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Review/ reseña

Donna Kercher. *Latin Hitchcock. How Almodóvar, Amenábar, De la Iglesia, Del Toro and Campanella Became Notorious*. Columbia UP, 2015.

Preying upon Hitchcock? Five Directors in Search of a Transnational Aura

Diana Roxana Jorza

University of Notre Dame

Embarking upon a study of Hitchcock's influence is a daunting task, given the director's canonic place in film history, his profound, long-standing impact on filmmakers, and the prodigious amount of bibliography available worldwide, yet Donna Kercher does not shy away from the ambitious challenge of tracing Hitchcock's imprint on three Spanish and two Latin American film directors, whose notoriety has transcended their respective national borders. While her book strongly relies on an acknowledged auteurist approach, supported by a sophisticated close film analysis, the overarching aim of her laborious enterprise is to address the broader issue of Hitchcock's reception in the Spanish-speaking world and of how these five directors (Pedro Almodóvar, Alejandro Amenábar, Alex de la Iglesia, Guillermo del Toro and Juan José Campanella) could become

internationally famous by allegedly using Hitchcock's motifs and aesthetics as well as his marketing and advertising ploys of career self-promotion.

The three ideas that she advances in her Introduction shed further light on the underlying assumptions and rationale of Kercher's study, which she will meticulously develop in the course of the subsequent chapters and which I will promptly analyze in more detail. First, she claims that Hitchcock's reception in the Spanish-speaking world has been largely ignored in film history and criticism dealing with the notorious director's international reception, being to a great extent eclipsed by the "French Hitchcock" François Truffaut helped institutionalize in the 1960s. Second, she posits that the appeal of Hitchcock's career model for these five directors, allegedly greater than Buñuel's, is largely indebted to his successful rise from a local (British) director to an international, Hollywood-based "master of suspense." His immense acclaim in Spain and Latin America seems to have been bolstered by a technical and artistic trajectory that, in Hitchcock's case, on the one hand was easily associated with modernity and progress, and, on the other, was inseparable from religious and moral issues that, while stemming from his Catholic upbringing, could effortlessly fit in the Spanish-speaking directors' upbringing and cultural traditions. Third, Kercher states that Hitchcock's reception in the Spanish-speaking world has been different due to the notable inflexion of his peculiar sense of humor, which permeates the more "serious" generic registers of thriller, horror, and melodrama, unlike what happened in other national contexts with the US filmmakers David Lynch and Christopher Nolan, for instance, or with the French Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol.

While there can be no peculiar point of contention with these three broad points as they are outlined in the Introduction and reaffirmed in the Conclusion, it is regrettable that Kercher's book lacks a compelling historicization of various institutionalized critical approaches on Hitchcock in the United States, Spain, and Latin America. She fails to mention, for instance, that his French canonization as a celebrated *auteur* by Truffaut in the 1960s, which proved essential for his subsequent rise to as a classic in the American academia, came at a time when *auteurism* was an effective

tool to reclaim the previously disdained commercial products of Hollywood for serious critical appraisal, while the preferred semiotic analysis (of an auteurist structural coherence) was a critical instrument to gain disciplinary status and distinction. Furthermore, Truffaut's paradigmatically formalist undertaking, which sought to identify distinctive visual elements and a coherent narrative order, appears strikingly similar to Kercher's auteurist attempt to globally reposition the five Spanish-speaking directors by turning to taxonomic postulations of a diverse but atemporal network of aesthetic and thematic resemblances to Hitchcock's cinematic universe. Her sophisticated close film analyses in this book can thus be analogously considered as part of a laudable endeavor to confer disciplinary prestige to the internationally famous but academically marginal Almodóvar, Amenábar, de la Iglesia, del Toro and Campanella within the consecrating space of American film studies and within the larger sphere of English-language criticism.

