary of course implies a concomitant distrust of cinema as cinema, of cinema as a mass cultural form. The rejection of literary adaptations by de la Iglesia signals a renewed interest in exclusively cinematic codes, and more importantly, a disavowal of the “respectability” literature endows on cinema.

A cursory examination of *Acción mutante* reveals how de la Iglesia and his team wittily break away from the dead hand of literary adaptations about children of the civil war. Far from being a reexamination of the past, it is set in a murky future where a group of men with various disabilities wage terror on the establishment, represented by the whole-wheat bread-making tycoon Orujo. These men, who appropriate for themselves the designation “mutants”, kidnap and transport Orujo’s daughter Patricia to the distant planet of Axturias where they hope to exchange her for a massive ransom. Leaving aside the fact that many of the characters are infantile or puerile in their actions and desires, there is only one child in this film, and he is no innocent traumatized by the misdeeds of his elders. The demented and sadistic Zacarías (Carlos López Perea) is a perpetrator, rather than a victim of violence, torturing the mutant leader Ramón on the dinner table (he is, in any case, played by a suspiciously adult-looking, if small, actor). Finally, if it were absolutely necessary to trace the literary antecedents of *Acción mutante*, the path would lead to alternative comic books, while most of the sources for the film, as has already been noted, are cinematic (genre films) rather than literary.

*Acción mutante* is an all-out assault on what de la Iglesia has called the “conspiracy of boredom” (Ordóñez 1997: 73) in Spanish cinema, by which he means the hegemonic literary-political cinema of the 1980s. This might be an exaggeration on de la Iglesia’s part were it not for the fact that the sort of cinema he excoriates was ultimately endorsed and sponsored by the Spanish state from the mid-1980s. When the PSOE was elected in 1982 its leaders set about fulfilling their promise to reassess and reorganize the Spanish film industry. The result, under the direction of Pilar Miró, was the *ley Miró* (1983), which encouraged a very particular sort of cinema production through the

concentration of funds on a smaller number of productions [films??], the awarding of grants and prizes, and assistance in distribution of those films approved by the *Comisión de Calificación de las Películas Cinematográficas* (Committee for Cinema Classification) and the *Subcomisión de Valoración Técnica* (Sub-committee for Technical Valuation). One of the main objectives of the legislation was the elimination or at least squeezing of the *subproductos*, the many genre films (horror, soft-porn, comedy) being made in Spain, and considered “undignified” by the new cinema authorities. In practical terms this attack on genre cinema meant the consolidation – not for the first time – of realism as the “official” style of Spanish national cinema (see Triana-Toribio 2003: 108-19). In its efforts to curtail the perceived excesses of genre cinema, the *ley Miró* must be judged a success, but in its desire to capture the audiences who once enjoyed the genre cinema, the *ley Miró* was an unqualified failure. By the early nineties, the policies driven by the *ley Miró* had been exhausted through shortage of funds, and its main legacy, besides a national cinema distrustful of “entertainment”, was the promotion of new young filmmakers who failed to fit the *ley Miró* mold – Pedro Almodóvar, whose films wed art cinema and genre cinema, was a notable beneficiary. It is within this context of a decaying anti-popular cinema policy that *Acción mutante* must be understood.

