

Riding on divergent but similar roads: *Airbag* or the Spanish experience of the American road movie

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ABSTRACT

The prolific number of road movies made in the 1990s in Spain constitutes a significant sign of the European importation of this genuinely American film genre.

This paper explores the contribution of the road genre to the specific ways in which US culture permeates European culture, by examining what happens when such an American icon as the road is assimilated by Spanish contemporary cinema. In this paper I will concentrate on the popular Spanish road comedy, *Airbag* (Juan Manuel Bajo Ulloa, 1997) to examine how an American formula is “translated” into a Spanish context, becoming significant in Spanish culture. This paper will analyse the negotiation between what is specifically Spanish in the film, mainly its humour, within a Hollywood framework of male action on the road.

Key words: Road movie, “gross-out” cinema, Spanish Americanization, generic and cross-cultural transposition, Spanish humour.

Carreteras divergentes pero parecidas: *Airbag* o la experiencia española del cine de carretera estadounidense

RESUMEN

La gran proliferación de películas de carretera españolas durante la década de los noventa constituye una prueba fehaciente de la importación en Europa de este género cinematográfico genuinamente americano.

Este artículo explora la contribución del cine de carretera en el trasvase cultural estadounidense en Europa, examinando lo que ocurre cuando el cine español contemporáneo asimila un icono tan americano como la carretera. Este artículo analiza en profundidad la comedia española de carretera más popular de todos los tiempos, *Airbag* (Juan Manuel Bajo Ulloa, 1997), estudiando como una fórmula norteamericana se traduce a un contexto español y consigue cierta relevancia en la cultura española. Este artículo analiza la negociación entre lo que es específicamente español en la película, fundamentalmente el humor, y un marco Hollywoodiense de acción masculina en la carretera.

Palabras clave: Película de carretera, cine “gamberro”, americanización española, trasvase genérico y cultural, humor español.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The road movie, like the musical or the Western, is a Hollywood genre that catches peculiarly American dreams, tensions, and anxieties, even when imported by the motion picture industries of other nations (Cohan and Hark, 1997: 2).

The fluid genre of the road movie has room for protagonists of any nationality, gender, race and sexual orientation (Roberts, 1997: 61).

After giving the road movie the status of a film genre in *The Road Movie Book*, 1997, Steven Cohan, Ina Rae Hark and Shari Roberts argue that, despite its undeniable American origins, the road movie is a genre that has now opened up its scope to other nationalities. Although “the automobile culture is coterminous with Americanism” (Mottram, 1983: 88), nowadays all sorts of characters, regardless of their country of origin, can feel the call of the road either to escape from an unfulfilling present or to experience new adventures in a car. This does not only mean that we may find foreign riders in US American road movies like *Stranger than Paradise*, 1984 or *Bagdad Café*, 1988. What is significant for this study is the great number of European road movies made in the last decade of the 20th century, a phenomenon which constitutes a significant sign of the European importation of its American cultural codes.

After clarifying the concept of genre as a context where a film may be read, this paper examines the generic conventions that facilitate generic recognition, contextualization and understanding in our case study: the road movie. But the main aim of this paper is to explore the contribution of the road genre to the specific ways in which US culture permeates European culture, by examining what happens when such an American icon as the road is assimilated by Spanish contemporary cinema. In this paper I will concentrate on the extremely popular Spanish road comedy, *Airbag*, 1997, in order to look at the ways in which an American formula is “translated” into a Spanish context, becoming significant or having some sort of impact in Spanish culture.

2. THE ROAD MOVIE AS A FILM GENRE

Although a closed list of film titles may actually work as an effective descriptive tool for the average viewer, a film genre cannot be understood exclusively as a fixed list of films, as the corpus-based approach suggests. The hybrid nature of genre, its blurred borderlines make this approach to genre not fully satisfying, as happens with the historical approach, which usually circumscribes a given genre to a fixed,

inaccurate and narrow time sequence. On average, these approaches provide a list of films including only emblematic titles which are wholly and exclusively identified with one genre and/or one period. Similarly, although generic conventions are essential generic markers, they are neither constant nor genre exclusive, since both their cross-generic use, and their presence along history may change them.

