Middlebrow cinema by women directors in the 1990s

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ABSTRACT
This article reviews cinema of the 1990s to argue that, besides the transformation of the industry through the shift from national to transnational funding structures, one of its most remarkable achievements was the rise of women directors, an achievement that is today all the sharper in focus as this rise was not sustained over the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The article reconsiders the dismantling of the Ley Miró in the period to suggest that the “Mirovian” films that this legislation funded in fact continued to be influential. It therefore proposes, against the popular thesis of 1990s novelty in Spanish cinema, that there was continuity between the 1980s and 1990s in the area of middlebrow films. Positing a flexible definition of this category of accessible, didactic cinema, which brings cultural prestige to viewers, it argues that middlebrow film was a particular strength of films by women in the period, as subsequent developments in Spanish film and TV confirm. Testing this hypothesis against three female-authored films, it argues for Azucena Rodríguez’s Entre rojas (1995) as newly relevant. A film that may be recovered both by feminism and by scholarship on the middlebrow, it proves that women’s cinema is an important and thus far little-acknowledged category within middlebrow film.

KEYWORDS
1990s cinema; middlebrow cinema; women’s cinema; Entre rojas; feminist film criticism

1992 is a watershed year in Spanish twentieth-century history, both for the specific events that celebrated the newly modernized nation on the international stage, and for the wider dividing line it marked between a country completing its internal political transition from dictatorship to democracy, to one seeking an outward-facing, external, global role. 1992 is also a key marker of change for historians of Spanish cinema (Pavlović et al. 2009, 180–225; Benet 2012, 403–431; Wheeler 2014), though not because in 1992 there was a Spanish cinematic equivalent of the triple celebrations of the annus mirabilis – the Olympic Games in Barcelona, the Expo in Seville and Madrid’s tenure as European Capital of Culture. Paradoxically, there were few miraculous films in the same period. Fernando Trueba’s Belle Époque, released in December, might seem a likely candidate, attracting lavish praise at home from a gushing established press (Mira 2005, 199) and from the recently founded (1987–1988) Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas (thirteen Goyas, including Best Director and Best Film), as well as one of the highest international accolades in non-Anglophone cinema: Best Foreign Language Film Oscar in
1994. Yet this sexual fantasy period piece has not stood the test of time. This is perhaps because, unlike Pedro Almodóvar’s paradigm-shifting treatment of gender, *Belle Epoque*’s sexual politics, were, as critics such as Alberto Mira have shown, both masculinist and heteronormative (2005, 205–207), and its critical reception today reads as overgenerous. Almodóvar himself, meanwhile, was also failing to deliver miracles, experiencing, for example, the mixed success of *Kika* (1993), between the highs of his international breakthrough, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988), and his return to form with a new “blue” period (Smith 2003, 144–168), inaugurated with *La flor de mi secreto* (1995). In 1992, therefore, as Duncan Wheeler has summarized, “the national cinema was in no mood for celebration”, (2014, 9), with 1994 – the year Trueba won the Oscar, but also the one when only forty-four features were made of which only thirty-nine reached screens – a “nadir” (Jordan 2000, 187; Wheeler 2014, 9).

If we consider industrial contexts, rather than film texts, however, 1992, or perhaps more properly the early years of that decade and later years of the previous one, did constitute a dividing line. Successive ministers of culture Jorge Semprún, in 1989, and Carmen Alborch, in 1994, gradually dismantled the controversial system for awarding advance subsidies to selected national films set up by cinema and TV director Pilar Miró while the Partido Socialista Obrero Español director general of cinema from 1982 to 1985 (the Decreto Miró, popularly known as the Ley Miró, was in place from 1983). Despite being based on a French model, and despite supporting national films for distribution in international markets, this system in fact looked inwardly to Spain and back to the past by setting in legislation the support for national film that anti-Franco, left-wing Spanish cinephiles had been demanding since the 1950s (Triana-Toribio 2016, 29), and repeating elements of José Luis García Escudero’s reforms as director general in the 1960s, such as the “Special Quality” category (Ibáñez Fernández 2017, 98–99). In Spain, as elsewhere in the period (for example, Argentina, Mexico and Brazil), the industry thus shifted in the 1990s from a broadly national approach to production, distribution and exhibition that looked to the past, to a broadly transnational one of private, often international, finance, coproduction with countries including and beyond Europe, TV subsidy1 and festival prizes that looked to the future.

