

Representation and the cultural politics of aging in *Justino, un asesino de la tercera edad* (La Cuadrilla, 1994)

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Abstract

Challenging the presumed bankruptcy popularly ascribed to horror and its parodic offshoots vis-à-vis matters of social consciousness, La Cuadrilla's low-budget, Goya-winning Justino, un asesino de la tercera edad/Justino: A Senior Citizen Killer (1994), foregrounds the issue of aged-based, forced retirement at a time when youthful exploits and images dominate much of mainstream Spanish cinema. The film ideographically links imposed retirement to the surrendering of adulthood – and of life itself, thus forging a discourse that places this quirky comedy in conversation with an emerging body of social theory on aging (precisely as demographic studies signal unprecedented growth in Spain's senior-citizen population). At the level of representation, Justino's 'deadly' performance of resistance flips onto its head a deep-seated element of victimhood that has often characterized on-screen senior identity. The peculiarities of the protagonist's subject position raise, in an otherwise light spoof on the slasher genre, some unexpectedly heavy questions concerning the politics of age and generation in early 1990s' Spain.

Keywords

representation
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Framed within the unlikely context of a low-budget, murder-infused, black comedy conceptualized by its creators as '[una] fantasía sociológica' ['(a) sociological fantasy'] (La Cuadrilla 2004), Santiago Aguilar and Luis Guridi's cinematic take on senior-citizen marginalization in early 1990s' Spain, *Justino, un asesino de la tercera edad/Justino: A Senior Citizen Killer* (1994), offers a brand of filmic impact as provocative as it is idiosyncratic. This quirky, black-and-white winner of the 1995 Goya for best directorial debut features a narrative set in motion by the forced retirement of an unassuming *puntillero* at age 62. This pitiable, though farcically screened, *coup de grace* is summarily carried out against the visual backdrop of a nostalgically rendered Madrid. As imaged by La Cuadrilla, the contemporary cityscape, like the bullfighting profession itself, is conspicuously out of step with glossy images of a newly progressive Spain promulgated as part and parcel of a 1992 national makeover (with the Olympic Games in Barcelona, the Expo in Sevilla and Madrid's designation as Cultural Capital of the European Union). At first glance, such a dynamic would seem to reinforce

broader impressions of the swift and sudden passing of an era. Yet, the expediency of such a passing is drawn into question in this unusual film. With dagger in hand, its aging protagonist fails to go ever so gently into that good night, mounting a symbolically imaged campaign of dissent against the tyranny of youth, a force whose presence in the cultural climate of early 1990s' Spain, though often alluded to by critics, is rarely broached by cinema of the period as imaginatively and forthrightly as within this particular movie.

Much as *Justino* places one foot in the past and another in the contemporary moment, it also straddles traditionally disparate categories of genre in an overtly playful manner. As if challenging the presumed bankruptcy popularly ascribed to horror and its parodic offshoots *vis-à-vis* the treatment of social issues, *Justino* foregrounds a discourse on aging at a time when more youthful exploits and concerns (perhaps most notably in the guise of cinema created by, or attuned to, the reality of the so-called *Generación X*) dominate the imagery and narrative scope of much mainstream Spanish film. The screening of social issues in Spain has long tended to favour straightforward melodrama and the tried-and-true, even sober, aesthetic sensibilities of realism. To date, it is largely *Justino*'s gestures towards overt stylization, as opposed to social concern that have garnered sustained attention among academic critics. This has been mainly as a function of the film's tongue-in-cheek references to Berlanga, Ferreri and Fernán Gómez's *esperpento* – infused black comedies of the 1950s (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas 1998: 79), its knowing conversation with the cult of the American slasher film (Triana-Toribio 2003: 174) or its ties to a strain of comedic dirty realism cultivated around the same time by the likes of directors Álex de la Iglesia and Santiago Segura (Allinson 2000: 272).

Scant critical attention, however, has been directed towards the film's vibrant interplay with the forms and aims of contemporary Spanish social-issue cinema. While at times overlooked in scholarly circles more inclined towards formalism, social cinema is a genre whose cultural currency has been undeniably on the rise in Spain since the 1990s, perhaps most notably under the stewardship of Icíar Bollaín (*Flores de otro mundo*, *Te doy mis ojos*), Fernando León de Aranoa (*Barrio*, *Los lunes al sol*, *Princesas*), Archerio Mañas (*El Bola*) and a host of other directors whose work has deftly negotiated critical success amidst both robust box office sales and widespread attention in the popular media. During this same period, international scholarship on horror and slasher films has itself also ventured beyond familiar theoretical terrains. Breaking out of the confines of a long-standing attraction to Freudian approaches, critics of horror have increasingly opted to stress aspects of social and geopolitical allegory (Worland 2007: 3), criminological takes on the sociological causes of crime (Rafter 2000: 47), critiques of police and other 'authorities' (Jenkins 1994: 135–36), postmodern questions revolving around the very notion of solvability itself (Tudor 2002: 109) and the sociology of spectatorship. This