As regards our case study, the road movie, the historical approach to genre sometimes leads to the late dating of its birth, since it discards some early films made before Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, 1969, which may perfectly well be read in the road movie context, among others¹. Furthermore, the corpus-based approach proves rather restrictive because it discards films that may show a rich cross-generic nature². This is why the strategy that Tom Ryall offers seems more reliable and useful:

Questions of generic membership —‘To what genre does this film belong to?’— become less relevant. Indeed, alternative questions such as ‘What genre or genres constitute an effective and pertinent context for the reading of this film? What is the world(s) evoked which make the film be understood, its narrative trajectory anticipated and its characters constructed, and so on?’ (1998: 336).

Therefore, a concept of genre as a constraining and closed corpus-based group is replaced by the more flexible and open idea of genre as a context in which meaning is created (Douglas Pye in Maltby and Craven's, 1995: 109), a context “for the approach to an individual work” (Yacowar in Maltby and Craven's, 1995: 233). Accordingly, generic context stands out as more significant than generic membership in this approach. Therefore, we need to analyse the rich combination of conventions relating to location, subject matter, character-typing, costume, locomotion or weaponry, that in different ways and to different extents make up the generic context of the road movie. A car on its own does not necessarily mark a road movie. But when this car is framed in a meaningful wide open roadscape, along a journey whose encounters and events are more important than its destination, when this journey presents the metamorphosis of the film protagonists and they are depicted by means of cast, costume, flags or road excess in the form of guns, sex or drugs, we will most likely be watching a road movie. It is within this generic context, among others³, that we may read or understand a representative road movie, Juan Manuel Bajo Ulloa's *Airbag*, the film which I am going to analyse in this paper.

¹ Think for example of *You Only Live Once* (Fritz Lang, 1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1939), *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1949), or *They Live by Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1949).

² For example, *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) is usually labelled as a gangster film and *Duel* (Steven Spielberg, 1972) as a thriller and not as road movies.

³ These are mainly the male buddy action film and the comedy.

3. THE EUROPEAN BACKGROUND OF THE US ROAD MOVIE

First of all, it is worth mentioning here that Europeans already loved road films in the 60s and 70s. As Richard Pells recalls “Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* was to have been originally directed by Truffaut or Godard” (1997: 228), and remarkable movies like “*Easy Rider* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* were especially successful among the American youth cult audience, the same core audience for European films” (Laderman, 2000: 75). These films represented the counterculture and a more independent and subversive way of making films which connected with the European New Wave cinemas. As David Laderman mentions, the New Hollywood of films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*

was characterized by a crosscultural interactivity (e.g. European cinematographers teaming up with “film school”(generation American directors; international coproductions) and an independent sensibility. This independent sensibility was perhaps best exemplified by the road movie (2000: 75).

Nowadays, the genre’s travelling storyline still promotes an international scope that has resulted in international coproductions, casts and settings: European and US American (*Stranger than Paradise*, *The Doom Generation*, *Lost Highway*, *Jeepers Creepers*) and also European and Mexican (*Deep Crimson*, *Perdita Durango*, *Highway Patrolman* and *Y Tu Mamá También*, etc). The road genre has been in regular contact with what critics denominate “the European Way of Seeing”, (Jones, 1996: 46) either through a variety of European émigré directors like Wim Wenders, Ridley Scott, Richard Sarafian, Michaelangelo Antonioni or Alex Cox or through the work of independent American directors with a “European sensibility” and financing like Jim Jarmusch and David Lynch.

However, as Paul Willemen argues, a film’s nationality “is primarily a question of address, rather than a matter of the filmmaker’s citizenship or even the production finance’s country of origin” (1994: 212). So, what happens when an essentially American genre is addressed to a European audience? Or as Eyerman and Löfgren have put it: “If the road movie is particularly American, why have European (and in this case, Spanish) directors been so fascinated by this genre and why are they finding an audience across the Atlantic?” (1995: 54). As the ever increasing road movie production shows, European audiences have responded enthusiastically to the universal appeal and vicarious pleasure of the genre’s essential search for freedom.