While Kercher lucidly notes the lack of an authoritative academic discussion of Hitchcock's influence on films in Spanish, she seems to strangely consider that there is "a US/UK tradition of [Spanish and Latin American] cinema scholarship that is on the whole more thematic and often auteur driven and which differs starkly from many more encyclopedic critical works that have come out of Spain" (7). Her evaluation of Spanish and Latin American film scholarship produced in English is all the more striking. She mentions Mark Allinson's, Malcolm Compitello's, Enrique Acevedo Muñoz's, Kathleen M. Vernon's, or Susan Martin Márquez's innovative studies, which synchronize with the most recent developments in American and British film studies (e.g., Rick Altman's *Film/ Genre; Refiguring American Film Genres. History and Theory*, edited by Nick Browne; *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams) and fall within a larger trend of post-1990s historiographic self-reflexivity that has long overcome the structuralist, auteurist approach that dominated the academia in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, her disparaging overall evaluation of the Spanish or Latin American film research produced in Spanish as merely "encyclopedic" appears hastily supported by only some examples of general histories and dictionaries of

Spanish or Mexican cinema, understandably bound by the constraints of their brief informative format. This reductionist and regrettably uninformed judgment contradicts the subsequent citations of many critically sophisticated studies that she uses to back up some of her analyses. The unfortunate reduction of a diverse panorama of Hispanic film studies to either an auteurist-thematic concern or an encyclopedic angle prevents Kercher's study from better positioning itself in the field of Spanish and Latin film and cultural studies while further reinforcing the biased impression that Spanish and Latin American scholarship is still unable to resist the aged charms of 1960s and 1970s academic fashion. Moreover, this misreading of her own study and of the wider field tends to be paralleled by an insufficiently historicized analysis of the Spanish directors Pedro Almodóvar, Alejandro Amenábar, and Alez de la Iglesia, whose consideration is not properly rooted in a broader study of their engagement with national film and cultural traditions, as I will show below.

While the focus on Hitchcock's somewhat overstated influence on the Spanish-speaking directors' artistic and career choices understandably limits the extent of the local motifs and models on the directors' film products, the loose positioning of their work in their respective national scenes unfortunately contributes to the reduction of an entire national cinema to only a few names of worthwhile international distinction (reclaimed as auteurs), a hermeneutic simplification that is also evident in the structure of the book, divided in two main parts, "Spain" and "Latin America." This methodological weakness is briefly acknowledged, however, in Kercher's Introduction, when she references Paolo Antonio Panaguá's exasperated remark in a dialog with her critical framework (e.g., "Reductionism is only applied to peripheral or dependent cinemas, which are subordinated or marginalized in the same dominant historiography: no one would have the gall to reduce French cinema to Renoir or Godard," 15). Her only answer to this possible criticism is that her study aspires to the current English-speaking tradition of thematic, auteurist scholarship (misidentified as hegemonic), its limitations notwithstanding.

What is peculiarly noteworthy and innovative in the division of her book sections, however, is the presence of an introductory chapter on

Hitchcock's reception in Spain and Mexico, which is meant to provide a historical framework for the initial perceptions of the director and of his filmography in these respective countries. Hitchcock's Latin American reception is reduced to Mexico City and Madrid, due to a lack of easily accessible archival (especially journal) information about the reception of his movies in Buenos Aires or other Latin American capitals.

The first chapter, "First Loves, First Cuts: The Initial Response to Hitchcock's Films in Spain", is an informative introduction to the director's uneven reception in Spain, where most of his work was subject to censorship during Franco's long dictatorship, which included cuts and a domesticated form of dubbing. Kercher contends that some of his movies from the 1940s (e.g., *Rebecca* and *Spellbound*), for instance, heavily impacted both the cultural politics of the time (especially in terms of gender representation) and local film aesthetics, while Spanish critics understandably lagged behind their American and French counterparts in Hitchcock criticism. He was not only a very popular director with enviable box-office success in Spain, however, but also a participant in the San Sebastián Film Festival in 1958 and 1959 (with *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest*) at a time when this Spanish festival was trying to compete with festivals in Cannes, Venice and Berlin. From the late 1950s onwards, Hitchcock was also very influential on Spanish television (in his world-famous show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*), at a time when the national production could not pose a real challenge in comparison. Hitchcock's popularity and enduring impact on both filmmaking and ordinary audiences in Spain is convincingly attributed to his status as a subversive symbol in American life and modern aesthetics. During Franco's regime, his movies were particularly alluring not only for their internationally appreciated suspense and psychological dilemmas, but also for their humor and moral tone as well as for their glamor and sexual innuendos. While this chapter could have been broadened by adding more socio-historical details to Hitchcock's reception of specific films and by consulting more specialized periodicals at the time (e.g., *Primer Plano*, *Dígame*, *Triunfo*) that published film reviews and editorials, this section contributes a great deal to the existing studies on Hitchcock's international reception.