#### NON-LITERARY, ANTI-REALIST

The opening shot of *Acción mutante* is a close-up of the soon-to-be suffocated President of the National Association of Bodybuilders, Matías Pons, screaming in protest against the attentions of his would-be kidnappers. In the “future” Spain of *Acción mutante*, Matías Pons represents all that is hegemonic: celebrity, beauty, health, physical perfection. The opening sequence which follows is designed to elicit an equivalent dismay in the hegemonic milieus of Spanish cinema production. Mock television footage is integrated with the opening credits in a film style which acts as a miniature manifesto against both realism and the literary pretensions of *ley Miró* cinema. Jaime Blanch, dressed in a suit inscribed repeatedly with the word “Sucesos” (News) reports on the bungled kidnapping of the previous scene. His mention of the group “Acción mutante” cues the credits, and when these are finished we return to the JQK television news which introduces us to the “mutants” through spinning mug-shots, as well as the Orujo family who are to be the next victims of “Acción mutante”. The use of television news serves more than one purpose. Clearly it provides an economical mode of exposition, introducing the characters and the basic plot backgrounds, which is a common enough deployment of television’s documentary function, but it also calls attention to the conventions of news presentation – its visual style (back projection, the positioning of the presenter in relation to the audience) and its sensationalist and frivolous content (*periodismo rosa* or celebrity news). The credit sequence is also highly self-conscious in relation to the cinematic apparatus and announces an anti-realist aesthetic. The actors parade theatrically in front of a fiery back projection, the character M.A. approaches the camera directly and simulates hitting the lens (at one point cracking it), and when Manitas’ machine-gun fails to fire (during the credits for special effects), a props man

enters the scene from behind the camera to assist him. The characters are also introduced in a style more appropriate to cartoons than to a cinema with pretensions to psychological insight. The mugshots identify and characterize each mutant through his single deformity, mutation or handicap, thereby asserting the two-dimensionality of fantasy over the cherished depth of realism. The references to comic-book conventions are deliberate, as are the other citations of mass cultural forms: in addition to the framing device of television news, the credit sequence clearly pastiches Bond films' opening credit conventions, and the accompanying hip-hop lyrics are provided by popular band Def Con Dos. It should also be noted that the satirizing of televisual conventions comes hand in hand with an admiration for their visual potential and takes for granted the relevance of such a mass cultural medium to its audience – hardly an assumption acceptable to the proponents of the *ley Miró* style who were keen to disavow the popular mass cultural side of their medium.

### GENERIC IMPURITIES

As we have already noted, one of the key achievements of the *ley Miró* was the denigration and suppression of the Spanish tradition of genre cinema. Not only *Acción mutante*, but all de la Iglesia's films, are unashamedly based on genres usually eschewed by Spanish auteurist cinema. In fact, one of the most important developments in Spanish cinema in recent years – certainly in terms of box office takings – has been the rejuvenation of genre cinema. One need only mention the success of Alejandro

Amenábar's psychological thriller *Abre los ojos* (1997) and ghost story *Los otros* (2001), as well as the inexorable rise of Santiago Segura and his growing *Torrente* (1998; 2001) empire. In the case of de la Iglesia, the revivification of genre cinema has not been an exercise in nostalgia; it has not been an attempt to go back to the "good old days" prior to the *ley Miró* by directly revisiting those genres Spain excelled at in the 1960s and early 1970s. Clearly, such an approach would be at best naive, at worst backward looking. The sentimental resurrection of earlier Spanish styles has of course taken place, yielding, for example, the anodyne and socially conservative *El amor perjudica seriamente la salud* (Manuel Gómez Pereira, 1997), a ham-fisted rehashing of the sexy Spanish comedy genre. De la Iglesia is not interested in mining a supposed seam of indigenous Spanish cinematic tradition. If anything, his films are rather a bold statement that *anything* can be Spanish cinema, or better yet, *forget* the idea of Spanish cinema as some discrete and bounded entity.

The "main" genre upon which *Acción mutante* is based, if one can say such a thing about this generically eclectic film, is science fiction. Science fiction cinema has no established tradition in Spanish cinema and there is still no entry for *ciencia ficción* in the *Diccionario del cine español* nor in any of the encyclopedic works on Spanish cinema. *Acción mutante* may very well be the first ever Spanish science fiction-comedy (the classification it is given on IMDB).<sup>3</sup> For various historical reasons to do with frontiers, space exploration, the Cold War, and the advances of US corporate capital, science fiction cinema has been a predominantly American phenomenon. Keeping this in mind, it is useful to consider what *Acción mutante* borrows from the SF canon and how it deviates from it. H. Bruce Franklin has devised an ironic and economical typology to



distinguish early, technologically optimistic SF film from the post-utopian films which came to the fore from the 1970s onwards. The “archetypal image[s] of the future projected in early SF film” are “THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE” and “THE MARVELLOUS FLYING MACHINE” (1990: 20-1). Drawing on films such as *Alien* (1979), *Outland* (1981), *The Last Chase* (1981), *Parasite* (1982) and *Blade Runner* (1982), Franklin claims that