essay follows most clearly in the critical direction signalled by Worland. It positions filmic interpretation within a cultural studies framework whose attentiveness to the imaging of a marginalized subject prioritizes social over psychoanalytic theory. Such an approach seeks to diversify an important discourse in Spanish cinema studies, namely, the deconstruction of cinematic subjectivities grounded in a politics of dissent. This is an area of criticism that has long gravitated towards a kind of Almodóvar-inspired state of the art – one characterized, in large part, by ‘eroticized’ conceptions of marginality (Kinder 1993: 432).

Aguilar and Guridi’s film traverses a social periphery defined in alternative terms. In linking aged-based, imposed retirement ideographically to a condition in which adulthood is effectively surrendered (and even put to death), the modes of representation drawn on by the directors serve to place their ostensibly ‘light’ horror – comedy in surprisingly ‘heavy’ discursive territory. As a cultural text, *Justino* participates both explicitly (through the content of dialogue) and figuratively (by means of the symbolic) in a conversation with an emerging body of theory on the social construction of advanced age. This constitutes an area of interdisciplinary inquiry whose ramifications *vis-à-vis* contemporary Spain, while yet to coalesce as a privileged discourse among Hispanists, are deserving of closer scrutiny. Indeed, recent growth in the senior sector of the Spanish population is radical and fundamentally unprecedented from both a national and international perspective.

This phenomenon of an aging Spanish populace is demonstrably tied to the specific conditions of genesis which give rise to the production of the film at hand. Working under the artistic name ‘La Cuadrilla’, film-makers Aguilar and Guridi received a grant from the Spanish Ministry of Culture in 1993 to fund the development of the screenplay that ultimately became *Justino* (Anon. 2008).¹ Appropriately enough, the year in question is officially designated by the European Commission as the ‘Year of Older People and Solidarity between the Generations’ (Walker and Maltby 1997: 1).

Justino’s forced exit from employment can be seen as hurling him towards what Simone de Beauvoir has called the ‘scrap heap’ of senescence (Beauvoir 1972: 263), an advanced stage of life marked by disregard and virtual invisibility in cinematic and other media representations. Yet, the contemporary West is a milieu in which younger members of society also consign aging subjects to out-of-the-way spaces in more hands-on ways, particularly as power becomes consolidated in their own generational hands. This removal is effected in the concrete sense, as with nursing homes and retirement communities. But it is also a phenomenon set in motion through structural means, as with the incentivized exodus of chronologically – aged, though healthy and vibrant, workers out of the labour force. Retirement is marketed to individuals and mythologized not as a departure, but as an attractively – branded entry into ‘second childhood’.

For *Justino*, re-entry into such an ‘infantilized’ space spells the virtual death of adulthood. There is a clear linkage between imposed retirement

1 La Cuadrilla, a name referring to the group of assistants who aid the bullfighter during the *corrida*, have collaborated since 1979. Their productions include a series of comic shorts: *Cupido se enamora* (1984), *Un gobernador huracanado* (1985), *Tarta – Tarta Hey* (1987) and *La hija del Fu-Manchú ‘72* (1990) (Caparrós Lera 1999: 54). In addition to taking home the Goya award for best directorial debut, Guridi and Aguilar’s *Justino* won best picture at the International Festival of Stiges (Catalonia), as well as best script at the Festival de Cine de Alcalá de Henares, the Festival de Cine de Humor de Peñíscola and the Premios del Círculo de Escritores Cinematográficos (Cinema Writers Circle Awards) in Madrid.

- 2 José Carlos Mac's score punctuates each of the splices between these alternating shots with a shift in the tone: musical 'cuts' that reinforce the butchers' own on-screen incisions. A sombre, drawn-out single note on synthesizer accompanies each credit shot, thus contrasting with the playful melodic allusions to comic-horror set over the slaughterhouse images.
- 3 Drawing on Stephen King's character Carrie, Clover analyzes the 'victim-hero (the hero part always understood as implying some degree of monstrosity)' from a feminist perspective. Specifically, she sees feminism as giving 'a language' and 'new force to the anger that subsidizes' this filmic character's 'horrific revenge' (Clover 1992: 4). As work by Beauvoir and Friedan shows, social theory on elderly marginality similarly builds on a foundation of feminism.