In this article I aim to nuance two of these arguments about the significance of the 1990s in order to review this decade of the national cinema afresh. First, if we narrow our focus to the early years of the decade alone, the two examples I chose of established, male directors Trueba and Almodóvar may be justified to illustrate the national cinema’s “nadir”. However, as critics such as Carlos Heredero (1999) and Susan Martin-Márquez (1999) were pointing out by the end of the decade, the 1990s was also a period of generational renewal, with some two hundred first-time directors debuting feature-length films, thirty-four of whom were women (Camí-Vela 2001b, 14). And while directors were still able to enjoy state subsidies for their first films – an element of the Ley Miró that was retained – these directors were astutely navigating new and often transnational industrial systems to pursue their careers, like Isabel Coixet, who founded two production companies, Eddie Saeta and Miss Wasabi, and who, following her first feature, *Demasiado viejo para morir joven* (1988), filmed in English. It is also fair to say that directors like Trueba and Almodóvar adapted, not only to support their own filmmaking (Almodóvar more successfully so from 1995 in coproduction with French CiBy 2000 for *La flor de mi secreto*), but also to support the careers of younger directors, including women (e.g., Trueba’s support of Chus Gutiérrez, or Almodóvar’s of Mónica Laguna).
Writing from the perspective of 2020, I suggest that subsequent developments in Spanish cinema allow us to review this period again, and propose that, in this decade of many novelties, one of its most remarkable firsts was the rise of women directors. Of course the growth in the number of debuts by women did not go unnoticed at the time. When the decade ended, María Camí-Vela was able to pinpoint the data: a tripling of the number of women directors working in Spanish film direction from just ten prior to 1988 to some thirty-four by the end of the decade (2001b, 13–14). However, if in 1999 Martin-Márquez was able to write optimistically that “given the number of women film-makers, I believe that [the feminist] voice is quickly developing into a chorus, whose ever-expanding range will surely delight and challenge film-goers for years to come” (1999, 291), twenty years on, we know that the turn of the millennium was the high point. Beyond the data for first-time directors, the rise of female authorship saw 13 percent of all Spanish films directed by women in 1996 (Zecchi 2004, 338), yet only 8.1 percent of films from 2000 to 2005 were directed by women, and only 9.8 percent from 2006 to 2010 (Arranz 2013). With 17 percent of new directors being women in the 1990s, we might have expected in the 2000s the overall percentage to be a figure in this region. The failure to sustain the accelerated access to direction by women beyond the 1990s, which Wheeler may be right to blame on endemic corruption, lack of transparency and lack of trust (2014, 14), therefore throws the achievements of that decade into sharper relief.

By comparing a selection of three case studies of debut films directed by women in the early 1990s, and taking into account the subsequent directorial trajectories of these women, this article argues that we might revisit some of the successes of female-authored cinema of this decade as middlebrow. I have selected three films by directors who have sustained careers in Spain’s audiovisual industry to this day, which allows us to see that the middlebrow elements of their first films would be characteristics that they developed in their later work. The article will therefore begin by arguing for the relevance of this English term to Spanish culture, then testing its applicability to the case studies. I move from Gracia Querejeta’s Una estación de paso (1992), which I will suggest does not fit this category, to two films of 1995, Icíar Bollaín’s Hola, ¿estás sola?, which does so partially, and my main focus, Azucena Rodríguez’s Entre rojas, which I will argue is a key, female-authored, middlebrow film. Its keyness lies not in audience numbers, which were modest, but what in 2020 we can argue is the continued relevance of such middlebrow films in the work of women directors, an interpretation recently proposed by Wheeler in his analysis of eight films released over 2007 and 2008 as “middlebrow melodramas” (2016, 1057).

**Middlebrow**

While *middlebrow* remains a snooty synonym for pedestrian in colloquial English, an understanding of the term that closes down interpretation of a text, if we consider the longitudinal depth and latitudinal breadth of the ways it has been used since it was coined in the 1920s, it becomes a tool that in fact opens up interpretation. A relational term that is only meaningful in comparison to definitions of *high* and *low* in any period, its use over the past century therefore chronicles shifting cultural responses to widespread literacy, the rise of the middle class and women writers and readers. Given that French
sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s 1984 *Distinction: A Cultural Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1999) is a key theoretical text, the usefulness of *middlebrow* beyond Anglophone contexts has thus already been demonstrated and is developing (Faulkner 2016c; Holmes and Ler- tournieux 2017). One of the challenges for its transnational use is the question of the linguist, and more widely cultural, translation of an elastic term that shifts in nuance over time. Nonetheless, the need to justify its employment in diverse contexts usefully requires commentators to address specific cultural and sociopolitical contexts, including English-speaking ones (Napper 2009; Hammill and Smith 2015).

