

Carmen Machi / Carmen mother¹

Asier Gil Vázquez

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (España) 

Ana Mejón

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (España) 

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ENG

Abstract. Carmen Machi is one of Spain's most renowned actresses, with an extensive career spanning film, television, and theatre. She rose to fame through the character Aída García García in *7 vidas* and its spin-off *Aída*, where she portrayed a working-class, resilient mother figure—embodying a notion of the 'authentic Spanish woman'. This role cemented her status as a character actress often associated with marginal and peripheral identities, distant from conventional beauty standards. Nevertheless, Machi has demonstrated remarkable versatility, taking on both comedic and dramatic roles, in leading and supporting capacities. The video essay focuses on her maternal portrayals, a recurring element in her career, to explore the tensions between typecasting and diversity. It reveals how Machi reconfigures the archetype of the Spanish mother across different genres and contexts, while also reflecting contemporary feminist debates on motherhood and media representation.

Keywords: actress; motherhood; Spanish film; Spanish television; typecasting.

ESP Carmen Machi / Carmen madre

ESP

Resumen. Carmen Machi es una de las actrices más populares de España, con una trayectoria destacada en cine, televisión y teatro. Saltó a la fama con el personaje de Aída García García en *7 vidas* y su spin-off *Aída*, donde interpretó a una mujer trabajadora, madre y luchadora, encarnando una idea de 'mujer española auténtica'. Este rol consolidó su imagen de actriz de carácter, muchas veces asociada a lo marginal y periférico, lejos de los estándares de belleza tradicionales. A pesar de ello, Machi ha demostrado gran versatilidad con papeles cómicos y dramáticos, protagonistas y secundarios. El vídeo ensayo se centra en sus personajes maternos, figura recurrente en su carrera, para analizar las tensiones entre encasillamiento y diversidad. Así, se revela cómo Machi reinterpreta el arquetipo de madre española en distintos contextos y géneros, reflejando también debates feministas actuales.

Palabras clave: actriz; cine español; encasillamiento; maternidad; televisión española.

Summary. 1. Written statement. 2. Data availability. 3. Authorship contribution statement. 4. LLM use statement. 5. References.

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1. Written statement

Carmen Machi (Madrid, 1963) is one of the most popular film, television, and theatre actresses in Spain. Among her more than seventy film and television credits are collaborations with Pedro Almodóvar and major box-office successes such as *Spanish Affair* (*Ocho apellidos vascos*, Emilio Martínez Lázaro, 2013), which became the highest-grossing Spanish film with 9,397,758 cinemagoers. Her acting style aligns with the tradition of character actresses who, due to a physical appearance that diverges from conventional beauty standards, are often relegated to supporting roles—typically in comedic portrayals of everyday women (Gil Vázquez, 2021). This notion is illustrated in the excerpt from her interview on the programme *Las tres puertas* (TVE, 2022–2023), broadcast on 16 February 2022, which opens the video essay. Nevertheless, Machi has performed in both comedic and dramatic roles, leading and supporting, and has successfully navigated various media, genres, and cinematic movements. Through the recurring figure of the mother—a constant in her career—this piece constructs an alphabet of her roles to explore the tensions between typecasting and versatility.

Understanding the early stages of her career is key, particularly the character that brought her widespread recognition: Aída García García. With nearly twenty years of theatre experience, Machi was performing at the Teatro de la Abadía (in central Madrid) when the renowned casting director Luis San Narciso noticed her and offered her a guest role in the series *7 vidas* (Telecinco, 1999–2006), where she played a domestic worker hired by the main characters (Torreiro and Mejón, 2018). At the time, the series averaged four million viewers, and her character quickly evolved from a guest appearance to a recurring and eventually central role. As the narrative developed, her character became increasingly caricatured, with humour often stemming from her proletarian status: she lived in a troubled neighbourhood, had been abandoned by her husband, had a juvenile delinquent son, and, for two seasons, struggled with alcohol. Her lack of education, vulgarity, histrionics, and physical appearance were frequently subjects of ridicule, although at times she proved more astute and resourceful than the other characters. Machi exaggerated these traits with a shrill tone, a dishevelled air, and a slouched posture—shoulders hunched and head lowered, almost stooped.