THE WONDER CITY OF THE FUTURE rarely appears any longer in the cinematic visions of tomorrow, except occasionally as some kind of domed world of illusory pleasures, as in *Logan’s Run* or *Futureworld*. Instead the cities of the present have been reduced to rubble through which our poor descendants have their last pathetic adventures.... When THE MARVELLOUS FLYING MACHINE makes an appearance, it is usually as a harbinger not of progress but of terror. It may be a vehicle bringing either some threatening alien life-form – as in *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) or *Alien*; or assassins sent by human powers – as in *Outland*. (1990: 23)

Broadly speaking, *Acción mutante* subscribes to this post-utopian view of the future. What we see of the city (Madrid?) of the future in the first third of the film contains little in the way of stunning progress or technological wonders. Like the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) this city seems to be devoid of sunlight, a dim visibility provided instead by neon street signs and car headlights. Although we see the decadent rich devoted to hedonistic partying, there is no sign of a social or governmental structure beyond the unseen guard who releases Ramón from prison and helmeted and faceless police gratuitously doling out beatings to protestors and “mutants”. Meanwhile, the spaceship, *Virgen del Carmen*, which hosts the middle third of the film, resembles not in

the least the gleaming fantasies of triumphant technology to be found in so much science fiction. Its computer is unreliable, from the outside it looks if anything like a grey-brown bon-bon on stilts, and its “bridge” is more mechanic’s yard than Enterprise. Perhaps the most striking feature of *Virgen del Carmen* is its constant need for greasing and its tendency to spurt brake fluid with great gusto at the least provocation. Even Han Solo’s Millennium Falcon, the paradigm for such decaying and inefficient spaceships, was hi-tech enough not to require ministrations as mundane as the oilcan, although the immediate model for *Virgen del Carmen* is the spaceship in John Carpenter’s satirical *Dark Star* (1974). Robots, another staple of the SF film, also appear here, but they too fail to testify to a brave new world. The mechanical bouncers, musical trio and priest at the wedding are hardly sophisticated in their actions, less cyborg or android than shop-window mannequins.

Obviously, much of the emphasis in *Acción mutante* on the limitations of technology (and by association of special effects in SF films in general) has to do with the film’s comic thrust, which consistently and deliberately undermines the fantasy prerequisite to SF, and therefore the whole pessimistic post-utopian trend identified by Franklin. What, then, is to stop *Acción mutante* from moving entirely into comedy and becoming nothing more than a spoof along the lines of *Dark Star*, *Sleeper* (Woody Allen, 1973) or *Spaceballs* (Mel Brooks, 1987)? Several aspects of the film prevent this from happening and allow it to tread the fine line between comedy and science fiction without ever dipping over exclusively into one or the other. If we compare it with *Sleeper* and *Spaceballs*, we will notice immediately that both these films are almost uniformly brightly lit, in accordance with the sunny disposition of comedy, and its emphasis on

visibility. In contrast, large parts of *Acción mutante* take place in obscurity, in poorly lit interiors – the spaceship, García’s bar, Orujo’s office. In fact, there is a consistency in the mise-en-scène which holds the film tightly together and constitutes an overall “look” for the film. This could be characterized in terms of the cluttered, baroque interiors where the action unfolds and the emphasis [is??] on dirt, grime, rust and decrepitude in both sets and costumes. De la Iglesia has explained that he was aiming for an “oxidized aesthetics that give the film a rusty (*roñoso*) look” (cited in Heredero 1999: 193). In addition, the comic elements of the film are always held in check by the brutality of the *grand guingol* violence which punctuates the plot, with stylized exit wounds and gory deaths. Finally, the strong narrative drive of the film – from early on, the clock is ticking on the inevitable final confrontation in García’s bar – ensures that suspense is never entirely sacrificed to satire.