3.1. THE SPANISH ROAD MOVIE: ANTECEDENTS AND PRESENT SITUATION

Spanish audiences in particular may feel an extra appeal to the genre, given our country’s history of migration within Spain or to other countries like France, Germany or even to America. The Basque people, the main group represented in this film, are a good illustration of this long tradition of migration to the United

States, popularly called “to make The Americas”⁴. In addition, Spanish Golden Age literature already offers what could be considered a precedent of the road movie, the picaresque novels of heroes on the road, like *El Lazarillo de Tormes*, *El Buscón* Don Pablos, and of course, *Don Quijote de La Mancha*. The influence of these nomadic stories can also be seen in Spanish films of the 1980s like *La hora bruja* (Jaime de Armiñán, 1985), *Viaje a ninguna parte* (Fernando Fernán Gómez, 1986), and *Ay Carmela!* (Carlos Saura, 1989), which narrated stories of theatre troupes across Spain. But it was in the 1990s that the Spanish road movie came into its own with films such as: *Jamón, jamón*, 1992, *Hola, estás sola?*, 1995, *Carreteras secundarias*, 1997, *Los años bárbaros*, 1998, *Lisboa*, 1998, *Perdita Durango*, 1999, and this trend has continued at the turn of the century with the following road films: *Carretera y manta*, 2000, *Fugitivas*, 2000, *Kasbah*, 2001 or *Slam*, 2003. The most popular of these road movies, and one of the most successful Spanish films of the 1990s at the box office was Juan Manuel Bajo Ulloa’s *Airbag*.

4. JUAN MANUEL BAJO ULLOA’S AIRBAG: AN AMERICANIZED SPANISH ROAD MOVIE

After a family party where he is offered a valuable engagement ring, Juantxo, (played by Karra Elejalde), a well-off, red-haired 30 year-old, is dragged into a brothel by his friends Konradín (Fernando Guillén Cuervo), and Pako (Alberto San Juan), on his stag night. There, he loses the ring inside the body of a prostitute with whom he surprisingly falls in love. In an attempt to recover the ring the three men set out on a crazy three day trip from brothel to brothel during which they get involved in a war between two mafia gangs. Villambrosa (Francisco Rabal), a mafioso warehouse owner and gang leader, refuses to give the ring back to Juantxo, while his Portuguese rival, Souza (Luis Cuenca), sends *femme fatale* Fátima Do Spirito Santo (María de Medeiros) to supervise things. In their search for the ring beyond the Basque country, the place where the journey starts, these three upper-class guys come across vice in its most varied forms: drugs, corruption, prostitution, gambling, etc, all surrounded by excessive violence. Eventually, Juantxo will recover his wedding ring just before the wedding ceremony only to cancel it and leave with Vanessa, (Vicenta Ndongu), the prostitute he lost the ring and his virginity with.

When asked about his opinion on the road movie, Juanma Bajo Ulloa denies any intention or interest in producing a film belonging to a specific generic taxonomy⁵. He believes these are labels film critics put to films once they are finished⁶. But when the director of *Airbag* mentions his interest in metamorphosis, we can discern the essence of the road genre:

⁴ Literally translated from the Spanish expression: *hacer las Américas*.

⁵ Bajo Ulloa’s opinions are taken from a personal interview held on the 22nd April 2002 in Pamplona and have been translated into English by the author of this article.

⁶ It is remarkable though, that Bajo Ulloa contradicts himself later on in the interview when he states that he wanted “to mock the conventions of the road movie, to try to be critical with North American genre cinema”, which proves his awareness and capitalization on this genre.

We wanted to tell a story in which some snobs, some real snobs, some bourgeois men with their own prejudice, information, problems and beliefs become different people for some hours, some days and some distance. That was my intention. Apart from entertainment and criticism what I was most interested in was —and I think this happens in all my films— to tell how a person is one way but becomes a totally different person after some vicissitudes and anecdotes that happen to him along a few days. It is metamorphosis that I am interested in, all the rest is anecdotal.

Like the US hero, Juan txo undergoes the generic metamorphosis of the journey, changing from being childish to more liberated and mature in only a few days. Thanks to his experience and encounters on the road he loses his virginity, gets drunk and stoned, shoots and plays Russian roulette with the mafia, and learns to show the same courage and self-assertiveness as his father. Eventually, this transformation makes him change partners, rejecting an aristocratic girlfriend for a mixed-race prostitute, and, as the end of the film suggests, leaving a comfortable and safe bourgeois lifestyle for a more liberal one on the road. Indeed *Airbag*'s metamorphical journey through the Iberian peninsula can be paralleled to its American counterpart. In US American road movies the journey is geographically and symbolically marked as a flight from the domestic values represented by the East to the more liberal South-West, usually across the Mexican border. In Spanish road movies the metamorphical journey through the peninsula may follow the directions marked by the three borders: to the North, South or West and thus lead to France (*Carretera y Manta*, *Los Años Bárbaros*), Morocco (*Kasbah*, *Fugitivas*) or Portugal (*Lisboa*) respectively. But in *Airbag*, borderlines and directions are blurred and the journey is cyclical, because it returns to its original starting point, back in the Basque country. But the journey does not end here. After the three heroes arrive at the wedding reception, Juan txo rejects his blonde, upper-class fiancée for the mixed race prostitute, with whom he gets on the road again, thus providing an open-ended generic liberal ending which rejects patriarchal values and is great fun to watch.

