

Bodies, Spaces, and Transitions
in Alberto Rodríguez's *Grupo 7* (2012)
and *La isla mínima* (2014)

Vinodh Venkatesh

La isla mínima's (2014) recent sweep of major awards at the 29th Goya Awards comes as no surprise given the film's aesthetic experimentation, execution, and stellar performances. While film critics and casual internet reviewers have called the film Spain's version of *True Detective* (2014)—a claim that really evidences a perspective of Anglocentrism more than veritable causality as both features have parallel production dates—it must be noted that there are clear lines of continuity with Alberto Rodríguez's previous film, *Grupo 7* (2012). Salient characteristics between the two films include their similar visual style, the temporal setting of the recent Spanish past, and that both pivot around the problematic relationship between two police officers with conflicting points of view who must work through their personal and interpersonal issues while solving cases. Yet there are also thematic parallels that merit exploration, particularly in reference to the central narrative dyad between two antagonistic

V. Venkatesh (✉)
Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

masculinities and their relationship to the very different macro-spaces of the films; that is, Seville in *Grupo 7* and the rural marshlands (*marismas*) of the Guadalquivir River in *La isla mínima*. In the following pages, I am interested in how Rodríguez's films negotiate the thematics of gender within the spatial geographies of both films. In *Grupo 7*, I examine how the changing urban landscape of Seville in 1992, with its symbolic and political capital and structures, interacts with the assemblages and representations of masculinities. I argue that both units undergoing change—the men of the police unit and the city—share processes and techniques of representation that cyclically construct and then deconstruct the other. The relationship between the montage of space and gender that I tease out in this film serves as a basis for understanding the position of the female body in *La isla mínima*, a film where the urban appears off camera and out of frame as a spatial referent to which the female characters in the marshlands of Andalusia gravitate. I focus on the narrative and ethical presence of the body and its relationship to the *marismas* to probe how Rodríguez negotiates the feminine in relation to the masculinities of the detectives, and, in broader terms, the value systems of rural Spanish society in 1980. Both films, I argue, evidence in the director's work a historicizing aesthetic and linkage between the spatial and the individual that encourages re-readings of the time period—loosely linked to the Spanish Transition and its implications for contemporary Spain.

Grupo 7, the fourth film in the director's oeuvre (when receiving sole credit) is loosely based on real events surrounding the run-up to the 1992 Expo in Seville, an event that arguably marked Spain's entry into global modernity, though by 1986 measures had already been taken to integrate the country into the then European Community.¹ Set in the late 1980s, the film follows a group of detectives—Rafael, Ángel, Mateo, and Miguel—as they combat the drug trade on the streets of Seville, in a cleanup operation meant to prepare the city for the hypervigilant gaze of the media that will accompany the Expo. The development of the city, which is chronicled by a series of montages throughout the film, reflects Nathan Richardson's note that massive urbanization in Spain was “unapologetically driven by economic rather than social concerns.”² Cleaning up the streets of drugs (and the bodies that consume and traffic them) was part of preparing the aesthetics of Seville for a global eye. Rafael Cobos's script is relatively simple: cops fight criminals; cops fall into collusion with said criminals to gain inside information while still profiting from illicit information on the side; success breeds ethical

conflict and exacerbates power struggles within the group; other criminals, the media, and internal affairs discover the true nature of the unit's dealings, leading to a grand shootout wherein Ángel and Rafael emerge damaged but ultimately triumphant. Like many films that delve into the bad-cop/good-cop narrative, *Grupo 7* elicits ethical questions in an audience that must judge their actions and evolution vis-à-vis the results.

The relationship between Rafael and Ángel circumscribes the tensions extant in the development of the plot. The former is a veteran, solitary officer, seemingly broken by the death of his brother at the hands of drug use, whereas the latter is young, brash, and ambitious, his eyes set on becoming an inspector. Adding to these intrinsic differences, both men go about their police work in starkly contrasting fashions: Rafael is measured and calm, following directives and best practices, while Ángel is quick to pull the trigger, forever asserting his desire to be the dominant male in the homosocial realm they inhabit. By realm I refer to the specific sociohistoric milieu of bodies and genders, within a defined geocultural space. Any examination of the gender dynamics in the film quickly lands us at the threshold of these two men, whether as individuals grappling with their own subject formation, or in tandem as contrastive exercises in masculine becoming. The idea of becoming here is a development of Raewyn Connell's ideas on the moment of engagement, which is "an active appropriation of what was offered, a purposeful construction of a way of being in the world ... the moment in which the boy takes up the project of hegemonic masculinity as his own."³ Masculine becoming in cinema, literature, or any other cultural artifact, then, is a fictionalization of this moment within a specific narrative trajectory and realm. In the case of *Grupo 7*, it underlines the process and praxis in which the antagonistic masculinities come into being in relation to each other, the broader gendered community, and localized ideals of hegemonic masculinity.⁴