An adjective that can attach to audience and institution (Faulkner 2016a, 5), I use it here to describe film texts, which, in the context of 1990s Spanish film, I propose share three key characteristics: accessibility to audiences in their form, didacticism in their treatment of the contemporary problems and past histories of Spain that they explore in their content and, finally, access to cultural prestige for their audiences through references to high culture. A contingent term that morphs depending on shifting cultural and sociopolitical contexts, I have suggested elsewhere that middlebrow film first emerged in Spain in the 1970s (2013, 4), and included, though it was not limited to, the “tercera vía” films produced by José Luis Dibildos in the period. One possible translation of middlebrow, then – though one that only works in this context – is “third way”. These films were accessible to audiences as they trod a middle path between the often wilfully complex art cinema of the period (in which political censorship remained), like Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón’s work, and the often wilfully facile genre film, like the soft-porn *destape* comedies by Ramón Fernández. Middlebrow films also brought cultural prestige to audiences that perhaps had not had the opportunity to acquire it through traditional access to education or contacts. Granting cultural capital is a key characteristic of Bourdieu’s definition of the middlebrow (1999, 323), prestige that audiences acquire through what Paul Julian Smith has helpfully summarized as a “shortcut” (2017, 50): the distinction that may be obtained from a novel, for example, which depends on education (literacy), access to bookshops or libraries and leisure time for reading, may be speedily acquired through film adaptation for the price of the ticket so long as theatres are geographically accessible. 1970s middlebrow films also fulfil the middlebrow criterion of didacticism as they responded to the sociopolitical context of the twilight of dictatorship to educate audiences in democracy, including Spain’s own liberal, democratic traditions prior to its authoritarian governments of the twentieth century. Period melodramas that were adaptations of nineteenth-century novels made in the early 1970s, for example, are accessible by deploying genre, bring cultural capital by adapting canonical novels and are didactic as they educate audiences about previous periods of democracy (Faulkner 2016b).

I suggest that for the 1990s we can make a complementary case for a new form of accessible, middlebrow film that is meaningful as such within that decade’s cultural and sociopolitical contexts. While “high” or art cinema of the 1970s responded to the presence of the dying dictatorship, as well as the newly aggressive censorship of Alfredo Sánchez Bella (minister of information and tourism, 1969–1973), by the 1990s, with democracy reestablished by the Constitution of 1978 and censorship banned from 1977, art film in the period became particularly preoccupied with articulations of national identity in subject and formal experimentation in address. I take these characteristics from Núria Triana-Toribio’s 2003 history, which names them in order to show that influential critics of Spanish cinema – her example is Carlos Heredero – have tended to lionize such art
cinema, like the work of Julio Medem in the early 1990s, at the expense of popular film (2003, 149–150). Popular films, or “new vulgarities” (Triana-Toribio 2003, 151), such as the work of Santiago Segura, thus constitute the “low” culture in relation to which the middlebrow is also located. While the middlebrow is pitched against these extremes, other directors worked with both art and popular forms differently, incorporating both elements in a hybrid approach, such as the work of Almódovar, Alejandro Amenábar or Álex de la Iglesia, rather than fusing these elements in a middlebrow approach. In my analysis of case studies, I consider 1990s cultural contexts to suggest that Azucena Rodríguez’s Entre rojas (1995) thus meets these two of our suggested three characteristics of a middlebrow text. Between the austere innovation of Medem and mischievous comedy of Segura, Entre rojas is formally accessible to audiences by drawing on – though, as I will demonstrate, reconfiguring – the legibility of the prison drama genre, yet it treads a middle path by requiring spectators to interpret elements of casting and performance that are not immediately obvious. Its references to high art through classical music, ballet and conceptual dance, meanwhile, bring cultural prestige.

Any text’s didacticism is dependent on its sociopolitical context, and while 1970s middlebrow cinema focussed on the hoped for, then actual, return of democracy to Spain, by the 1990s I suggest that these preoccupations had shifted to questions of memory (which tended to be debated in art, not middlebrow, cinema in the 1970s) and social issues such as drug use. In this regard, Manuel Huerga’s AntártidaF (also 1995) may be read as a middlebrow text that fuses the formal accessibility of the gangster film with a didactic, and here somewhat earnest, exploration of the dangers of heroin use. Entre rojas therefore also demonstrates a third characteristic of a middlebrow text as it seeks to tell the story of women prisoners’ role in the anti-Franco fight to its audience, or “contárselo a la gente joven”, a phrase I take from a comment made by the director as part of a roundtable discussion of women’s cinema that followed the screening of Entre rojas, broadcast on RTVE’s “Historia de nuestro cine” on International Women’s Day, 2019. Here we see Bourdieu’s shortcut to cultural capital again, as Entre rojas furnishes audiences with information about this historical period through a ninety-minute film, rather than labourious study of the official historical record or unofficial testimonials. The latter, indeed, would scarcely be accessible to the public in any case.

Before addressing our case studies in detail, I return to the intervening 1980s, as this is a key chapter in the evolution of middlebrow film in Spain. To review the period, I draw a distinction between the legislation and its enactment, thus between the now degraded Ley Miró, and the films it subsidized, which I have termed elsewhere Mirovian cinema (2013, 7). This allows me to query film historians who dismiss the type of films funded by the system because of the way they were funded. While critics may object on political grounds to the left-wing principle of state subsidy, or the law itself (e.g., Smith1995), and are absolutely right to condemn the cronyism of selection practices, or the enactment of the law (e.g., Besas1997, 246; Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas1998, 3), I argue that we should nonetheless take seriously the films themselves. Their fusion of accessibility, didacticism and cultural prestige was dubbed “polivalente” by Esteve Riambau in 1995, the translation of which as “multipurpose” (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas1998, 32) fails to convey the term’s rather snooty reference to the Spanish school programme in the 1980s, the Bachillerato Unificado Polivalente (Triana-Toribio 2003, 173n19). Middlebrow, still laden as it is in contemporary colloquial English with scornful critique, is the perfect
translation, and I would suggest, working the other way around, that polivalente might be the best translation into Spanish of the 1990s “middlebrow” films under discussion in this article.