It is also worth mentioning here that the symbolic power of the most fetishized element in a road movie, the car, both follows the average US American road film but also distances from it. On the one hand, car chauvinism seems understandable in a country with a huge geographical extension, cheap petrol and such an old car history as the United States. Indeed, the car is a priceless possession for all road movie protagonists, irrespectively of class, because it represents the key to metamorphosis, freedom, adventure, liberty of movement and/or escape from constraints or the law. However, in *Airbag*, the ownership of a private vehicle is clearly emblematic of class privilege (and, as I illustrate later on, the Spanish upper class is ridiculed all along the film). In this road movie the car is presented as an access tool for experiences that may be easily left behind or changed for another means of transport. This criticises the throw-away politics of a Spanish upper-class based on consumerism and where men in their thirties are still jobless and living off their parents. This is exactly what *Airbag*'s protagonists do. Given their wealthy condition and the fact that Konradín's father owns a car dealer's firm, after their car

explodes they just drive another one and they mind neither the explosion nor the change. Therefore, the car in *Airbag* does not reach such a high status and protagonism as the average US American road movie since its drivers do not seem to profess a true attachment to it. What is also significant regarding the means of transport is that the main car the protagonists travel with is a clear example of European and American hybridization in the film since it is remarkably a “Starsky and Hutch model” which is in fact “a Volvo, the European car par excellence and the paradigm of safety par excellence” (Bajo Ulloa). Furthermore, among the vehicles present in the film we see a huge truck and a yellow school bus, which give the film an American look. Apart from this, *Airbag* shows some further elements of “Americanization”, which Bajo Ulloa fully admits and calls aesthetics *a la americana*. Some settings like the desert (shot in Las Bardenas Reales, Navarre), which recalls the Mojave desert, and the *Kokotxa Club*, the *Little House in the Prairie* (whose names have Basque and US American connotations) and The Great Casino in Santander show the director’s intention to offer a Spanish equivalent of American deserts, casinos and road clubs (some of them genuine). All in all, as Bajo Ulloa reminds us, these settings are also rather Hispanic, mostly shot in Mexico. He admits this intention to reproduce the American aesthetics of the genre when he states that: “this journey goes from the Basque country to Galicia but it surprisingly crosses the desert”.

But what I am more interested in, however, is the observation in *Airbag* of how a quintessentially American genre sells its nationally specific cultural mechanisms in Spain. The process of US cultural integration is not clear-cut in *Airbag*, but the result of a negotiation between what is genuinely American and the Spanish elements of the film.

The film certainly shows a rich, true-born Spanish flavour, which is not to be confused with a nationalistic content. Most US road movies are full of American values and symbols like US flags on jackets, caps, petrol stations and tanks, etc. This high nationalistic element is very rare in a Spanish film, let alone a road film. The Spanishness of *Airbag* is layered on the US specific conventions of the genre. It lies in its depiction of popular customs and hobbies, in its use of *mise-en-scène*, character development (though shallow and stereotyped) and soundtrack, and especially in its sense of humour. The following examples are an illustration of this. The opening credits show a Basque pelota match, which is really anecdotal since it does not introduce or anticipate the film’s plot. The Spaniards’ devotion to football appears several times (Villambrosa watches it in his car, while Pazos, his assistant, confesses to be a *Deportivo*⁷ supporter and uses a football field as a mafia meeting place). Spanishness is also presented through regionalisms and nationalisms. We get a funny mixture of Basque, Galician and Portuguese⁸ characters, accents and folk songs and dances. A Spanish viewer may also laugh at the sight of a casino croupier

⁷ This is a popular Galician football team.