and death itself in La Cuadrilla's filmic fusion. As the movie commences, the viewer is immediately confronted with a pair of inaugural killings. Here the victims are hardly the stuff of conventional serial-killer horror. One is a bull, while the other, allegorically speaking, is a bullring employee's career. 'Termination', of course, is rarely a straightforward affair at the *plaza de toros*, where the matador and the sundry members of his team of assistants drive the bull through the ritualized stages of a prolonged exercise in sacrifice. Suitably, then, like the spectacle of a bullfight itself, management's tossing aside of Justino as an aging *puntillero* here assumes a drawn-out, ceremonial quality. The film cuts from an introductory title screen, in which the central 't' of Justino's name is transcribed as the blade of a dagger, to production credits projected over a surface whose flesh – like texture (perhaps human, perhaps bovine) is accentuated by low-key lighting. Each individual credit title (to producer, script writer, music editor and so forth) alternates at a one-to-one ratio with intercut shots of a pair of workers shown sharpening a set of bladed tools. As José Carlos Mac's whimsical musical score drowns out their everyday chatter (conversation seemingly indifferent to the bloody work at hand), these figures butcher a bull from that day's event. The latter task is performed robustly and with steely precision, most notably in a close-up highlighting their workman-like removal of the bull's horns, that most iconic symbol of the beast's autonomy and defiance.²

Such visceral images denoting disempowerment, dismemberment and disembowelment of a genuinely mortal variety are filmed within the setting of the bullring slaughterhouse. As a site of death that conventionally goes unseen by the general public, this locale shares the trait of invisibility with working-class retirement and senescence themselves, not to mention with the marginalized status of much subject matter brought into the light of day by social-issue cinema. The montage depicting the fate of the bull functions as a preamble to the spectator's first encounter with Justino. To borrow a useful term from cinematic horror scholar Carol Clover, La Cuadrilla's senior-citizen protagonist is configured from the outset as a kind of 'victim – hero' (Clover 1992: 4), a personage whose personal experience with abuse (here, age discrimination and social dislocation) gives way to retribution in a deadly, though, in stylistic terms, risibly absurd expression of cultural dissent.³ Early in the film, it is the victimhood component of this dialectical subjectivity that La Cuadrilla, as well as actor Saturnino García (in his Goya – winning debut lead role at age 59), play up most conspicuously. Cutting from a shot which features the bull's carcass dangling from a hook on the ceiling, the film positions the retiring *puntillero* in an analogous situation connoting death. The scene in question portrays Justino's own final stand in the bullring, a public retirement ceremony during which his career of 30 years takes its last gasp of air, succumbing to the stranglehold of a golden handshake before a crowd of anonymous onlookers.

This golden handshake is forged in a kind of fool's gold. As several scenes of La Cuadrilla's film highlight, the economic distress of the forced

retiree's condition is such that even modest, arguably clichéd dreams (Justino's plans, for example, to spend a winter holiday in the fabled, working-class 'wonderland' of Benidorm with his chum Sansoncito [Carlos Lucas]) become all but a pie-in-the-sky fantasy.⁴ As with the multitudes of workers at, or just beyond, the threshold of aged-based separation from employment, a modern mythology of retirement unravels before the protagonist's eyes, and what emerges is a distressing untruth:

Society inflicts so wretched a standard of living upon [. . .] old people that it is almost tautological to say 'old and poor' [. . .] [J]ust when [the retiree] is [. . .] set free from [. . .] restraint, the means of making use of his liberty are taken from him. He is condemned to stagnate in boredom and loneliness, a mere throw-out. (Beauvoir 1972: 6)

Adding insult to injury is the veritable *via crucis* that typifies formal separation from employment. Before serving out retirement as a kind of punitive sentence, what Friedan goes so far as to call a 'a living death' (Friedan 1993: 201), the retiree must often endure the rite of passage that is termination itself. La Cuadrilla's representation of Justino's experience in this regard is telltale at the level of the symbolic. The scene foregrounds a wooden case presented to Justino by his employer at the centre of the bullring. The camera focuses in tightly on a commemorative dagger laid out within the box on a small bed of satin-like material. Such a pose evocatively calls to mind the image of a corpse lying in state. This unmistakable visual synecdoche signals the death of the protagonist's career with the knife (although Justino later puts this same weapon to more 'practical' use in a series of bloody crimes, showing how old work habits tend to die hard). Moreover, the wooden case's interior cover features a bronze plaque engraved, as if a tombstone memorializing Justino's career, with the start and end dates (1965–94) of this faithful company man's tenure. With respect to historical context, the period in question is equally split between late Francoism and the years of PSOE majority rule: both sources, in their respective ways, of discontent among younger generations of Spaniards whose own 1990s' cultural imaginary seems inclined towards 'burying' the past.