Reviewing audience figures in the 1980s and 1990s, critics were bitterly sceptical of the failure of Mirovian films to connect with the public (national audiences for national films fell from 21 percent in 1981 to 11 percent in 1991 [Deveny 1999, 22]), while acknowledging some commercial successes like El rey pasmado (Uribe, 1991). Just when film was losing audiences to television, and national film to an ever-effective Hollywood, to alienate potential spectators of the national cinema by banning from mainstream exhibition circuits the S films that were actually widely popular was surely misguided, and responded to an ideological agenda to make Spanish film more “European”, and, especially, “French” (like the Socialist Jack Lang legislation model that Miró used for the decree), rather than a cinematic one of making films that audiences wanted to see. However, writing from the perspective of 2020, I suggest that the passing of time allows a more generous reappraisal of Mirovian films, if not the Ley Miró. While the attractive thesis of novelty and generational renewal understandably attracted much critical attention in the 1990s, laden as it was with Oedipal rejection, we might today argue that, in fact, 1980s Mirovian cinema successfully continued in the next decade as middlebrow film, which was especially present in the work of women directors. Taking a longer historical view, the middlebrow – updated to new cultural and sociopolitical contexts of course – remains successful in both film and TV of the early 2000s and 2010s (Faulkner 2013, 237–278; Wheeler 2016; Smith 2017, chaps. 3, 8). In his analysis of middlebrow cinema by women directors in Spain in the 2000s, Wheeler picks future director general Pilar Miró’s Gary Cooper, que estás en los cielos (1980) as an example of a precursor, fusing as it does 1970s middlebrow tendencies with the future aims of the Ley Miró (2016, 1064). This piece similarly offers a fuller backstory to the success of middlebrow cinema by women filmmakers in the first decade of the 2000s and 2010s by returning to the 1990s.

**Una estación de paso (Querejeta, 1992)**

In her appraisal of Carlos Heredero’s account of generational renewal in 1990s Spanish cinema, Núria Triana-Toribio notes that the critic’s own methodology is hardly renewed, as it privileges high culture, or auteur cinema (2003, 147–150). It is interesting to note how women directors fare when such a methodology is applied. Gracia Querejeta, daughter of veteran producer Elias, receives enthusiastic praise in Heredero’s account for her debut **Una estación de paso** (1992), which opened in Spain in November 1992, won the Valladolid Special Jury Prize and registered 27,874 viewers. While backed by Spanish production companies Alta Films and Eshima, the transnationality towards which the Spanish film industry moved over the decade may be perceived in the film’s international cast, which included Swedish Bibi Andersson and Italian Omero Antonutti.

**Una estación de paso** fits perfectly into an auteurist interpretation of Spanish cinema. The film recalls the narrative enigmas of the best-known works of this tradition, which were produced by the director’s father, including Víctor Erice’s El espíritu de la colmena (1973), whose blonde and distant mother, Teresa, played by Teresa Gimpera, is echoed in Andersson’s Lise in the 1992 film, and the same director’s El sur (1983), which features a mysterious father played by Antonutti, who repeats this role in Querejeta Jr’s picture.
“Una sensible y arriesgada opera prima” (1999, 277), and a “puzzle narrativo” (1999, 279), Heredero writes admiringly, “que se interroga con mirada inquisitiva sobre el final de la inocencia y el derrumbe de los mitos, sobre el desgarro emocional que produce el trance y sobre el sufrimiento que se vive en esa encrucijada” (1999, 277). Multiple temporal frames that are not signposted and narrative ellipses that remain unexplained are championed by this critic: “exigen la participación activa del espectador y reclaman –por su honesta renuncia a toda concesión de índole explicativa– una mirada interrogadora por parte de aquel” (1999, 282). The choice of adjective “honest” seems to suggest that less demanding, accessible cinema, which explains, or is didactic, – both middlebrow and popular – is somehow dishonest, a comment that recalls the inflexible position of left-wing critics in Spain who associate the popular with a putative uniform propaganda of the Franco dictatorship (Labanyi 2007, 1–2), even though such propaganda only patchily existed.

Una estación de paso is nonetheless an important Spanish art film, not, I would argue, for its animation of the active spectatorship that Heredero so admires, but for its adoption and exploration of the child’s gaze, which enriches this key tradition in Spanish cinema (Wright 2013), and for its broaching of official and unofficial memories that is prescient of preoccupations that continue to concern Spain into the future. Refusing both the accessibility and didacticism of 1990s middlebrow, it brings spectators cultural prestige not through any shortcut, but through active, even, on occasions, labourious attention and participation. While Heredero, writing in 1999, makes a convincing case for Querejeta Jr’s continued trajectory along this line, it is fair to note today a shift to the middlebrow in her work from the early 2000s, such as Héctor (2004) and Siete mesas de billar francés (2008).