⁸ The presence of Portuguese, South American and black characters points to the director’s intention to include “the representation of crosscultural, hybrid identities in ‘national’ films” (Higson, 2000: 205).

wearing the regular attire of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela and of a black Basque Governor (something still very unlikely in this country and therefore amusing). We may feel identified with certain popular activities such as playing cards, watching South American soap operas on television, betting or drinking too much and singing popular songs while trying to be friendly, as Juantxo and Pazos do during their first meeting. Some Spanish connotations are also to be found in the scene of the “Russian Omelette”, where five people play Russian roulette with a deadly mushroom omelette. Spanish viewers may identify here either with betting, mushroom picking (a highly popular tradition for the Basque), or with the overconfident attitude presented by Juantxo’s father, who insists on eating his omelette although he knows it is poisonous and even demands some bread and wine to go with it. Some other funny moments in the film depict the current Spanish obsession with learning languages (prostitutes learning English in a brothel with an audio method) and the country’s derisory view of its own technology (the airbag does not function, and a confusion with mobile phones results in a shootout).

In addition, we witness a humorous and accumulative critique of powerful institutions in Spain, like the aristocracy, the Catholic church, the Civil Guards and politicians. The high relevance of some of these institutions in Spain has no pure equivalent in US road movies. As Bajo Ulloa explains: “I wanted to mock a specific group of people, to criticize what is politically correct, what is predetermined and inhibiting”. Thus, that which is established, straight-laced and politically correct is firstly represented in *Airbag* through religion, which is satirized mainly through the character of the “postmodern Catholic priest” (Albert Plá), who gives confession on his mobile phone, sings pop songs in a brothel and curses using God’s name. In addition, the law in this and other Spanish road movies is a further institution which is ridiculed and feared. In *Airbag*, as in *Los Años Bárbaros*, Spanish law, represented by the Spanish Civil Guards is parodied: these characters are very aggressive, cocky, dumb and go to brothels with their three-cornered hats on. Finally, the upper class and the aristocracy are also derided throughout the film. Aurora (Rosa María Sardá), Juantxo’s future mother-in-law, represents ambition and dishonesty, since she sponsors and has sex with powerful corrupt people in order to achieve her goals. One of these is a pederast (Santiago Segura), who represents Spanish corrupt political power. In addition, the upper-class is also ridiculed through the three antiheroes, who seem to recover the ring just out of luck and improvisation, not wit. They constitute three easily recognizable character types: Konradín as the crazy scientist, Pako as the tough guy and finally Juantxo as the faint-hearted wimp (who also represents the ineffectiveness of the Law since this is his career). The presence of upper-class protagonists, which is highly unusual both in US and Spanish road movies (except for some yuppie road movies of the 80s), promotes in *Airbag* the critique of the social class they represent. If, in addition, these upper-class people socialize with the lower classes including prostitutes, pimps, drug dealers and mobsters, the resulting colourful melting pot enhances the film’s comic effect.

Another humorous element which attempts to describe our country is our tendency to talk a lot, sometimes like Pazos, Villambrosa’s assistant, using mispronounced,

fixed expressions which prove meaningless in the wrong context. Some of his silly, empty phrases like: “the concert is the concert” and “professional, very professional” or “I refer to the existing evidence”, proved very funny and popular among Spanish youngsters. We also laugh at his wrong use of the words “microwave” and “parabolic” referring to his mobile phone or when he insists in enumerating with A and B the points he wants to make, which are really non-existent. Remarkably, this highly successful verbal and local humour limits the film’s distribution abroad to only a few Spanish-speaking countries like Argentina and Cuba. As Bajo Ulloa comments:

If I were to make a film for Europe I would use a different type of humour... the humour in *Airbag* is local. A Spaniard finds it funny to botch things, to see a fellow countryman doing some shoddy work. There is no exact translation to the word *chapucero* into English. Jokes cannot be translated. Too many changes should be made.

Indeed, if it were to succeed abroad, the film’s humour should be changed, perhaps relying more on visual and physical elements than on local and verbal ones, especially those which cannot be translated effectively.

