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Leora Lev

Bridgewater State College, l1lev@bridgew.edu

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CULTURAL COMMENTARY: MILLENARIAN VISIONS IN SPANISH CINEMA

BY LEORA LEV

What will the new millennium bring humankind? Will we know ourselves and our “others” better and more humanely than we now do? Will kaleidoscopically shifting technologies provide virtual worlds in which to experience multiple versions of ourselves? Do we have a consciousness, a soul, that are separate from our physical selves, and that might be freed by cryogenics or virtual space even as the body (or “meat”) decays? Would this be desirable? Will we be able to alter whichever mysterious interplay of chance and destiny shapes our life stories and thus exert more control over our dénouements? Will media-filtered, Western consumer obsession with surfaces, celebrities, and image(s) cede to renewed interest in the existential, spiritual, and psycho-emotional complexities of real-life human beings? Will there be an apocalypse?

Amidst the barrage of media journeys into these realms is a series of Spanish films that innovatively imbue these questions with an explicit or implicit *fin de millennium* urgency. These films eschew the simplistic pablum too often proffered by corporate Hollywood media machines.

In young Spanish director Alejandro Abenamar’s darkly dreamlike *Open Your Eyes* (*Abre los ojos*, 1997), César



(Eduardo Noriega) is the man who has everything. A gorgeous, wealthy twenty-something playboy, he tools about Madrid in his sports car and throws parties in his ultra-chic

pad. However, at a fateful party he pursues Sofia (Penélope Cruz), the lovely girlfriend of his soulful buddy Pelayo (Fele Martínez), enacting the wrongdoing allegorized in the biblical injunction against “the rich man stealing the poor man’s ewe.” César also spurns Nuria (Najwa Nimri), one of the many women whom he has romanced and discarded.

But Nuria literally proves to be a femme fatale; when César accepts a ride home, she drives them both off the side of the road, metaphorically signaling the narrative’s shift into a nightmarish roller coaster that switches precipitously between different psychic registers. César awakens in an institution for the criminally insane, accused of murder, his face now hideously disfigured.

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The question of how he got from “there” to “here” is one, of course, that we might all well ask ourselves, albeit less dramatically, at many junctures. Rich, glamorous swinger, or mad, scarred assassin – which is the illusion, which the reality? To complicate matters, César repeatedly dreams of a televised spokesperson for cryogenics and the letters “ELI,” giving a new twist to questions posed by such films as *The Matrix* (1998, starring Keanu Reeves).

Through these confusing challenges to our understanding of being and knowing, Abenamar meditates

non-didactically, and in ethically and philosophically interesting ways, upon César's predicament. The scarlet-clad, seductive Nuria is allied with the dark forces, and the insouciant César is clearly being punished for his traitorous, Don Juan-of-the '90's ways. When César does return to his life outside the asylum (sans fabulous looks), he labors



toward redemption and a possible winning back of Pelayo's friendship and Sofia's love. Shots of the masked César in trendy nightspots dancing alone point to the lethal obsession with surface that haunts our *fin de millenium* psyches, the dehumanizing focus on image and exterior packaging rather than our interior make-up. And when César and his empathetic psychiatrist Antonio (Chete Lera) discover a cryogenics institute with the acronym ELL, which is a transcription of the Hebrew for "my God," the film examines the metaphysics of future technologies: what if a client had the ability to freeze not only her body but her happiest dreams and memories, but something went awry, and she opened her eyes instead to a world of her worst nightmares? And has this happened to César?

The film links these gripping questions back to the thinking of the great Golden Age Spanish playwright Calderón de la Barca in his masterpiece *Life is a Dream* (*La vida es sueño*, 1665), whose protagonist Segismundo, a philosophical forebear of César, muses: "Life is a dream, and dreams are dreams as well" ("La vida es sueño, y los sueños sueños son"). Far from being able to shape our destiny as we would wish, we may not even be able to distinguish our waking lives from dream states or chimeric projections. But whether it's

all a dream or not, we must still try to navigate, to borrow again from Calderón, some sort of conscious and conscience-driven vessel through the ocean of existence.

A similar if less gothic blend of millennial metaphysics and magic fuels the English-language, Spanish-directed film *Twice Upon a Yesterday* (Maria Ripoll, 1999). Set in the colorful London neighborhood of Notting Hill, the film presents the predicament of Victor (Douglas Henshall), a self-absorbed actor, and his ex-girlfriend Sylvia (Lena Headley). Victor has lost Sylvia because of his egotism and his fling with an actress; he realizes too late, as Sylvia prepares to marry an engineer, Dave (Mark Strong), the enormity of his error in risking an enduring love for a shallow infatuation.

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Or is it too late? Drunk, despairing, and drenched in rain, Victor is spirited off by two improbably elegant garbage collectors (Eusebio Lázaro and Gustavo Salmerón) to the depository of the city's detritus, a metaphorical heap of all the precious objects that anyone has ever mistakenly thrown away. As the two mystical men allude to the dilemma of would-be knight-errant Don Quijote de la Mancha and his always-elusive love Dulcinea, Golden Age Spanish literature once again works its magic. Victor finds himself in the midst of the carnivalesque Notting Hill parade, back to the time before his fatal relationship misstep. Ecstatic with this opportunity for a second chance, Victor regales Sylvia with love and devotion.

Will this alternate destiny prove happier? Alas, Sylvia's meeting of Dave in a new context, with sparks aplenty between them as Victor observes in anguish, does not bode well. The film's exploration of the multiple paths that our lives could take, and the limitations of our control over our life narratives, is consonant with issues raised in the winsome, albeit less profound, *Sliding Doors* (1998, starring Gwyneth Paltrow). Noteworthy in this context as well is Julio Medem's stunning *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* (*Los amantes del Círculo Polar*, Spain, 1999), which also charts the intertwined topographies of haphazard coincidence and destiny in the lives of its two lovers. The poignant parting words of Don Quijote, "one can never find this year's birds in the nests of yesteryear" ("ya en los nidos de antaño no hay pájaros hogaño"), a verbal leitmotif of *Twice Upon a Yesterday*, suggests that sometimes it is too late to go back, that certain losses are irrevocable. Nonetheless, the film's final note is redemptive, an intimation of new beginnings despite past failures.

For a final stop on this cinematic tour, millennial questions take a campy horrific turn in Alex de la Iglesia's *Day of the Beast* (*El día de la bestia*, 1995). In this dark satire with shades of Buñuel, John Waters, and Sam Raimi, a Spanish priest teams up with a pierced, long-haired heavy-metal aficionado and a phony TV psychic to save humankind from the Antichrist. The Apocalypse may be imminent, but meanwhile Madrid will celebrate with satanic metal bacchanals, roving arsonist gangs, psychic TV "friends," vainglorious, hate-mongering televangelists, and holiday shopping orgies. Is the Beast about to be born, or is he already here?

Leora Lev is Assistant Professor of Foreign Languages.