Although the primary generic fault-line in the film runs along the comedy-science fiction axis, *Acción mutante* also pilfers from, or imitates in passing, horror, westerns and *film noir*. Horror and science fiction have of course always overlapped. To give just one example from *Acción mutante*, one could point to the death during the wedding reception massacre of Chepa, the machine-toting hunchback who falls from the top of the fake wedding cake which has concealed him. The shot shows the newlyweds, Patricia and Luis, in medium shot cowering under the table upon which the cake sits, and then an abrupt racking focus changes planes to show in close-up the bloodied face of Chepa who has fallen from above. The shot is an ironic reference to the use of such sudden rack focusing for shock effect in horror films. Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas have argued that Ramón’s “release from jail and his grisly murder of his colleagues on

the spaceship strongly recall *film noir*” and they also point to the “western-style shoot out finale” (1998: 108). The *film noir*-style off-centre framing of Ramón as he plots the deaths of his companions and the bleak desert landscape of Axturias reminiscent of the terrain of European Westerns support both of these claims and reinforce the case for *Acción mutante* as a generic *mélange*, or *marmitako*, to use a term from de la Iglesia’s native Basque country.

Does this constant referencing of disparate film styles serve a purpose or is it merely gratuitous showing off? It would be wrong to discount entirely the latter hypothesis, since one of the unifying drives of the film is the commitment to sheer excess; however, there are two further things worth noting about this heteroclitite borrowing of genres. First, just as the “oxidized aesthetic” brings a look of antiquation to the supposed “future”, so the borrowing from *film noir* and westerns – genres associated with the past – reinforces the post-utopian sensibilities of the film. In other words, many of the references, however disparate, contribute to *Acción mutante*’s overall visual structure. At the same time, the mixing of genres must be considered a refusal of generic purity. *Acción mutante* revisits genre cinema, but recognizes that this can never be done in an innocent fashion. This resistance to playing genre “straight” leads to a series of deliberate clashes or juxtapositions, where from sequence to sequence, and sometimes even within a sequence, discontinuity in visual style becomes the rule.

#### ALMODÓVAR FOR BOYS

The most striking sudden shift of styles takes place during the wedding reception scene. This shift is partially camouflaged because it is motivated by a narrative development which we have already been prepared for – Ramón has instructed M.A. to extinguish the lights during the kidnapping, which he eventually does once the plan has gone spectacularly wrong. After the fade-out the black screen is held for a considerable time before the subsequent fade-in to the death of Chepa which continues the scene and initiates a new visual style. There could not be a greater contrast between the two parts of this scene both in terms of *mise-en-scène* and camera movements. The brightly lit party dominated by the garish colours of guests dressed in camp costumes is displaced by dim lighting, and the black and white of the mutants' tuxedos and Patricia's wedding dress. Whereas the former scene heaves with frantically dancing and then frantically fleeing bodies, the latter contains slow, deliberate movements by fewer figures. The first half pulsates to *Def Con Dos* and then the jaunty "*Aires de Fiesta*" (Party Time), while the soundtrack of what follows is punctuated by Patricia's deep breathing and piercing screams. In the first, there is a mixture of long and medium shots giving the audience a breadth of spatial knowledge which is dramatically curtailed in the next scene, dominated by medium shots and close-ups.

It is not difficult to identify the generic conventions being invoked in the second part of the scene. The features mentioned already – the dim lighting, the close-up screams of the victim – along with such techniques as the menacing off-screen presence of Ramón confirmed by look of victim, Patricia's pathetic attempt to defend herself with her concealed knife, and the sudden close-up of Ramón's disfigured face, all announce a pastiche of slasher films. In order to place the style which precedes this one, we need