While the narrative structure of the film seems to focus on this notion of becoming, a quick examination of the visual tactics of the film suggest a separate line of inquiry: what we can note from the very beginning of *Grupo 7* is the stark linkage between the male characters and the city in which their becoming is anchored.⁵ Situated in 1987, a setting montage introduces the characters in an action sequence where the unit undertakes an initial takedown of drug traffickers in the peripheral neighborhood of Seville's La Candelaria. Panoramic and panning long shots in the opening montage are interlaced with images of blueprints

and extreme long shots of the terrain in which the Expo campus is to be erected. We see closer shots of trucks and infrastructure, on which is superimposed a note that the city “se prepara para ser escaparate del mundo en la Exposición Universal de 1992.” The setting montage establishes the spatial and politico-economic parameters of the film, locating it within a defined time-space or chronotope of recent Spanish history still very relevant in the formation of a national telos in the twenty-first-century. The action sequence that immediately follows can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a seamless progression; that is, following established narrative praxis, we move from the setting shots into the setting where the action takes place, our focus placed less on space and more on how the characters introduce the key elements to the plot. On the other hand, however, we may glean an interpretive point of inflection from this exercise by placing the narrative on a secondary plane and focusing instead on the visual coda of the montage sequence. If the montage poses broad, macro-images of the cityspace, then the subsequent action scene moves or dislocates us into the intimate viscera of the city. Nonetheless, the montage and action sequences are not necessarily narratological progressions but, instead, indicate a move toward introspection where the camera shifts the spectator’s gaze toward the actual lived space of the *escaparate*. This move highlights the anatomy of the city, asking the audience to hone in on its corporality within the changes sketched out by the montage.

The action sequence begins with over-the-back camera angles that follow Ángel through the narrow alleyways of the neighborhood. The framing of these shots emphasizes the closed-in nature of the streets, where the action that unfolds is amplified by the almost claustrophobic nature of the space. The idea of amplification—that is, of reading the narrative vis-à-vis the spatial—ominously foreshadows the later temporal jumps in the film, where single drug busts are shown as examples of a longer trajectory of police work. Meanwhile, the unit moves in on a group of *narcos*, giving chase from a dilapidated drug house to the emblematic *azoteas* of the city. The initial zoom in from the montage to the narrative is qualitatively reversed as the characters move out of the closed streets and quarters to the open rooftops where iconic architectures and steeples can be seen. Rodríguez employs longer tracking shots in the final section of the chase scene as the officers capture the dealer with the city as a backdrop. By spatially moving outward to spaces easily linked to the earlier panoramic images of the montage, the film draws attention to the wider space of the urban in relation to the takedown, thereby suturing

the dynamic male bodies of the plot to the equally dynamic city. We see echoes here of Elizabeth Grosz's reflections on the linkages between bodies and cities: the connection is not one of mirroring or reproduction, but a model that sees them "not as megalithic total entities, distinct identities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro-groupings."⁶ Ultimately, and I believe Rodríguez's film demonstrates this quite well, "the city in its particular geographical, architectural, and municipal arrangements is one particular ingredient in the social constitution of the body."⁷

The visual hermeneutics of the urban initiated in these images models the dissection of masculinities in the film. In the case of the protagonist, Ángel, we are given—as in the montage of Seville as *escaparate*—a panoramic angle as he chases down the criminals. The audience is provided with a cursory sketch of his gender composition: his actions and physical attributes correlate with the masculine leitmotiv of virility, strength, and decisiveness. We quickly learn, however, that he is not, in fact, as robust as it first appears; in a conversation with his wife, Elena, she insists in a motherly tone that he maintain a prescribed regimen to stabilize his blood sugar. This warning will prove prophetic in an instrumental scene early on when Ángel presents his candidature for the inspector rank. In a running trial, he rapidly moves to the front of the pack, following in large part the parameters of masculinity established in the opening chase sequence. Almost at the end of the race, however, he succumbs to diabetic shock, losing his chance of promotion and, more importantly, losing his position as an apical or hegemonic male within the homosocial.⁸ Just as the images of modernity and progress are debunked by the introspective images of crack houses and urban violence, the protagonist is demythified through an introspective framing angle when we see him desperately eat packets of sugar in a toilet cubicle, an act that signals the fragility of his masculine corporality and expression. Once the leader of the pack, Ángel now sits on a commode as a defeated man, his masculinity laid bare as fragile and unstable at best. The camera is placed at medium and low angles, following his hands as he injects insulin into his torso. The image cuts to a close shot of his powdered face showing signs of relief as he slowly comes out of shock. The portrayal of Ángel here is quite ironic given his drug-busting adventures throughout the film, as we are drawn to the white dust around his lips and the syringe as they evoke the drugs and *yonkis* that serve as (hierarchical and aesthetic) counterpoints to his masculine expression. The shot, furthermore builds

on the notion of sugar consumption as an addiction, albeit one sanctioned by the law, thereby demonstrating, though tangentially, the processes by which social behavior enters or is removed from acceptability.