But what is significant is the film’s negotiation between this typically Spanish black humour, which recalls Berlanga and early Almodóvar’s cinema, and US action cinema. As Bajo Ulloa claims, with *Airbag* he wanted to make a popular, commercial film with a lot of characters, action and adventure. But he also wanted the jokes to be ours and to escape from the usual Spanish comedy showing Jorge Sanz running after Maribel Verdú. Indeed, he succeeded in making an entertaining product by placing this Spanish humour within a Hollywood action framework. Remarkably, the violence included in the action is presented in a humorous tone since, despite the shooting, there is no blood-shed in the film. Unlike Spanish cinema in general and other Spanish road movies like *Lisboa* or *Fugitivas*, which rely on character and story development, *Airbag* relies on excessive action, violence and visual elements to the detriment of plot and dialogue (it won the Goya prize, the Spanish equivalent of the Oscars, for best special effects and best editing in 1998). As *Airbag*’s director comments, it proved really hard to make an action film in Spain, “a country where you can only shoot people talking”. His priority, which is at the same time his main merit, was to make a film where technological means of quality could be appreciated. Doing this in a country where there are no specialists in every field and no prior experience in action cinema is a fight *contra natura*, as was selling the film as a concept. *Airbag* had to look and sound real, which for Bajo Ulloa means also American since he strongly believes that Hollywood action cinema is the best. Indeed, *Airbag*’s special effects and cartoon or comic strip aesthetics may remind the viewer of other US action road movies. Its absurd, surrealistic touch, uncommon in the road genre, recalls Robert Rodríguez’s *From Dusk till Dawn*, 1996, its excessive violence, prostitution and drug dealing point to Tony Scott’s *True Romance*, 1993, and its triggering plotline and teenpic look makes us think of a film like *Road Trip*, 2000, by Philip Todd. And some absurd

scenes and part of the soundtrack look very “Tarantinian”. Furthermore, it is significant that *Airbag*, unlike most Spanish road movies of the 1990s, follows Hollywood’s tendency to associate action with maleness. Curiously, the average Spanish road movie stars runaway women either in heterosexual couples (*Los años Bárbaros*, *Carretera y manta*, *Lisboa*) or female duos and trios (*Hola, estás sola?*, *Fugitivas*, *Cuando vuelvas a mi lado*, 1999). But these are not films including such a great dose of action-adventure and humour. When asked about the representation of gender in his film, Juan Manuel Bajo Ulloa shows a sexist and old-fashioned stance. He claims that women do not like cars or weapons, and thus, cannot have a leading role as road protagonists in a film like *Airbag* because they are pathetic and not credible when placed to act like aggressive men. He tries to justify the negative representation of women in his film (they are either prostitutes or manipulative devils) by saying that, although they remain in the shadow of men, women in *Airbag* are the ones who pull the strings of the action, the same as in real life. This retrograde statement recalls the average treatment of women in westerns and early road movies, which were essentially male. Thus, *Airbag*’s male protagonism is not coincidental but constitutes another American element present in the film which follows Hollywood gender standards as regards action genres. However, it is worth mentioning here that among the action genres, the road movie has had a reputation for widening its gender stance towards the representation of other gender combinations and sexual tendencies, a trend that Bajo Ulloa’s film does not observe, since it sticks to the old male buddy formula of protagonism, relegating women to a peripheral and degrading role. Unfortunately, Bajo Ulloa is disguising a gender bias within a genre like the road movie, popularly conceived as liberal. This is what happened in Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider*, but that was three decades before and the film was highly subversive and controversial at other levels for its day⁹.

All in all, the protagonists in *Airbag* are all men who suffer a transformation by the end of the film whereby they are not stupid any more. Furthermore, Bajo Ulloa states that he chose three men to star the film not in order to relieve the homosexual anxiety that two men would have aroused, but to create conflict and promote dialogue. He believes three is the best option since there is nearly always a disagreement and someone can change sides to have a majority. As Bajo Ulloa comments, apart from the universal appeal of humour,

Airbag was a hit because it is an uninhibited, amusing, and hot film. Everything that has to do with adrenalin: running, cocaine, sex and rock and roll is something that, on the one hand, attracts men but on the other, women like men for.

Thus, *Airbag* stars male buddies having excessive experiences on the road, which may cater for a wider audience appeal and therefore prove more profitable.

⁹ This film’s celebration of marginal culture: free love, hippy communes, alcoholism and drugs was really new and controversial, as was the film’s criticism of “America the ugly” (Klinger, 1997: 181), of a fascistic and bigoted America, especially through its violent ending.