only quote selectively from Paul Julian Smith's review of Pedro Almodóvar's *Kika* (1992). *Kika* was made in the same year as *Acción mutante* and financed by the same combination of Almodóvar's production company, El Deseo S.A. and the mainstream French producer CIBY 2000. In his review, Smith's key word is "glorious": "*Kika* offers fans the frantic farce and gloriously saturated colours and costumes we have come to expect from its director" (2000 [1994]: 166); "*Kika*'s gorgeous art design and consistently inventive cinematography... produce pleasure, but no longer surprise" (168); "This cult of surface is nowhere more evident than in *Kika*. Gloriously shot, beautifully dressed, and skillfully acted" (169); "The scene is shot against a glorious blaze of sunflowers" (170); "*Kika* remains gloriously flashy fun" (170). If it were not already abundantly obvious that *Acción mutante* is citing the trademark Almodóvar style in the wedding scene, then the presence of Almodóvar regulars Bibi Andersen and Rossy de Palma (also stars of *Kika*) as decadent partygoers drives it home.

Given that *Acción mutante* owes an enormous debt, both financial and stylistic, to Pedro Almodóvar, isn't de la Iglesia literally biting the hand that feeds when he has his heroes massacre pretty much every last one of the "Almodovarian" characters who appear in the party scene? In fact, during the shooting of this scene, de la Iglesia worried that the owner of the studio would walk onto the set to find himself being satirized. (Heredero, 1999: 194) Indeed, when Ramón reminds his charges exactly what they are fighting against, his list of enemies sounds like a not so thinly veiled reference to the exotic and self-consciously frivolous protagonists of Almodóvar's oeuvre. Gathering his team around him he declares, "El mundo está dominado por niños bonitos e hijos de papá. ¡Dios! ¡Basta ya de mierdas 'lite'! ¡Basta ya de colonias, de anuncios de coches,

de aguas minerales! No queremos oler bien, no queremos adelgazar. Todo el mundo es tonto o moderno. Somos mutantes, no pijos de playa ni maricones diseño” [“The world is run by pretty boys and rich kids. God! Enough of this “lite” shit! Enough of eaux de cologne, car adverts, mineral waters! We don’t want to smell good; we don’t want to lose weight. Everyone is stupid or modern. We are mutants, not beach preppies or design queens]. The pleasure which Almodóvar’s films take in modern, democratic Spain is forthrightly rejected here, from a self-proclaimed position of marginality vis-à-vis the stylized, design-conscious world inhabited by Almodóvar’s characters. Interestingly, Ramón’s vitriol is reserved for men. The pretty boys, the spoilt rich kids, the beach preppies, and the design queens all suffer from a diminished masculinity, brought on, Ramón suggests, by a modern obsession with appearances, with how they smell, with their figures. Almodóvar’s films, in contrast, are celebrated for their heroines, for consistently placing women centre-frame. Could *Acción mutante*’s scorn for the feminization of men be an indirect response to the embracing of the “feminine” in Almodóvar?

This question takes on greater significance when we consider the similarities of Almodóvar’s and de la Iglesia’s filmic projects. Does not de la Iglesia’s knowing rehabilitation of genre cinema in a collage which emphasizes discontinuities and clashing styles provoke a sense of déjà vu? Is this not what Almodóvar had already been doing for more than ten years? It is not terribly important what relationships of influence or even anxiety of influence exist between *Acción mutante* and its patron. What is important is how it and de la Iglesias’ other films have done for popular genres traditionally coded “masculine” what Almodóvar did for popular genres coded

“feminine”. It is routinely recognized that Almodóvar’s oeuvre brings a postmodern playfulness and skepticism to melodrama and screwball comedy, two timeworn staples of the Spanish (and Hollywood) popular cinema repertoire, which are traditionally labeled “women’s” genres. De la Iglesia, meanwhile, has constructed his films on the basis of genres we could argue are coded, for lack of a more nuanced vocabulary, “masculine”. On the one hand, the two directors are on the same side, against the sober production of the *ley Miró* era, making films which are not literary adaptations, do not explore childhood, and studiously ignore the unsavoury episodes in Spain’s past. At the same time, they could not be further apart as result of the specific genres they have chosen to carry out this cinematic operation.