The second chapter, “Pedro Almodóvar’s Criminal Side: Plot, Humour and Cinematic Style”, argues that Hitchcock represented his “primary textbook and industrial model”, even if the eminent autodidact and Spanish director unsurprisingly tended to silence or at least minimize this alleged debt with his convincing claims of proud eclecticism. A very close film analysis of Almodóvar’s and Hitchcock’s filmographies enables Kercher to nonetheless skillfully and commendably show an undeniable, recurring influence of visual and narrative motifs or artistic “robberies” (in Almodovar’s own words in an interview). Her analysis clearly disproves the Spanish director’s attempts to downplay Hitchcock’s impact or to lump it together under the generic tag of “classical Hollywood cinema,” whose imprint he has consistently acknowledged. What this and other chapters are less successful in proving, however, is the claim that the unique mix of humor and suspense, or humor and melodrama, that Almodóvar and the other Spanish and Latin American directors successfully used in their movies is primarily indebted to Hitchcock’s peculiar *mélange*—which has not been so popular in other American or French directors that forged their style following Hitchcock. While the Spanish-speaking directors under discussion might have been attracted by Hitchcock’s distinctive union of the humorous and the serious, their own choice of such a tonal and generic mixture should be more thoroughly understood also in the specific contexts of their own respective cultural traditions, where such blends are quite unsurprising. In the specific case of Pedro Almodóvar, his films display frequent instances of a very peculiar, internationally disconcerting sense of (usually dark) humor, which has been successfully linked to Spanish comic film production of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Juan Egea’s recent book, *Dark Laughter: Spanish Film, Comedy, and the Nation*. Furthermore, the director himself occasionally expressed his creative debt to such postwar Spanish directors as Berlanga, Ferreri, and Fernán Gómez. Whereas Kercher mentions Marco Ferreri’s Spanish comedies as potential intertexts in Almodóvar’s cinema in passing, a more sustained engagement with the prior Spanish film tradition that impacted Almodóvar would have enabled her chapter to probe into how his movies were enabled by the Spanish sociocultural milieu where they were produced, thus enriching his

local formative, context. Kercher's limited number of details about Almodóvar's local roots is understandable, however, to the extent that one of her primary aims in this book is to consolidate his (and the other Spanish-speaking directors') rise to international fame, which for her is decisively shaped by Hitchcock's strategies to build his career in its earlier stages. While one can certainly see some resemblances between the two paths of professional ascent to a position of worldwide acclaim, it is hard to believe that Hitchcock's career model had such an indispensable role in Almodóvar's and the other directors' rise to international notoriety. A more historicized account of these contemporary directors' peculiar journeys within the "global village," at a time of normalized transnational exchanges, could have shed a much-needed comparative light on the different conditions of film production and distribution that Hitchcock and these "Latin directors" encountered.

The third chapter, "Drawing on a Darker Humour, Cultural Icons and Mass Media: Alex de la Iglesia's Journey from Outer Space to the Spanish Academy", dwells on another famous Spanish director, who was an autodidact and rose from a marginal cult director to a mainstream commercial filmmaker whose renown crossed the national borders. In this case, de la Iglesia came to filmmaking from a design background, which is manifest in his movies. Some examples of his similarities to Hitchcock's visual and narrative style, which are again meticulously and convincingly documented by Donna Kercher through close film analysis, are the chase scenes that take place at great heights (e.g., in *Día de la bestia/ Day of the Beast*, *La comunidad/ Common Wealth*, the UK-based *The Oxford Murders*). Interestingly, she also connects Hitchcock's influence on Alex de la Iglesia with the latter's confessed attraction to graphic novels and comic books on the basis of their plot construction, which, according to de la Iglesia, not only share (through Hergé) "a hidden dark side, full of obsessions and mysteries" but are also "sustained by a succession of minimal, insignificant intrigues" (146). While I do not wish to detract from Kercher's solid, pioneering work on Alex de la Iglesia's and Hitchcock's movies, I share reservations about this chapter, one of which is the exaggerated credit given to Hitchcock for the Spanish director's cunning

exploitation of his public image. My other caveat is the all too easy ascription of Alex de la Iglesia's dark humor, intertwined with suspense, attributed to his prestigious transnational predecessor. This is coupled with a conspicuous disregard for a whole Spanish cultural tradition in which de la Iglesia is rooted and which makes his particular sense of humor less disconcerting to the Spanish or Latin American audiences. Kercher's interpretive bias and her lack of a broader cultural analysis (which should not minimize the local models) once more operate in the service of an otherwise commendable attempt to portray the Spanish director's international reputation. Yet her approach, arguably, makes it difficult to explain the international reception of Alex de la Iglesia's Hollywood-made *Perdita Durango/ Dance with the Devil*, whose unpopularity (or, rather, untranslatability) in the United States was understandably attributed to its "out of proportion" mixture of dark humor, sex, and violence.