The staged gratitude of the ceremony decorates forced retirement much as the spectacle of the bullfight decorates death. In its wake, as with the bull before him, the protagonist is packed off to a site that ordinarily goes unseen, a shadowy locker room beneath the *plaza de toros* grandstand. In this setting, as with the meat locker before it, a ritual of termination is rendered complete. The finality of the moment is conveyed through the vehicle of black-humour innuendo linking retirement to a dark promise of imminent demise. Ramón, the arrogant son and heir apparent to Justino's hospitalized, elderly supervisor (himself a marginalized figure who never appears on-screen), coerces from his aging employee a hasty signature on a contractual separation agreement. This document is loaded with lopsided terms which the *puntillero's* son, Carlos, later cites as material evidence

4 According to Walker and Maltby, 54% of the public in Spain believe having insufficient financial resources is the most serious problem facing senior citizens in their country – the third-highest proportion of nation-specific respondents in the European Union to hold this opinion (only Portugal, at 72%, and the United Kingdom, at 66%, report higher percentages in this regard) (Walker and Maltby 1997: 54).

5 One internet reviewer notes that this 'beautifully photographed [. . .] production [. . .] was shot in 16 mm and later transferred to 35 mm, bringing a cozy graininess to the screen' (Goodman 1995).

of his father's encroaching senility. In a kind of last-rites offering whose rhetoric draws on scores of cinematic, and especially silent-era, representations of execution by firing squad, Ramón the middle-aged manager dispenses a final cigar to the protagonist, remarking with a cold, haughty smirk that 'a todos nos llega nuestra hora'.

The *double entendre* is hardly lost on Justino, who openly laments that this adage should apply to both retirement and funerals. Such an observation drolly foreshadows his own campaign of murder, a project whose irrepressibility ultimately points to the impossibility, even the folly, of Transition-era attempts to bury Spain's past along with its protagonists.

As Justino lumbers out the arena's rear door into an alleyway, a move recalling Beauvoir's allusions to senior citizens' relegation to the rubbish bin, a long shot dwarfs his figure and a do-not-enter sign posted nearby denotes his figurative removal to a point-of-no-return. This back-door exit is the ironic flip-side to the gallant entrances staged in the world of bullfighting by matadors (La Cuadrilla 2004). Having served an entire career away from centre stage in the modest bullfighting role of *puntillero*, Justino exits to a retirement subject position which, in view of its guarantee of invisibility and economic mediocrity, is analogously marginal in nature. Despite the film's culturally hegemonic theme of bullfighting, the spectator is ironically confronted with what Triana-Toribio aptly calls a 'second-row Spanish' character (Triana-Toribio 2003: 154), an agent who conducts the film towards peripheral social terrains. This back alley serves as Justino's conduit into the full complexities of senescent reality. In terms of *mise en scène*, the passageway is screened as both desolate and sunny, with La Cuadrilla's chiaroscuro lensing here offering dramatic contrasts between a patchwork of bright and dark values.⁵ If the brightness of the sunlight representationally suggests the promise of new freedom surrounding the mythology of retirement, then the shadowy desolation of the alley calls to mind a much grimmer reality, that of a life stage threatened by what Friedan describes as forced retirement's self-fulfilling prophecy of disengagement and decline (Friedan 1993: 195), a state of affairs in which 'illness and disability', effects, as opposed to causes, of retirement, establish themselves as the defining features of the aging individual's identity (Minkler 1981, quoted in Friedan 1993: 203).

As deviations from middle-aged, able-bodied normalcy, illness and disability serve as markers delineating the space of old age, a life-cycle stage Justino quixotically rejects even in those scenes seemingly removed from the main narrative thread of the movie. For instance, in one of several absurdist, non-sequitur interludes dividing the main episodes of the movie, he pushes an elderly man in a wheelchair off the sidewalk and out of the frame of the film. This intertextual wink clearly invokes Marco Ferreri's *El cochecito* (1960), a farcical comedy whose own retired protagonist hopes to buy a motorized wheelchair as a means of finding 'companionship' with others of his age and category, all of whom use the vehicle to escape the oppressive confines of home and family (D'Lugo 1997: 46). Although La Cuadrilla

knowingly draw on Ferreri's film, whose desperate antihero poisons his family and takes their money to buy his coveted wheelchair, Justino brazenly rejects any notions of retreat into peer-based solidarity. This is especially evident in his equal-opportunity selection of victims, who in the end include a disquieting number of aged persons. Indeed, these latter figures seem chosen precisely as a consequence of their very complicity with the segregated, subordinate subject positions ascribed to them by family and society.

