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Abstract

Review of Clara Guillén Marín. *Migrants in Contemporary Spanish Film*. Routledge, 2018.

Keywords

migrants, contemporary Spanish film

Clara Guillén Marín. *Migrants in Contemporary Spanish Film*. Routledge, 2018. 124 pp.

The focus of this volume is immigration, currently one of the most relevant topics of Spanish society. Clara Guillén Marín investigates the reality of immigration in Spain, supporting her research with the works of Isolina Ballesteros, Isabel Santaolalla, and Daniela Flesler, in addition to others on the cutting edge of defining the “new social reality” (Guillén Marín 1). She shows the impacts of immigration and the resultant changes to aspects of the Spanish economy, society, and culture. In her research, she includes six films: three documentaries and three fictional films. These six artifacts of culture, if you will, shine a light on a reality not often seen: the world through the eyes of a migrant. They expose the difference between those who reach “consensus” (the included) and those who remain in “dissensus” (the excluded). These terms, coined by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, are useful in understanding themes of exclusion and marginalization that are ever-present in immigration.

The book starts with a review of the documentary *En construcción* (2001), directed by José Luis Guerín. The documentary shows “the reconstruction of a luxury apartment complex building after the demolition of the previous old one” (11). Guillén Marín remarks on the importance of the heterogeneous society living in the neighborhood of El Raval in Barcelona. In this quarter of the city, there are people from all over the world. The film shows how the authorities hope to construct a homogeneous building for the middle class, in stark contrast to the people who actually live there. The author explains clearly the way the director of the documentary empowers the people who work at the construction site by giving them a voice, thus making them “active subjects of knowledge” (19) throughout the film. The condition of the workers easily associates them with the subaltern, as explained by Gayatri Spivak.

The second documentary analyzed in the book is *Extranjeras* (2002), directed by Helena Tabarna. One of the most relevant aspects of this chapter’s analysis is that we see through the eyes of heterogeneous female immigrants and how these women in Spain can be seen as “transmitters of their ethnic cultures and languages” (26). Our perspective is thus redefined, as we experience a life not known, yet ever extant and ubiquitous. However, as Guillén Marín explains in this chapter, the documentary lacks depth in its interviews and tries to represent a “more idyllic” (26) interpretation of the different women living in Spain by “project[ing] an image of Madrid as a multicultural city” (29). Although Guillén Marín perceives some superficiality throughout the documentary, the film is nevertheless a catalyst for inclusion.

The final documentary is *El otro lado... un acercamiento a Lavapiés* (2002), from Basil Ramsis, an Egyptian director. This film stands out for its

emphasis on politics. It portrays Spain as “a space that is both shared and contested at the same time” (47). A neighborhood in Madrid, Lavapiés, is shown panoramically, over the course of eight chapters, from its early Jewish demographics (prior to their expulsion in 1492) through to the present time. In examining the evolution of this urban neighborhood, Guillén Marín confirms that “identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming” (49). The director of the film successfully unites the different cultures through the musical score, which helps describe Lavapiés as, in the words of Homi Bhabha, a transitional space and interstitial location (58-59).

After the documentaries, the first movie that is discussed is *Flores de otro mundo* (1999), directed by Icíar Bollaín. It is an engaging film in which a house in a rural town is occupied by outsiders, all females. The town organizes a celebration “for prospective single women coming by bus from all across Spain” (65). Two arrivals, a Basque and a Cuban, are unable to adapt and decide to leave. Their departure is symbolic of their decision not to submit to the patriarchal society but to maintain their independence, as Guillén Marín states. The Caribbean arrivals are sexualized and described as a contrast to the Spaniards, especially the women of the province of Castile. The author illustrates the celebration of diversity in the movie and the union of heterosexual couples from across the world, analyzing the situation through the theories of Michel de Certeau. Guillén Marín shows how consensus overcomes dissensus (personified by the character of Patricia), and is clearly reflected at the end of the movie.

The second movie is *Retorno a Hansala* (2008), by Chus Gutiérrez. This film “tries to promote ethical values” (78) and puts together two nations: Spain and Morocco. Although we see the vision and perspective through the eyes of the Spanish protagonist, the movie attempts to make us sympathize with the Africans who come by way of the Strait of Gibraltar. The movie was filmed in Morocco, where the audience has the opportunity to see a very poor, small town in the Atlas Mountains. The solidarity and friendship that characterizes life in this small Moroccan village is seen by the Spanish protagonist, and it gives the inhabitants dignity. The protagonist engages in “a journey of self-knowledge” (84) where the director skillfully portrays the deeper reality of immigrants by showing us their homeland, their reasons for leaving behind their culture, their family, and their social networks.

The final movie is *Biutiful* (2010), by Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu. Guillén Marín analyzes the consequences of capitalism for both immigrants and locals in the city of Barcelona. In the film, Barcelona is depicted as a city in contrast with its “dominant image . . . as the modern model city” (96). The author beautifully makes an analogy between the illness of Uxbal, the protagonist, and the city per se. The metamorphosis of the beauty of Barcelona, as shown on touristic postcards, into a much uglier reality is reflected in the change of

orthography, “Beautiful” to “Biutiful,” which cleverly uses the Greek prefix for “two,” as in bifurcation. Guillén Marín further claims that the exclusion of people from society is a consequence of capitalism, where survival through hand-to-mouth existence and low-wage jobs needs to be criticized.

This is a compelling book, bringing us closer to the migrant experience and making us aware of the conditions of immigrants in both Spain’s public and private spheres. It is a realization of diversity through critical analyses of some of the most important theorists such Michel de Certeau, Douglas Massey, Gayatri Spivak, Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Rancière, among others. Through their theories, we are left more aware of the reality of migrants’ experience in Spain, a country so different from their many homelands. With *Migrants in Contemporary Spanish Films*, Guillén Marín shows how the identity of immigrants is fluid, how they struggle with the hegemonic structures of power, and how all these immigrants create a “disunited polysemy of voices” (110), which represent Spain at the present time.

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