**Hola, ¿estás sola? (Bollaín, 1995)**

While Querejeta Jr’s 1990s work fitted the auteurist paradigm, Heredero, as Susan Martín- Márquez has shown, searched for alternative models in which to locate Icíar Bollaín’s work. This model turned around his identification of her deployment of film form as “su buscada y consciente desnudez estética, su deliberada sencillez formal” (Heredero 1999, 76).Attributing formal invisibility to this director, in the context of a celebration of auteurist visibility in this volume as a whole, surely betrays the limits of the methodology. Martín- Márquez additionally notes that ascribing formal invisibility can be a form of underhand critique that is particularly reserved for female directors (2002, 270–271n6). Indeed, far from invisibility, María Camí-Vela has developed a thesis surrounding Bollaín’s “negotiated gaze”, suggesting that she deploys cinematography to explore conflicts within both gender and nation via an “intersubjective” approach (2001a). Jo Evans’s reading of Hola, ¿estás sola?, meanwhile, pinpoints the techniques that seem to have deceived Heredero:

> despite the illusion of improvisation (the gritty realism of the argument, the handheld camera, and the grainy 16 mm film stock) this is a tightly constructed, tightly edited film [which also uses] comical verbal bridges; rhythmically stylised mise-en-scène; temporal ellipses, and some disconcerting blurring of the boundary between non-diegetic and diegetic music. (2013, 255–256)

Bollaín does not deploy this formal virtuosity to add to Spain’s art cinema tradition, however. Despite Evans’s identification of ellipsis and playful soundscapes, these do not
provoke narrative disruption that the active spectator deciphers, as in *Una estación de paso*. They enhance the narrative, but our comprehension of that narrative is not dependent on understanding these creative formal elements, as it is in Querejeta Jr’s film. Released in Spain in January 1996, *Hola, ¿estás sola?* accrued 300,612 spectators and won Best New Director at Sant Jordi, Turia and Valladolid festivals, with a nomination in this category at the Goyas. A female road movie, Bollaín made the film, she explained in interview, to portray the kind of female friendship she had never before seen in cinema, rejecting Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991) as portraying two female friends as if they were men, especially in that film’s violent close (Camí-Vela 2001b, 43, 44). This use of the road movie genre, central to Hollywood and US culture, and by the 1990s deployed internationally, may be interpreted as part of Spanish cinema’s wider shift from the national to the transnational in the period. The film is also part of the 1990s move away from public to private finance. It was produced by La Iguana, coestablished by Bollaín in 1991, along with Fernando Colomo’s production company that takes his name – another established director and producer, who, like Elías Querejeta did for his daughter, supported the work of debut directors in the period, including those who were not actually related to him. This support by established directors and producers also partially derives from the 1989 Semprún legislation, which gave further power to the producer. Bollaín received additional support and apprenticeship from earlier women directors such as Chus Gutiérrez, for whose first film, *Sublet* (1992), Bollaín was protagonist (Laura) in front of the camera, and for whose second, *Sexo oral* (1994), Bollaín was assistant behind it.

We may interpret *Hola, ¿estás sola?* as a middlebrow film as this deployment of the road movie genre largely adheres to its conventions and is accessible to audiences. The film contains didactic elements by exploring the reasons for, and thus promoting an understanding of, precarious youth and immigrant employment. However, writing from the perspective of 2020, and thus with knowledge of Bollaín’s subsequent exploration of contemporary social problems – immigration in *Flores de otro mundo* (1999), domestic violence in *Te doy mis ojos* (2001) and neocolonialism in *También la lluvia* (2011) – it is important not to overinterpret this element of *Hola, ¿estás sola?*. Given that its cinephilic references are to popular Hollywood (*Thelma and Louise*) and Spanish films that adopt popular forms (Berlanga’s 1953 *¡Bienvenido, Mister Marshall!* [Evans 2013, 255] – even if this film later became canonical), in 1996, the film did not bring a middlebrow acquisition of cultural prestige. The later works mentioned by the director fulfilled the middlebrow criteria I propose (on *Te doy mis ojos*, see Faulkner [2013, 244–250]), and it is tempting to recast *Hola, ¿estás sola?* retrospectively as such. It is more accurate to suggest, however, that the film contained some of the elements of the middlebrow – both accessibility and the exploration of social problems – that Bollaín would develop later in her successful career.