Cultural critics concerned with representations of aging have increasingly analysed the 'third age' in ways comparable to those derived from gender, sexuality, race, class and disability (Deats and Lenker 1999: 10). Nevertheless, Featherstone and Wernick advise against 'pushing the parallel between ageism and other "isms" too far' (Featherstone and Wernick 1995: 8). Old age, after all, stands distinctively apart from other categories of social marginalization in view of its distinctive potential for universality, that is, its all-inclusive eligibility as a pejoratively construed, bittersweet Other into which dramatically more individuals than ever will eventually morph. This 'haunting possibility' (Featherstone and Wernick 1995: 8), facilitated by modern medicine, is realistically available to all persons at some point in their lives, but can be seen as most pressingly acute for those at the chronological pinnacle of adulthood: the middle-aged, those for whom senescence comes to represent a dreaded final condition ever closer at hand.

Old age as a construct 'varies according to the era and the place' (Beauvoir 1972: 2), and is capable of creating tension between socially imposed 'prescriptive behaviours' linked to chronological age and practices deemed to be in keeping with one's 'own self-image'. This latter image, moreover, is 'often at variance with all other markers of age' (Deats and Lenker 1999: 9). Unlike the 'identification crisis' experienced by adolescents moving into adulthood, a transition in which the body itself announces change through puberty, with the onset of senescence, '[t]he aged person comes to feel that he is old by means of others,' a scenario under which the 'inner being does not accept the label [. . .] stuck to him' (Beauvoir 1972: 291). In Spain, as in much of the contemporary West, there can be little doubt that coerced retirement pins a definitive label of senescence onto the individual completely and irrevocably. Society's application of this label projects onto the retiree a *de facto* set of expectations, many of which are bolstered by essentialist cinematic and media representations of aging persons and the life phase of retirement. For example, that society's elders should exhibit serenity has been promulgated, as inseparable from senescent normalcy (Beauvoir 1972: 4). If the aged defy such a standard by indulging in 'the same desires' and 'feelings [. . .] as the young', they are viewed 'with disgust', as if 'revolting' deviations from virtue. (Beauvoir 1972: 3). Given the horror-infused mode of representation here at play, they are seen as *monsters*.

In this sense, La Cuadrilla's construction of an aging Justino within the context of horror could not be more appropriate. With respect to the dynamics of cinematic spectatorship, the monster is a spectacle filmgoers long both to see and *not to see*, a figure who emits a dual charge of both attraction and

repulsion, 'equal parts repulsive and compelling' (Worland 2007: 120). This push-pull current mirrors society's own relationship with advanced age itself. Indeed, despite its own widespread, even fetish-like, obsession with the attainment of longevity, contemporary Western culture has at the same time forged an 'untouchable image' of the aged from which 'we understandably avert our eyes', a 'terrible reality' characterized by 'sick' and 'dehumanized' personages whom familial and medical authorities round up and 'institutionalize' in hospitals, nursing homes and assisted care facilities (Friedan 1993: 50). The cinematic serial killer fits a strikingly similar mould. Audiences flock to horror movies wholly expecting and desiring, as Worland proposes, a monstrous character who will impel them, rather paradoxically, to 'avert' their eyes from the screen (Worland 2007: 1). The viewer, at once appalled, is also drawn to the slasher's deviant acts and threats to the dominion of reason. Much in the same way, she longs to see her own golden years in spite of the dread and unease produced by the spectre of senescent dementia, or by countless other assaults on youthful 'normalcy' embodied by elderly persons. *La Cuadrilla's* conflation of aging retiree and murderous madman thus artfully enlists horror-based audience expectations as it taps into an often unspoken set of anxieties society holds with respect to the disturbing nature of the senescence. Old age, in short, is a life-cycle stage we all aspire to see, but it is also a reality we profoundly fear.