The audience's strong connection with the character led to the spin-off *Aída* (Telecinco, 2005–2014), her greatest success, in which she assumed the leading role. The series was set in the fictional neighborhood of Esperanza Sur. Notably, in its early seasons, the show drew even larger audiences than *7 vidas*, attracting between five and six million viewers in four of its first five seasons. This popular response may be attributed not only to Aída's character but also to the show's embodiment of a recognisably Spanish authenticity—one that resonated more directly with audiences than the more globalised and middle-class aesthetic of *7 vidas*, a Spanish adaptation of the American sitcom *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004). While elusive, the notion of authenticity is often constructed around a 'fetish of origin' and articulated through dichotomies that valorise marginal and peripheral spaces—such as the shift from the city centre in *7 vidas* to the working-class neighborhood in *Aída*, with its stories of survival.

In this series, where she became a lead actress for the first time, Aída García García acquired a new dimension, as the narrative delved more deeply into her dramatic conflicts and solidified her image as a comedic underdog, a tenacious mother, and a working-class woman who perseveres against all odds. Manuel Palacio (2024, p. 180) identifies this series as representative of a trend in television fiction that foregrounds 'empowered women'. It is here that what might be called the 'Machi formula' takes shape. While in *7 vidas* the character was primarily defined by her social class, in *Aída* this was complemented by her role as a mother who confronts adversity with humour and strength. It is worth noting that the show's final seasons coincided with the 2008 economic crisis, a period that significantly influenced cultural and cinematic production (Mejón and Romero Santos, 2017). From this point onwards, Machi's characters tend to revolve around three recurring elements: peripheral settings (mainly working-class neighbourhoods or rural areas), maternal figures, and lives marked by adversity—poverty, illness, loss, or abuse—from which the characters manage to emerge.

The video essay focuses on maternal roles as a narrative thread. This focus is justified for two reasons. Firstly, as previously noted, motherhood is a key component in shaping Machi's star image—at least on screen, as the actress herself does not have children. Secondly, because of the relevance of motherhood and its media representations in current feminist debates (Carrera and Ciller, 2021). On the one hand, the essay highlights the diversity of maternal images portrayed in recent years; on the other, it exposes the limitations of the concept of typecasting commonly associated with character actresses. Rather than a simple repetition of the same role, we observe how the actress's 'mask' is continually reworked to present various interpretations of Spanish motherhood, across different genres and registers.

While Carmen Machi's maternal figures can be situated within a broader genealogy of Spanish motherhood shaped by Catholic morality and neoliberal individualism, it would be reductive to read her performances as direct reflections of those historical frameworks. Within the same year, Machi might embody both a sinister and a

nurturing mother, revealing that her screen presence resists a single ideological interpretation. Rather than serving as a stable emblem of national womanhood, Machi's corporeality and star image operate as a kind of malleable semiotic resource that can be reconfigured through different cinematic genres, tonal registers, and aesthetic conventions, each offering a distinct articulation of motherhood in contemporary Spain.

It is precisely Machi's non-canonical physicality, together with her ability to move seamlessly between naturalist, comic, and even grotesque registers, that has enabled her to cultivate a form of versatility within typecasting itself. A survey of her film and television roles reveals that motherhood remains one of the most recurrent and symbolically charged themes in contemporary Spanish fiction. The maternal figure becomes a narrative device through which broader cultural questions can be negotiated: the critique or reinforcement of the family as a social institution; the representation of diverse female subjectivities; the intersection between gender and class; and the deconstruction, or at times reassertion, of traditional images of Spanish femininity.

Machi's distance from normative standards of beauty displaces the idealized vision of youthful, flawless motherhood (an ideal that Annie Ernaux critiques in our opening quotation). Instead, she foregrounds what we might call a 'side B' of maternal experience, one marked by imperfection, emotional conflict, and alternative ways of loving and feeling. Her performances thus do not aim at a monolithic portrayal of motherhood, but rather at an exploration of its heterogeneity. Across her many maternal roles, Machi stages motherhood as a field of contradiction, multiplicity, and affective ambivalence; precisely the kind of complexity to which Ernaux alludes in the latter part of her cited reflection.

2. Data availability

The videoessay is publicly available on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/1136973989?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

3. Authorship contribution statement

Asier Gil Vázquez – conceptualization, resources, writing.

Ana Mejón – conceptualization, resources, visualization.

4. LLM use statement

This article has not used any text generated by an LLM (ChatGPT or other) for its writing.

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