**Entre rojas** (Rodríguez, 1995)

For an auteurist critical methodology that is uncomfortable with accessibility, didacticism and easy access to cultural prestige, middlebrow cinema is not a good fit. Heredero opens his brief account of *Entre rojas* by acknowledging the legitimizing authenticity that Rodríguez brings to her directorial debut as herself a former detainee of a women’s prison
under Franco, but then shifts to describe the film in hostile terms as “más interesada por los factores emotivos y personales que movida por una voluntad testimonial” (Heredero 1999, 379). Here, Heredero reveals his frustration that Rodríguez betrays this authenticity of her personal experience by imbuing her version of the prison drama thriller with emotion, rather than employing a testimonial documentary genre. In cinema, “emotion” is code for melodrama, a genre which has a long history of denigration owing to its perception as feminized (Wheeler 2016, 1064–1065).

Released in April 1995, to modest audience numbers, Entre rojas attracted fewer prizes than the other films examined, which were limited, in Spain, to a Best New Actress Goya nomination and Best New Actor award from the Actors Union for María Pujalte, then a young performer who would go on to future success in TV. Backed by two Spanish production companies, Fernando Colomo Producciones Cinematográficas and Lucas Ediciones, Entre rojas, like Hola, ¿estás sola?, may nonetheless be interpreted as part of the early 1990s shift to the transnational due to its adoption of genres popularly associated with Hollywood. Frank Darabont’s contemporary Shawshank Redemption, whose title was translated as Cadena perpetua for distribution in Spain, which foregrounds its adherence to the prison genre, debuted there in February 1995, two months before Rodríguez’s film, possibly, then, in influencing its reception, if not its creation. The fusion of pathos and narrative action in the films also taps into transnational melodrama. Rodríguez’s film, the first portrait of the experience of women in Francoist jails, and thus their sacrifice and contribution to the anti-Franco fight, has attracted some scholarly interest. Martin-Márquez examined Penélope Cruz’s Lucía as a “bridge character” between on-screen characters and off-screen audiences (1999, 284) – an interpretation that recalls the “negotiation” that Camí-Vela identifies in Bollaín’s work – while Christina Buckley reads the film’s portrayal of “silence, dance and disease” as instances of female agency that resist patriarchy (1998). I gather together critics’ references in publications of the late 1990s to melodrama, character construction and agency to argue for a middlebrow Entre rojas and one that might even be newly relevant today. The selection of this film by RTVE’s “Historia de nuestro cine” to mark International Women’s Day 2019 is no doubt due to the attractiveness to audiences of its leading actress, Cruz, who has subsequently enjoyed a stellar career, though it could also indicate a current recuperation of 1990s Spanish middlebrow.

The accessibility of Entre rojas derives in part from its adherence to the genre of the prison thriller. Rodríguez’s innovations here are her subject matter of the women’s prison and her introduction of the bridge character of Lucía. When Heredero criticizes her turn to melodrama, rather than documentary, he is writing of this film’s divergence from its most important prison drama predecessors in the national cinema, Pilar Miró’s denunciation of a miscarriage of justice perpetrated by the Guardia Civil in the 1910s and 1920s, El crimen de Cuenca (1981), which saw her hauled before a military court despite the supposed end of censorship, and Imanol Uribe’s portrait of a jail breakout by ETA prisoners at the end of the dictatorship, La fuga de Segovia (1981). While Miró’s film in fact introduces elements of melodrama through its family-focussed narrative frame, El crimen de Cuenca may lay claim to the authenticity of documentary through its notoriously explicit portrayal of physical torture. Uribe’s film, on the other hand, while controversial for its sympathetic portrayal of terrorism, clearly lays claim to authenticity through a testimonial approach, with all members of the breakout participating in its
creation, and the author of the original account collaborating on the script (Stone 2002, 140–141).

For Heredero, Rodríguez dilutes the authenticity of the autobiographical element of her film by filtering it through melodrama, a genre that also brings accessibility for audiences. While not a family setting, the film focusses on women, their experiences and their emotions, with the casting and performance of its female lead, music and mise en scène all playing the key roles that we associate with that genre. The only fictitious element of the narrative (Camí-Vela 2001b, 140), the presence of the protagonist Lucía, located within this melodramatic format, is central to making the film accessible. The characters of the other prisoners are at best static. Some excellent performances, including prize-winning Pujalte’s turn as plodding Cata, and Blanca Portillo in her film debut as the energetically smutty Manuela, rescue these characters from caricature. Others fail to do so, with casting-against-type failing to deliver: the usually sizzling Cristina Marcos is a wooden Communist Party faithful Julia, and enigmatic Ana Torrent the dour prison officer La Tacatún. With these mixed performances, what draws audiences into this accessible film is Cruz’s Lucía, whose character arc charts her transformation from timid ballet dancer from a wealthy family, imprisoned owing to her politically militant boyfriend (their opposite social classes conveyed through the crosscutting of the precredit sequence [Buckley 1998, 2]), to increasingly engaged member of the prison community of Communist Party activists. She ultimately becomes the group’s saviour by risking her own life with a fake escape to cover the real one that she originally planned for herself, completing a character arc through which Rodríguez encourages audience pathos, especially through performance style, mise en scène and music, at each stage.