For its part, the satirical component of *La Cuadrilla's* horror-comedy formula serves to bait the spectator's critical consciousness towards a heightened brand of awareness. Once activated, this perceptive sensitivity is susceptible to spilling over from purely filmic concerns (the movie's stylistic indebtedness to a Spanish esperpento-inspired tradition, or its alignment with the 'dysfunctional' and 'perverted underworld[s]' a critic like Rafter sees as inseparable from absurdist crime movies [Rafter 2000: 40]), to the intricacies of contemporary social discourse. In *Justino*, these involve the construction of social aging in a nation whose own conceptions of collective identity remain suspended between strong associations with both the old and the new. Returning to the film's underpinnings in the slasher cycle, *La Cuadrilla's* placement of one foot in the horror genre has the effect of zooming the spectator's attention in on the centrality of the movie's iconic main figure. After all, the monster, the slasher, the source of dread or, as Worland puts it, the 'thing,' is that main attraction 'the audience comes to see' (Worland 2007: 9). This 'thing' is at the core of the horror spectacle, especially when it comes to the slasher subgenre. It is the villain's name that appears in lights on the cinema marquee. Indeed, even in those cases in which this is not explicitly the case, audiences and the press are prone to re-christening films with the names of their protagonists in popular parlance. Producers in the sequel business eventually catch on to this trend, regularly labelling additional instalments in successful slasher franchises with titles that remind us precisely whom we can expect to fear: *Nightmare on Elm Street* becomes *Freddy's Revenge*, *Silence of the Lambs* leads to *Hannibal* and so forth.

This placement of the serial killer in a space *apart* also parallels the exceptional condition of the aged. Cultural images banish the senior citizen to a subject position where he or she, in Beauvoir's words, 'stand[s] outside humanity' (Beauvoir 1972: 4). This can take more readily pejorative forms, such as concealment and exclusion, but it is also manifest in certain more positive idealizations of old age, as with classical and Biblical archetypes involving senescent wisdom, moral strength and steadfastness. In contemporary terms, outsider status is most commonly conferred by a culture that equates retirement and senescence with second childhood, a situation denying seniors their 'adult personhood' as shaped over a lifetime of 'risk, pain, joy' (Friedan 1993: 58). Hockey and James see the linkage of 'old age with childhood' as a structural mechanism that helps to sustain an 'unchallenged,' systemic 'hegemony of [middle-aged] adulthood' (Hockey and James 1995: 138). Those who stand next in line, the middle-aged, thereby remain psychologically shielded from the ever-approaching terror of old age. In Friedan's view, the marking of those beyond an arbitrarily defined chronological age as a vulnerable and dependent group allows one constructed Other – seniors, the elderly, the aged – to absorb *gerontophobic* anxieties bubbling up among those who would follow in their footsteps (Friedan 1993: 40).⁶

As *La Cuadrilla's* filmic narrative inserts Justino more fully into the space of retirement, senescence as second childhood emerges as a key motif of the film. The topsy-turvy dialectical nature of such a scenario, akin to the film's own formal fluctuation between the poles of comedy and horror, is perhaps most evident in a scene in which the protagonist returns home from his retirement ceremony to what is ostensibly a surprise party. The gathering, much to Justino's chagrin, turns out to be a reception for his son's visiting Finnish business clients. In an instance of inverted paternalism, Carlos orders his father to make himself scarce for the evening. A demoralized Justino acquiesces to his son's authority, 'retiring' to a tiny bedroom whose *mise en scène* comically infantilizes this unseated head of the family. The bedroom furniture's child-appropriate size, its wallpaper featuring Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes* cartoons, a dinosaur figurine on the nightstand – all are visual cues highlighting Justino's removal to a childlike space. In keeping with this absurdly imaged inversion of generational power within the family, the room in question once housed Carlos as a boy. Within this space, the camera pans past a photograph of the protagonist's widow, past a family portrait from a time prior to her death (in which a middle-aged Justino as patriarch dwarfs his son) and the viewer briefly sees a now-useless *traje de luces* hung in the corner: all markers of an adulthood surrendered.

As Carlos notes when reading his father's retirement papers, the latter's new station in life implies 'una rendición sin condiciones' ['an unconditional surrender'], one consigning him to what Friedan might call 'the unadulterated horror of second childhood' (Friedan 1993: 56), a life-cycle phase in which family members and society at large beseech seniors 'to go to bed

6 Friedan correlates this sheltering of the aged by the middle-aged to the safeguarded, clearly subordinate space occupied by women prior to the advances of feminism (Friedan 1993: 26).

meekly, like good children' (Friedan 1993: 58). As if in harmony with this latter metaphor, daughter-in-law Ana embroiders Justino's name onto a pillow she presents to him as a retirement gift, a not-so-subtle hint that naps on a twin-sized bed beside the age-pejorative icon of the dinosaur figurine as a kind of anticipated norm. It is with great irony, then, that Justino suffocates his daughter-in-law with this very same gift pillow. This act sublimates the 'unadulterated horror' of imposed second childhood as violence, but it may also be seen as a moment whose own scripted deadpan humour adulterates any notions of the director's faithfulness to clear-cut horror.