Despite the boycott campaign against the film that Bajo Ulloa claims and complains about, after its release there was a word-of-mouth promotion which proved highly effective. Indeed the cross-cultural mixture of Americanness and Spanishness in the film “went like a bomb” or rather, like an exploding airbag. For a Spanish film, *Airbag* was a great budget investment which became a great box-office success (it made 7,200,000 euros). In general, as I have suggested before, the film’s production values also follow Hollywood’s models. It included a well-known, attractive cast full of cameos including Santiago Segura, Javier Bardem, Olvido Gara, *Alaska*, Julio Medem and some popular television figures. But, Bajo Ulloa denies having used cameos as a source of audience attraction, which is common practice in Hollywood cinema, something he also disagrees with. Surprisingly, he argues that his cameos are different because he does not use them to divert attention but in a credible role different from their own occupation. He places popular people like the Spanish chef Arguiñano or the singer Albert Plá, playing a mobster and a priest, respectively. He also placed some peripheral famous people for the spectator to play a game of recognition. Anything for the sake of fun. But although these cameos certainly constitute another source of humour in the film, this does not prevent them from being a distracting formula originally used by US American cinema which promotes higher audience rates. It is surprising though that, despite its appropriate narrative structure, *Airbag* did not exploit any video game or related theme park ride, something unthinkable in mainstream contemporary Hollywood cinema.

Bajo Ulloa proved that American marketing strategies and the Tarantino-Rodríguez aesthetic worked also for a Spanish audience when applied to a Spanish context and humour. *Airbag* really became the Spanish model for a *cine gamberro* or gross-out cinema, whose first priority is to entertain no matter the cost. This may account for some surrealistic scenes in the film which are not justified by the plot. An extradiegetic hand offers the three protagonists an energetic drink through the car roof while they are travelling (which obviously mocks advertising) and a mobster like Fátima Do Spirito Santo suddenly starts to levitate. *Airbag*’s success triggered films like *Torrente, el Brazo Tonto de la Ley*, 1998, and *Torrente 2: Misión en Marbella*, 2001, both by Santiago Segura (the child abuser politician in *Airbag*), *Año Mariano*, 2000, by Karra Elejalde (who also plays *Airbag*’s protagonist), *Perdita Durango* by Alex De la Iglesia and *Slam* by Miguel Martí.

5. CONCLUSION

As a product of the transposition of a genuinely American genre to a Spanish context, *Airbag* shows an explosive mixture of Spanish and American ingredients. Bajo Ulloa intended to “use our ingredients, what is genuinely Spanish but with some American aesthetics and showmaking”. Indeed, this road film presents this intention to “Americanize” vehicles and settings, to show the Spanish equivalent of American road clubs, casinos and landscape and to frame them within a Hollywood action spectacle of visual and aural stimulation through crashes, explosions and

chases. Furthermore, despite the lack of a border, the protagonists' metamorphosis through a journey of initiation follows American standards. But what is really significant here is the integration of what is specifically Spanish in the film, mainly its successful humour, heir to a long and very fruitful national tradition, within a Hollywood framework of male action on the road.

In fact, the Spanish sense of humour may be working, in a more important way, towards undermining the US imported generic conventions. This implicit critique, however is highly compromised. The success of the film may be due equally to its irreverent attempt to "Hispanisize", and therefore distance itself from American cultural and filmic codes and to its shameless exploitation of a well-known formula. Spanish audiences responded favorably to the film because of its Spanishness and because of its Americanness (after all we are talking about a country in which four out of five films seen by the spectators come from Hollywood, but also a place where national cinema has fortunately experienced a commercial renaissance in the last few years). You may have noticed that I started talking about the road movie as a template for *Airbag* and I have finished referring to the male action road movie. In exploiting one of the most popular of the recent Hollywood configurations, the male buddy action film, *Airbag's* director has made a sly, typically postmodern move: he has turned a genre like the road movie (with a traditional liberal pedigree) into a commercially secure formula. Its apparently iconoclastic take on this formula can barely hide its ultimate allegiance to it. The film's sense of humour, its most distinctly Spanish feature, may flaunt an irreverence towards both contemporary Spanish society and towards its own Hollywood models, but it is also a colonized sense of humour: one that is finally appropriated by a domestic industry which, in reproducing the methods of its powerful big brother reveals its ultimate cultural dependence on it. As far as Spanish cinema is concerned, Bajo Ulloa's film constitutes a brave, praiseworthy and successful attempt to experiment with something new. But although his film is a witty illustration that with the right funding Spanish cinema can also offer entertaining, visually and aurally spectacular films full of action, speed and shooting, it is also true that the road in *Airbag* leads inevitably to the other side of the Atlantic.

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