Clearly our object of identification, Lucía is also the conduit for the didactic elements of Entre rojas, demonstrating the film’s provocation of both an emotional and also intellectual response throughout. Not only do we sympathize with the imprisoned women at the same time as Lucía does, but we learn about their pasts, the party and the struggle with her. The film is set in 1974, which is announced in an intertitle, the year Rodríguez herself was imprisoned. Although twenty years on, its 1995 audience could have participated in the struggle themselves, Entre rojas, through its didacticism, seems clearly to target an audience without lived experience of this period. In the 1990s this would have been the youthful audience among whom cinema attendance soared in the period (Triana-Toribio 2003, 140), an aim the director herself recalls for the film: “contárselo a la gente joven”. The passing of time has also benefitted a film like Entre rojas in a number of ways. First, the living memory of the anti-Franco fight in prisons is of course increasingly fading, making its didactic approach, also adopted in Huerga’s 2006 portrayal of 1970s prisons, Salvador (Puig Antich) (Vidal 2016), increasingly relevant. Second, Entre rojas was an early example of a film to recover memory in Spain, a movement which would become a boom with events like the establishment of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica in 2000 and passing of the Ley de Memoria Histórica in 2007. Third, as this article hopes to show, the film’s accessible, didactic or middlebrow address has continued to be relevant in Spanish culture, both in the medium of film, to which Rodríguez returned later in 1995 and in 2007 (Puede ser divertido; Atlas de geografía humana) and the medium of TV, where she, and many of the actors in the film, like Pujalte, have had subsequent successful careers. From 2007 to 2014, Rodríguez directed twenty-four episodes
of Cuéntame cómo pasó, for example, an updated version of the middlebrow for the small screen and for Spain in the early 2000s.

The character of Lucía also brings the audience access to cultural prestige, the third characteristic of the 1990s middlebrow that this article has defended. Cruz’s early training in ballet is critical to her performance in this film, while it remains hidden in her contemporary performances in others, like Belle Epoque, where her slender frame simply adds to her portrayal of somewhat gawky youth Luz. In Entre rojas, the presence of her strong though slender dancer’s body on-screen encourages us to sympathize with the loss of her ballet career owing to her ten-year jail term, which Rodríguez also conveys through a close-up of her ballet shoes (Buckley 1998, 3). Her two dance performances and ballet training session also underscore our understanding of her character arc. We may contrast her first performance as a dancer in control of her body to her fate as a prisoner who has lost that control. Once in prison, we see her incongruously perform ballet’s tortuous stretches in the gym, while the other characters, like sweaty Cata, play childish ping-pong. From the perspective of feminist theory, more interesting is the later conceptual dance sequence that Lucía performs to convey her anger at her prison term. As Buckley shows, by performing barefoot against the tempo of the music, she gestures towards the hysteria that plays such an important role in the control of women and their bodies from the nineteenth century onward:

by incorporating the violent eruptions, shaking and collapsing made famous by the hysterics of [Salpêtrière], Lucía co-opts the terms of women’s (and other marginalized groups) subjection through medical discourse, and propels them into a new context which criticises and subverts this very discourse, creating agency out of the re-appropriation of the power to silence. (Buckley 1998, 3)

Cruz’s performance and deployment of her dancer’s body are also intriguing in the scenes where she is not actually dancing. Even when wearing similar clothes to the other women, Cruz emphasizes her dancer’s posture, so her difference from the other women is always stressed. This could be interpreted as a weakness in the film: its authentic setting of the 1970s Francoist jail (it was shot in the former women’s prison of Yeserías) is somewhat undercut by her dazzling presence. Cruz had modelled since the age of fifteen, thus Buckley writes, “whether she is cleaning toilets, jogging on the patio, or walking through the halls, Lucía looks as if she just stepped out of a model photo shoot” (1998, 2), an interpretation that is even more tempting, if anachronistic, today, given Cruz’s future after 1995 as a model for a variety of international products and as a perennial sex symbol. We may alternatively recast her out-of-place presence in the film as a strength, however, if we consider the keyness of Lucía as Martin-Márquez’s “bridge character”. To be a “bridge”, she is not meant to become like the other women, but “establishes the necessary connection between the film’s viewers, here evidently conceived of as bourgeois, and the ‘rojas’ presented on screen” (1999, 284).

Rodríguez has stated that in Entre rojas she targeted a youth audience who lacked knowledge of the period portrayed, “telling them how it happened”, as she would in her seven years at the helm of Cuéntame cómo pasó. Martin-Márquez suggests that given Rodríguez’s creation of Lucía as our object of identification, she also seems to imagine an audience that did not necessarily belong to the working class of the other prisoners. I have argued elsewhere that insisting on an alignment between a certain class and
a certain type of film, like middle class and middlebrow, problematically imprisons audience and closes down interpretation (2016a, 2). However, Martin-Márquez rightly identifies the rise of individuals into the middle class as potential filmgoers in a Spain that by the 1990s may have been enriched by democratizing processes such as joining the European Economic Community in 1986. Increasing prosperity was extremely patchy, however, with an unemployment rate of 25 percent in 1995. It may be more reasonable to propose, then, that the audience for middlebrow Entre rojas included both new youth audiences and some that may be described as newly “bourgeois”.