The transparent content of dialogue itself also serves in a number of scenes to place *Justino* in discursive contact with a conversation on advanced age in Spain. In one instance, the secondary character Cova, a social worker who checks in on Justino after an alcoholic bender, speaks articulately about gerontological issues in a series of personally affirmative interventions with the protagonist. At the level of language itself, such episodes have a public-service-announcement quality about them, a register which calls to mind the discrete topic at the heart of 1993 as European Year (indeed, seemingly as if to justify funding for the movie). La Cuadrilla positions Cova's interventions as counterpoints to the cartoonish insensitivity of Carlos and Ana. Still, a close examination of rhetorical undercurrents even in her own professional parlance points to a hobgoblin of gerontophobia lurking in contemporary Spanish society:

[U]stedes, nuestros mayores, se lo merecen todo. Algunos valoran negativamente el crecimiento de la población de la tercera edad [pero] tal crecimiento es consecuencia del incremento de esperanza de vida, debido a mejoras en la nutrición, cuidado de la salud y al control de enfermedades [. . .] No debería, [. . .] *crear tanta inquietud* un hecho que es consecuencia de factores altamente positivos. (Aguilar and Guridi 1996: 33, emphasis added)

[As our elders, you deserve so much. Some people view this growth in the population of the third age unfavourably, but such growth comes as a consequence of an increase in life expectancy – a result of improvements in nutrition, health maintenance, and disease control [. . .] This shouldn't [. . .] *create such anxiety*, as it's a consequence of highly positive trends.]

The anxiety to which Cova refers, society's apprehension before the rise of senescence in contemporary Spain, may be viewed against an extra-filmic backdrop of unprecedented shifts in national age demographics at the outset of the 1990s. Data reveal that Spain's senior population doubled in size between 1950 and 1995 (Fernández-Ballesteros 1997: 107). From 1950 to 1992, which include the prime years of Justino's working life, the life expectancy of Spanish men improved from the second-lowest among reporting European Union nations – at 59.8 years – to the fourth-highest level of any European Union member state, reaching an unprecedented level of 73.7 years (Walker and Maltby 1997: 15). In fact, by 1993 (the year during which *La Cuadrilla* wrote their script), approximately one in five Spaniards

(19.6% of the population) was over age 60, while younger generations' historically low fertility rate of 1.26 (within the E.U., higher only than Italy's figure of 1.22, and less than half of Spain's modern peak at 2.9 in 1970) – led to an astonishing demographic projection: namely, that before the close of the second decade of the new millennium, nearly one-third of all Spaniards will be senior citizens (Walker and Maltby 1997: 10, 14).

Given vast improvements in public health, as well as a shift in aging individuals' vision of age-appropriate roles, that fewer contemporary older persons are not following suit with respect to the behaviour models of preceding generations has become a truism of late in Spain and much of the cultural West. Agedness, as suggested above, is a relative construct like childhood or adolescence, both of which have been studied by social historians as 'inventions' of, or concepts largely modified by the values and ideologies of specific periods of history. The negotiation of late capitalism and postmodernism, at the heart of urban Spain's cultural reality of the 1980s and 1990s, proves no exception in this regard. According to aging studies scholar Harry Moody, the West's late twentieth-century movement towards post-industrial socio-economic paradigms involves undeniable modifications, or even a total revolution, in how the individual life course is experienced, perceived and imaged. This 'life course,' in his view, now entails 'an extension of the *norm of middle age* in two directions: downwards ([with] the "disappearance of childhood") and upwards ([into] the "third age")' (Moody 1993: XIX–XX, emphasis added).

The implications of a newly pervasive middle-aged worldview stretching across the age spectrum are difficult to ponder, whether we do so from an analytical standpoint or with ethical concerns in mind. With an eye towards the twin discourses of retirement and social aging central to the film under examination, it is intriguing to consider the intersection of such demographic trends with the global recession of the early to mid-1990s. Like a number of Spanish films that draw on disruptive effects of recent economic crises, *Justino* seems to tap into employment-related issues *vis-à-vis* a particular aged-based cohort. On the surface, this would appear to be none other than a rising cohort of 'youthful' seniors. Yet, in keeping with the 'intergenerational' focus the European Commission officially assigns to 1993, *Justino* can actually be seen as drawing on socio-economic tensions germane not just to the aged, nor simply to the 30-something age-group of the film's directors, but ultimately to all generations with a direct stake in the labour market.