### **GENRE, GENDER, POLITICS**

Another part of Paul Julian Smith’s analysis of *Kika* gives us a sense of what might be at stake in the choice of generic conventions: “*Kika* shamelessly proclaims itself a woman’s film and one whose female characters are granted both the ‘ultra feminine’ visual pleasure characteristic of mainstream film and the central narrative position generally occupied by men. This implicit threat to masculinity is confirmed by the male leads who, as so often in Almodóvar, are comparatively dull” (2000: 169). There could not be a greater contrast with *Acción mutante* in which there is only one female character of any importance, and the film’s treatment of Patricia, the kidnapped heiress, is, like the rest of the film, shameless. In most modern films asymmetrical gender relations have to be



carefully excavated, so judiciously are they buried in seeming egalitarianism. In *Acción mutante*, however, sexual prejudice is disconcertingly transparent throughout. Recent cinema is not short of examples of violence against women being justified through elaborate narrative necessity (*Basic Instinct* [Paul Verhoeven, 1991], *Fatal Attraction* [Adrian Lyne, 1981]), but *Acción mutante* takes no such precautions in the slapstick violence it inflicts on Patricia. She is regularly punched or slapped by Ramón and his colleagues, Ramón unceremoniously drops her like a rag-doll from the crashed spaceship, and then drags her by the hair across Axturias. While many female characters in films are manipulated to collude indirectly in their own oppression, Patricia, suffering from what Ramón identifies as the Stockholm Syndrome, ends up assisting her captor. *Acción mutante*, in other words, tends to literalize what many films leave implicit or metaphorical, and there could be no clearer example than the stapling shut of Patricia's mouth for the voyage to Axturias, an image which is regularly reproduced and has become iconic of the film. No need here for the subtleties of classic cinema which Kaja Silverman calls "a textual model which holds the female voice and body insistently to the interior of the diegesis, while relegating the male subject to a position of apparent discursive exteriority by identifying him with mastering speech" (1988: ix). This transparent silencing of woman mirrors a general transparency at other levels of the film. In spite of Heredero's claim that the allusions to ETA and terrorism are submerged and need to be disinterred through interpretation (1999: 195), we would argue that nothing is more obvious than the ironic links between the Basque group and "Acción mutante". Against Heredero's wishes, this film cannot be retrieved for a cinema of political depth, the metaphorical, allegorical cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s (Monterde 1993: 43-54),

which, not incidentally, indulged heavily in violence against women. When the mining region of Asturias is cunningly disguised as the mining planet “Axturias”, we know that occluded meaning is not the main project of the film.

Although *Acción mutante* does not trade in the allusiveness so beloved of art cinema’s proponents, this does not prevent us from examining what the film leaves out in its articulation of sexual difference, nor what it says without knowing it says it. The making of *Acción mutante* coincided with the rapid expansion of private Spanish television, a development the film itself draws on. As Rosa Montero notes, the drive for markets led to a proliferation of sexually-centred programmes, “with women being exploited *ad nauseam* as sexual objects of the crudest kind” (1995: 383). *Telecinco*, which resembles more than a little the JQK television channel of *Acción mutante* and produced such fare as the stripshow *¡Uf, qué calor!*, was the main culprit in this televisual display of the female body. Horror and science fiction genres are also generally quick to exploit opportunities to show female flesh, however, *Acción mutante* for the most part declines to do so. It is notable, in fact, that Patricia is only treated as an object of sexual desire at one point in the film, although the desires of most of the characters revolve around her. For Ramón she is a business proposition, worth only as much as her ransom; for Álex she represents the possibility of romance once his Siamese twin has expired; for her father her wedding is the chance to gain a title; and her aristocratic fiancé wants access to her father’s wealth.