Chapter four, "Against Hitchcock: Alejandro Amenábar's Meteoric Career", concludes the first part—devoted to Spain—by focusing on a Spanish director that often confessed a condescending attitude towards Hitchcock, hence his insistence on correcting the master's "errors." This rebellion against what Kercher aptly terms a "father figure" says more about his "anxiety of influence" (to use Harold Bloom's well-known label that she felicitously employs in this chapter), as about Amenábar's extensive reliance on dreamwork and psychoanalysis, which notoriously underscored Hitchcock's universe and shaped his filmography much more than in any other case analyzed in Kercher's book. Making his debut in the 1990s at a time when Spanish cinema was actively seeking to enjoy a better box-office count but was also wondering, in Juan Egea's words, how to "look" Spanish, Amenábar was allegedly influenced by Hitchcock's savvy union of artistic mastery and commercial success, especially by his generic mixture, which seemingly influenced his later transnational success, *Tesis/ Thesis*. Donna Kercher analyzes this worldwide hit in conjunction with *Psycho*, with which *Thesis* shares suspense devices, characterization strategies, narrative elements, metanarrative concerns (gravitating around the issue of voyeurism), and a punctuating strain of dark humor. Amenábar's next movie, *Abre los ojos/ Open Your Eyes* gained him a huge

international recognition, implicit in its successful Hollywood remake by Tom Cruise as *Vanilla Sky*. Kercher closely and skillfully examines the Spanish director's original version in conjunction with Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, with which it shares a thriller plot that not only heavily relies on a disturbing exploitation of dreams but also invites another reflection, after *Thesis*, on audiovisual violence and voyeurism. Analyzed in parallel with *Rebecca*, Hitchcock's first successful film in Hollywood, Amenábar's Gothic melodrama *Los otros/ The Others* (2001) marked indeed his "crossover moment" to Hollywood and consecrated him as a Spanish filmmaker that can make "viable products for adaptation in a global market." While Hitchcock is undeniably famous for this global appeal, in the absence of a sociohistorical and economic data regarding their box-office hits, their international trajectories (which do not hold up, besides, later development in their careers) can hardly act again as the most authoritative argument underlying an alleged case of career modeling—the common visual, generic, and narrative motifs notwithstanding. Whereas Amenábar might try to underestimate the extent of Hitchcock's influence in the shaping of his filmmaking, which is evident in his alleged, confessed "correction" of the latter's "errors," his positioning as an original director attempts to contribute to Spanish film's international marketing. In this sense, Spanish film distinction could not lie in a servile imitation of an institutionalized Hollywood model, but rather in its superior (self-)positioning.

Chapter five, "Latin American Openings of Hitchcock's Films: The Reception History for Mexico City", opens the second part of Donna Kercher's book, which focuses on two Latin American directors, the Mexican Guillermo del Toro and the Argentinean Juan José Campanella, whose work and transnational careers are again meant to exemplify Hitchcock's decisive imprint. The fifth chapter is a masterful account of his reception in Mexico City at a time when the Mexican film industry was Hollywood's strongest competitor in Latin America and capable of fostering a dynamic film culture by means of a wide array of popular literary, sports, and film magazines that were part of everyday life. Kercher's compelling, pioneering account proceeds to identifying a number of important trends in Hitchcock's Mexican reception, such as the reading of his 1930s spy movies

(from his British beginnings) as well as the national and international events that surrounded Trotsky's Mexico exile, or the overemphasis on the reception of Hitchcock's melodramatic mode during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, so heavily reliant on melodrama. She also distinguishes between the eminently aesthetic or narrative focus of Hitchcock's Buenos Aires reviews (e.g., in *La Nación*), based upon a strong tradition of film criticism, and the Mexico City preference for debating national policies or industrial issues with regards to Hitchcock's films, often considered enviable cinematographic and industrial models for the Mexican cinema.