This includes those around the middle-aged years, that segment of society most likely to suffer growing pains exacerbated by what has been called a contemporary 'Graybe Boom' (Wattenberg 2004: 115). By promising new conditions under which senior citizens will increasingly adopt more 'youthful' values and practices, the physiological and cultural extension of middle-aged adulthood beyond its industrial-era conclusion around age 60 carries with it the potential of shock within the labour market status quo. As aging workers stay in the labour force, the rise of younger employees in the ranks decelerates, as does a natural downwards

7 In Spain, most workers can retire and receive social security benefits at the age of 65. Early retirement exceptions exist for certain precarious professions, among which bullfighting is included. Though Spanish law stipulates that 'matadores de toros, rejoneadores, novilleros, banderilleros, picadores y toreros cómicos' qualify for retirement age at 55, the *puntillero* stands somehow apart from his colleagues, not categorized by the government as eligible for early retirement until 60 years of age (Anon. 2009).

8 A notable exception involves the vigilance of a similarly aged female neighbour, whose complaints regarding noise from a party – a threat to a senescent norm of dead silence – promptly induce Justino's wrath.

transfer of wealth. This basic axiom informs the logic of modern pension and social security programs, such as that of Spain, which seek to induce, and even stipulate by law, that employees hang up their boots at a defined age and leave the labour market for good (or, rather, for the collective good).⁷ Threats to this long-standing order, such as a healthier elderly population interested in a longer work life, an unprecedented surge in the elderly's proportional size or even aging persons' organization as a political force ready to combat aged-based retirement mandates may be seen as flashpoints in an under-acknowledged intergenerational conflict which La Cuadrilla's film creatively broaches. The implications of this emerging political response to the treatment of the aging with regard to the distribution of power and influence naturally supersede the realm of the purely economic, fanning out into all areas of the culture.

As a victim-hero in this conflict, and a relic of an era that refuses to be bygone, Justino seizes the opportunity of his imposed invisibility, making a mockery of society's blinders before his very viability as a murder suspect. Unlike many films built on crime and suspense, no main characters entertain so much as a fleeting thought that the aging *puntillero* has gone off his rocker.⁸ When Justino explains away the prolonged absence of his son and daughter-in-law to Cova, suggesting they are on a trip around the world (rather than packed away in his freezer), the social worker fails even to raise an eyebrow. After the protagonist chases away two knife-wielding teenagers who attempt to rob the purse of an older woman at a Metro station, a woman whom *Justino* himself then murders in cold blood, a succession of middle-aged passers-by curse the fleeing youths and ironically offer their condolences to him. Having murdered a drunkard who has called him 'Matusalem,' a biblically inspired byword for longevity, Justino confesses his crimes to a pair of bumbling police officers who take him to be an intoxicated vagrant. As a result of scoffing at his confession, they too can soon be counted among the protagonist's broad spectrum of victims. Similarly, the climax of the film draws its humour from the (pre-*Torrente*) ham-fisted antics of a squad of Spanish-style keystone cops who, after catching the protagonist literally red-handed, fail to single him out as the author of a murderous *magnum opus* committed at an assisted care facility where some dozen elderly residents lay dead.

The notion of senescent criminality as unthinkable is a culturally encoded truism. This is particularly the case as movies provide the inspiration for society's images of serious crime and hardened criminals through the narratives of robberies, swindles, assaults and murders at the hands of young, virile offenders. A wild card featuring anything akin to a serial killer with an identity premised on the basis of advanced age is an oddity within the standard deck of offenders held in the popular cinematic imagination. As Midwinter aptly notes, 'such is the strength of the association of older people with being victims of crime, that [. . .] incredulous smiles [greet] any attempt to discuss criminal activity by elderly people' (Midwinter 1990: 550). It is on the back of this very association that Aguilar and

Guridi fashion the conceit of a cold-blooded, senior-citizen killer, a premise that elicits a kind of blithe dismissal among the various representatives of the social order who diegetically come into contact with the protagonist.

In the end, it is this impulse towards *dismissal* itself that La Cuadrilla's 'sociological fantasy' places front and centre in their highly unconventional, though intricate and nationally relevant, social satire. Imaged as a powerful social force that impels and defines the construct of senescence at the level of the individual, dismissal defines the cultural moment and spirit *Justino* so mischievously critiques, namely, Spain in the wake of 'Spain's Year' (1992). Within this milieu, Spain and Spanishness are aggressively linked with youthfulness and a forward-looking agenda, while the past and its protagonists find themselves relegated to a space of momentary oblivion. La Cuadrilla's film counters the thrust of this discursive trend. The movie positions advanced-aged subjectivity within a pantheon of pluralism whose edification and expansion, whether with respect to gender, sexuality, region or a host of other identity categories are otherwise a hallmark of Spanish film-making during the 1990s' Transition years.

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