Only the isolated and dysfunctional all-male family of colonists on Axturias, the walls of whose house are plastered with photos of naked women, think of Patricia as a sexual being. The characterisation of the grandfather and his three grandsons goes out of

its way to depict male sexual desire as perverse, grotesque and sinister. For instance, when the “boys” go to tell their grandfather that there is a woman outside their house, he is filmed in an armchair watching a pornographic video, his face at first hidden from view; and when the whole family emerges to see the visitors, Ezequiel (played by Santiago Segura) ejaculates prematurely at the mere sight of Patricia. Failing to agree a trade for Patricia’s sexual services, the family attack and restrain Ramón; once dressed in their Sunday best, they prepare to rape Patricia, who we see only briefly through a doorway in the background of a deep focus shot, tied to a bed with her legs suspended by rope in the air. The low-brow humour of this scene should not prevent us from reaching more general conclusions about the nature of sexuality and sexual difference in the film. It is not clear whether the rape occurs because there is a narrative ellipsis which takes us from the scene in the colonists’ house to a scene in which Patricia is driving the unconscious Ramón towards García’s Bar. Cross-cutting then reveals the naked grandfather and two of the boys (once again in the background, deep focus) tied up in comically complicated bondage, the youngest boy having assisted in Patricia’s escape. The film therefore not only elides the sexual act, but when it shows the preparations for it, the cinematography keeps the actors at a distance and partially obstructed from view. In addition, there are voyeuristic characters in the film, but the camerawork never eroticizes Patricia with any of the voyeuristic codes cinema is so well equipped with. In other words, *Acción mutante* represents satirically the male gaze in the shape of the pornography-watching grandfather, but it does not gratify that gaze in its own mise-en-scène.

We are not suggesting a recuperation of *Acción mutante* as some kind of feminist text, even in spite of itself. It is instructive, however, to contrast its sexual economy with that found in another Spanish film of the 1990s, one which is in many ways more typical in its articulation of sexual difference: *Abre los ojos* (1997), Amenábar's hymn to besieged male subjectivity. This futuristic thriller unfolds in such a way that the audience has little choice but to take up the perspective of the narcissistic César, a *niño de papá* if there ever was one. The two women in the film, Nuria and Sofía, function solely as ciphers to articulate an internal split in the protagonist. The terrifying, sexually aggressive Nuria (Najwa Nimri) mutilates the hero by crashing her car with him in it, and the chaste, idealized Sofía (Penélope Cruz, of course) promises to erase this symbolic castration through her bland ministrations. In both cases, sexual difference is absolute and constitutive of César's subjectivity, on the one hand figured as the threat of death, on the other as the guarantee of an illusory wholeness. In addition, the vicissitudes of César's fantasy life leave plenty of scope for the specularization of Nuria and Sofía, as well as violence against them justified by narrative logic. In contrast to this hysterical, but by no means unusual, representation of sexual differentiation (consider any number of recent films with Michael Douglas as the tormented alpha male), *Acción mutante* tends ultimately to efface sexual difference. In a film with more than its share of mutilated men, the final scene brings Patricia closer to the all-male "mutants": her arm is severed at the elbow and she joins the similarly one-armed Álex in the ongoing struggle against the *niños de papá* represented by her effete, and now dead, fiancé. Thus, while *Abre los ojos* establishes femininity as a primary structural principle in its symbolic economy, *Acción*

*mutante*, not unlike many modern science fiction films (see Penley, 1990: 123-5), tries to do away with sexual difference, which effectively means the exclusion of femininity.

Finally, Patricia's desire throughout the latter half of the film to "become mutant", and her eventual realization of this desire, raises the question of the political stance of a film which deliberately sets itself against worthy political cinema. In the first instance, there is no let up in the film's irreverence when it comes to Patricia's "conversion" to the cause of the oppressed "mutants". *Acción mutante* clearly mocks her as an upper-class political *parvenu*, mouthing slogans about alienation as she is dragged across Axturias. That she is called Patricia and is diagnosed with Stockholm Syndrome by Ramón is clearly intended to make us associate her with heiress Patty Hearst, first victim and then willing member of the Symbionese Liberation Army. Nevertheless, the film's cynicism and satirical bite have encouraged radical disabled groups in Spain and elsewhere to borrow the slogans and logo of this fictional terrorist cell.<sup>4</sup> In a reading which manages to ignore the trenchant satire of the film, Madeline Conway has even argued that "[w]atching the 'freaks' in this film... [...]?? does not reinforce our feelings of normalcy, as happened of the audience of the freak show, but rather breaks down the barrier between 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'able-bodied' and 'disabled'" (2000: 258). It might be tempting, then, to find in *Acción mutante* a model for a de-centred micro-politics, typical of a postmodern era distrustful of the grand narratives based on class offered by traditional Marxist politics. However, while the film may be open to such readings, we have to recognize that ultimately, the film favours cynical detachment over political engagement. On two occasions Ramón rallies his charges with what is clearly a much-rehearsed mantra:

Ramón: ¿Qué eráis cuando os encontré? (What were you when I found you?)

Mutantes: ¡Éramos basura, deshecho de hospital! (We were rubbish, hospital debris!)

R.: ¿Quién os sacó del arroyo y os hizo lo que sois? (Who got you out of the gutter and turned you into what you are now?)

M.: ¡Tú, Ramón! (You, Ramón!)

R.: ¿Qué sois ahora? (What are you now?)

M.: ¡Mutantes, Mutantes, Mutantes! (Mutants, Mutants, Mutants!)

The second time that Ramón thus invokes the solidarity of his group, though, he is already planning to defraud them of the ransom and therefore uses their politicized consciousness as a weapon against them. As with Patricia's misplaced sympathy for Ramón, then, group action is depicted here as collective self-deception. Ramón pronounces his true ethos only after he has disposed of his mutant crew and just before the spaceship crashes into Axturias: "¿Qué era cuando me parió mi madre? El número uno, el mejor. ¿Quién me hizo lo que soy? Yo mismo sin ayuda de nadie. ¿Qué es lo que soy? ¡El puto amo!" ["Who was I when my mother gave birth to me? Number one, the best. Who made me what I am? I did, without anyone's help. Who am I? The Fucking Boss!"]. It turns out that Ramón's allegiances are motivated by self-interest and not political solidarity, for when he arrives at the Lost Mine Bar, we discover that his co-conspirator in the kidnapping is the able-bodied García. Ultimately, then, *Acción mutante* asks its audience to align itself with a Machiavellian individualism and a distrust of, and skepticism towards, organized political action. By making its heroes (like the

eccentric heroes of all de la Iglesia's films) marginal and disfigured, though, it refuses the humanism under whose cover individualism usually travels. While the socialist government of post-Franco Spain was intent on "cleaning up the image" (*lavarle la cara*) of the nation, *Acción mutante*, steeped in the *desencanto*, resists any such temptation.

### Notes:

1. All the films which bear the directorial signature "Álex de la Iglesia" are the product of a team consisting of de la Iglesia (co-scriptwriter and director), co-scriptwriter Jorge Guerricaechevarría, and artistic directors Arturo García "Biaffra" and José Luis Arrizabalaga.
2. Unpublished interview with Álex de la Iglesia. (March, 2000)
3. Since *Acción mutante* there is at least one further instance of Spanish SF-comedy in *El milagro de P. Tinto* (Javier Fesser, 1998).
4. See, for instance, <http://members.tripod.com/~discapacitados/barreras.htm>

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Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar, 1993, FR-SP)

*El amor perjudica seriamente la salud* (Manuel Gómez Pereira, 1997, SP)

*¡Ay Carmela!* (Carlos Saura, 1990, SP)

*Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1991, US)

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*Dark Star* (John Carpenter, 1974, US)

*Después del sueño* (Mario Camus, 1992, SP)

*La guerra de papa* (Antonio Mercero, 1977, SP)

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*Kika* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1992, FR-SP)

*El milagro de P. Tinto* (Javier Fesser, 1998, SP)

*Los otros* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001, US-SP)

*Sleeper* (Woody Allen, 1973, US)

*Spaceballs* (Mel Brooks, 1987, US)

*El Sur* (Víctor Erice, 1983, SP)

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