The sixth chapter, "Guillermo del Toro's Continuing Education: Adapting Hitchcock's Moral and Visual Sensibilities to the World of Horror," is devoted to a Mexican director who embodies the successful crossover director between the smaller-budget world of Mexican or Spanish film production and lavish Hollywood productions. His incursions into the horror or fantasy genres were carried out both in Spanish (e.g., *Cronos* and *El espinazo del diablo/ The Devil's Backbone*) and in English (*Mimic*, *Blade II*, and *Hellboy*). What differentiates Guillermo del Toro from all the other directors is his extensive academic research on Hitchcock, on whom he published a book in 1990, before beginning his filmmaking career. His proven in-depth knowledge of the "master of suspense" makes the Mexican director's alleged debt to Hitchcock's cinematic techniques and industrial model the most compelling of all the five cases studied in this book. Donna Kercher successfully capitalizes on this as she gives numerous citations from del Toro's monograph, retrospectively read as a nascent aesthetic (and commercial) manifesto. His university degree in visual arts enabled him to later create his own special effects company, which not only brought him closer to top names of the Mexican film industry (e.g., Luis Estrada, Paul Leduc, Nicolás Echevarría), but also paved the way for his own distinctive cinematic look on the horror genre. Among the many technical, narrative, and industrial models that Kercher meticulously analyzes in Guillermo del Toro's film production—shaped by his fertile dialog with Hitchcock—are his blend of (dark) humor and suspense, the Catholic motifs and the overall reliance upon ethical issues, the association between a (melodramatic) romance and the action genre, as well as the impact of his visual arts

background. While these common characteristics are arguably quite general in themselves, speaking more about a savvy return to an internationally popular cinema that can have diverse national inflections, the specific forms of Hitchcock's filmmaking and influence on Guillermo del Toro are, once again, convincingly carried out via an impressive close film analysis of the two directors' films. Another distinctive merit of this chapter is its concomitant and necessary discussion of other (e.g., Spanish and Mexican) film genres and directors that shaped del Toro's career, contributing to a more complex, historicized picture of his work.

The last chapter, "Understanding Osmosis: Hitchcock in Argentina through the Eyes of Juan José Campanella", begins with the popular Argentinean director's claim that Hitchcock's influence on him was through osmosis, being "in the air" for him and most film directors. Kercher turns to direct quotations of some well-known Hitchcock's films, which she continues to competently assess through close film analysis, and which show the influence on the Campanella's cinematography (e.g., a peculiar mixture of comedy and drama, or of humor and thriller) at crucial stages in the Argentinean's career. Beginning his formal filmmaking training at the Tisch School of the Arts from New York in the final years of Argentina's military dictatorship, Campanella was arguably trained for success in the global film industry from the outset. After making various well-received films and a stint on cable television in the United States (i.e., making docudramas for the HBO), he shot the US/ Argentinean coproduction, *Love Walked In*, a mix of noir and romantic melodrama. From that point on he has alternated between making films in Argentina (e.g., a populist trilogy that was considered a sample of romantic social comedy) and television projects in Europe and the US. His international triumph came with *The Secret of Their Eyes* (2009), which Kercher considers a return to Hitchcock and classical narrative film through the aforementioned mixtures: a specific preference for multiple endings with many political and ethical possibilities, and some signature cinematographic moments (e.g., the chase scene).

In her "Conclusion: They Became Notorious", Kercher takes up the claims in her Introduction and provides a brief summary of her seven

chapters, lamenting again Hitchcock film critics' rare acknowledgement of the connections between him and these five Spanish-speaking transnational directors. The Spanish and Latin American directors are also interrelated in their roles as supportive producers, a position that has greatly impacted the actual circulation networks of their movies and has influenced a younger generation of filmmakers in their respective countries.

Its limitations notwithstanding, Kercher's *Latin Hitchcock* is pioneering because he provides proof for Hitchcock's international reception by considering his large audiences in Spain and Latin America. Her book will not only widen the field of Hitchcock film studies, but it will also undoubtedly spark many debates in the realm of Spanish and Latin American film and cultural studies. Some arguments will perhaps be triggered by her curious panoramic perceptions of the discipline. Most will probably arise because she attempted to use Hitchcock's rise to worldwide fame to survey the international paths of five successful Spanish-speaking directors, whose successful crossover to Hollywood has already triggered many controversies about the nature of a distinctive national cinema, which is simultaneously transnational and commercially viable.