**Middlebrow and women directors**

While it is far from the case that middlebrow film and TV in Spain is either uniquely, or mainly, authored by women, there is nonetheless a suggestive overlap between an area of culture that has previously been overlooked as it does not fit with the established critical categories, like Heredero’s version of auteurism to which I have returned throughout this piece, and women’s cinema, the twentieth- to twenty-first chapter in a millennial history of patriarchal neglect. There is therefore an important overlap between the archaeological work of critics of the middlebrow to recover overlooked texts, and the similar work of recovery within feminism. Recovering previous work, as well as celebrating current work by women directors by placing it within the still favoured and prestigious auteurist paradigm, is a powerful strategy. It is particularly effective, for example, in the work of Patricia White, whose case studies include Lucrecia Martel (2015, 44–56). However, this paradigm limits research to isolated exceptions like Martel, rather than recovering wider categories like the middlebrow.

By returning to the various turning points that surround Spain of 1992, this article has proposed the examination of largely overlooked films like Entre rojas, or the reexamination of better-known pieces like Una estación de paso and Hola, ¿estás sola?, as female-authored middlebrow cinema. It may be argued that placing women’s work in a category of film that already carries a history of neglect is an unhelpful move for feminist film history. However, if we fail to include middlebrow cinema in women’s cinema, we overlook an area that has been especially durable and often successful with audiences. Despite the auteurist “fit” of her early work, Gracia Querejeta’s cinema subsequently moved towards the middlebrow. Bollaín’s Hola, ¿estás sola? tentatively explored social problems in an accessible format, fusing two of the characteristics I have proposed for the middlebrow, but the director’s later work deployed accessibility, didacticism and the reward of cultural prestige in middlebrow successes that were acclaimed by both audiences and critics (Te doy mis ojos attracted 1,063,406 spectators and won multiple national and international awards, including seven Goyas). I propose that middlebrow Entre rojas, which filtered the authenticity of the director’s own prison experience through the popular, accessible genre of melodrama, to the annoyance of established critics, and which was not afraid to offer its audience historical lessons about a period that they may have been too young to know, and which, finally, brought cultural prestige through its inclusion of high art classical music, ballet and conceptual dance, constituted a middlebrow film whose characteristics continue to be successful to this day. RTVE’s Cuéntame may have been created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau in 2001, but middlebrow Entre rojas, whose director, Rodriguez, was subsequently at the helm of the series, was surely a blueprint. While feminist criticism must rightly
lament that the increased access of women to direction stalled at the close of the 1990s, this should not prevent us from celebrating its achievements in that decade, including its middlebrow ones.

Notes

1. Note that the Ley Miró also drew on the Unión de Centro Democrático’s film-TV financing arrangement, “El concurso de los 1.300 millones” (Hopewell 1986, 225), which funded, for example, *La colmena* (Camus, 1982). The increasing financial support of film by TV revenues that developed in the 1990s thus had antecedents in both the 1980s’ Ley Miró and the 1970s’ UCD “Concurso”.

2. This data improves slightly if women’s contribution to other areas of film’s creative teams is taken into account, as Concepción Cascajosa Virino does (2015), though my focus in this article is direction.

3. Within this somewhat bleak panorama, Cascajosa Virino notes the importance of the creation of CIMA (Asociación de Mujeres Cineastas y de Medios Audiovisuales), which is particularly focussed on opening up distribution, and thus visibility, by working with film festivals (2015, xxv).

4. Note Vidal’s analysis of Huerga’s later *Salvador* (*Puig Antich*) as a middlebrow text (2016).

5. The discussion can be viewed at this link: [http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/historia-de-nuestro-cine/historia-nuestro-cine-coloquio-cine-mujeres/5045258/](http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/historia-de-nuestro-cine/historia-nuestro-cine-coloquio-cine-mujeres/5045258/) (accessed 1 May 2019).

6. All viewing figures are taken from the Spanish Ministry of Culture’s “Base de datos de películas calificadas” at [https://sede.mcu.gob.es/CatalogoICAA](https://sede.mcu.gob.es/CatalogoICAA) (accessed 1 May 2019). The link for *Entre rojas* is unfortunately broken.

7. Gutiérrez recalls in a recent interview that she had begun to work on the script of *Hola, ¿estás sola?* with Bollaín, but the younger director accepted a suggestion that she should work on it with Julio Medem owing perhaps to her lack of confidence at that time (Beceiro and Herrero, forthcoming, n.p.).

8. Given melodrama’s capaciousness, Williams argues that it might be better termed a “mode” (1998).

9. Buckley also points out that yet another inmate, Berta, creatively mimics hysteria for political and feminist agentic ends (1998, 3).

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