The framing angles of this scene likewise metaphorically and visually resuscitate the initial approximation to the urban in the film. The images move us from the outdoors (where Ángel affirms his apical masculinity) to the demythifying inside of the toilet, where he sits recovering from extreme hypoglycemia. The movement from macro to micro is emphasized in the scene as the camera alternates between close shots of his body and face to slightly wider shots of him sitting on the toilet, framed by austere white-tiled walls. The angles of the walls draw the line of sight toward his gendered body—one that is studiously and repeatedly glossed over as embodying masculine visual ideals—yet also emphasize the crampedness of the space, akin to the streets early in the chase scene. The film seemingly acknowledges this dynamic when the camera focuses on his left hand touching the tile. Short in length and narratologically unimportant, the close shot of his hand resting on the tile does, however, further the connections to be made between the body and space, in a tactile gesture that acknowledges the space–body dialectic. In effect, the protagonist’s body and gender formation become an *escaparate* for the viewer in the closed space, now privy to its formation and unraveling. Importantly, this linkage suggests that Seville too—and Spain’s entry into global modernity by implication—is equally fragile, capable at any second of going into shock.

While the ontological fragility of the body/city is emphasized in the sequences culminating with Ángel entrapped in the bathroom, it is in a later scene that the film poses another characteristic of the dyad. In an important bust, Ángel slips a packet of heroin into his pants in the presence of his peers and La Caoba, an important linchpin in the local drug trade. It is his corruption of the process and integrity of police work that leads to the unit’s collusion with La Caoba to corner the market and arrest all competitors, thus setting up the film’s principal narrative and ethical knots. If Ángel—as body and acting character in the plot—is equated to the city, then the equivalency made is that Seville (and its symbolic and real positioning in the zeitgeist of the nation-state leading up to 1992) is also corrupt. A principal characteristic of the film (and one that will be repeated in *La isla mínima*) thus reveals itself: there appears an inferred critique of the present through an exposition of the past. The pinpointing of Seville in the run-up to the Expo can be seen

as a starting point for the innumerable cases of corruption and dirty politics that have plagued Spain (at least) since 2008. The connection made between the genesis of the modern Spanish global economy with the film's extradiegetic present of post-2008 crisis cannot be ignored. Rodríguez does not directly suggest causality but instead exposes the supposed (structural) integrity of the economy—metonymized by a booming Seville—as fragile, analogous to Ángel sitting on the toilet. The booming growth of the city in the montage sequences throughout the film thus paradoxically point toward the construction bubble and its subsequent bust.

The film then jumps through specific events in the coming years where the unit rises in fame and fortune, and then comes under investigation by the media and internal affairs. The quartet of officers becomes more self-assured in their ways and swagger, fully embracing their masculine position within the hierarchy of the police force and wider society. In one poignant scene, Ángel stands alone in the center of a group of apartment blocks in La Candelaria after chasing down a drug dealer. He stands erect, gun in hand, and screams for all to hear that the unit is in charge and that they are the “top dogs” in the game. The audience gathers from this show of bravado not only the group's increased presence and stature (they begin to gain official commendations as a result of their activities), but also the rising position of Ángel within the homosocial as the apical male, unafraid to display his dominance over all other gendered bodies. This is illustrated in his actions toward different femininities and queerities in the diegesis, as Ángel, like the other officers, is quick to establish a hierarchy of gender-power. In fact, in several scenes he challenges Rafael, the older patriarch of the group, overcoming his authority with physical dominance and strength. We see in all the men of the unit a growing machismo, as they display homophobic and anti-feminist behaviors in these scenes. Their physical appearance also changes, going from unkempt and disheveled to clean-cut and posh.⁹ Coinciding with these scenes is a parallel set of images where Rodríguez again uses publicity-style montages to show how fast the city is changing in preparation for the Expo. The connection to be made is succinct and simple: the city in construction is akin to the masculinities in flux, closer to assuming a final shape at the temporal endpoint of 1992.

The rise of Ángel, both as a police officer and hegemonic masculinity, however, is tempered, as he becomes the victim of a terror campaign by Amador, the kingpin caught in the first chase scene of the movie and the

drug patriarch of the Candelaria neighborhood. He and his henchmen leave messages for Ángel on his car, threatening the security of his family and himself. In a climactic image, they set the family's dog on fire, provoking not only a visceral reaction of fear in the protagonist's eyes as he gazes in shock at the animal running across the garden, but also in the audience that is unprepared for such savagery. Rodríguez effectively uses a slightly slow-motion camera in this shot not only to allow for visual focusing on the act, as we see the flames captured in a slower frame-rate while the camera moves from behind Ángel toward the garden, but to also accentuate the negative affective impulses of the image. We feel an instinctual disgust and fear, which then creates an emotive link with the protagonist, as though the spectator, too, has been threatened by the animal. The camera moving from inside the household toward the dog emphasizes this perspective, as the viewer is located from inside the (narrative and spatial) family unit.

While the image of the burning animal creates emotive ties between the observer and the protagonist, it also initiates the descent of the character from the apical position of the social hierarchy. Due to increasing external pressures against their *modus operandi*, they decide to give up La Caoba's identity in exchange for some respite from the investigations. Amador's men swiftly beat her to a pulp, leaving her alive but on life support in the hospital. The unit takes this assault as an attack on one of their own—after all, La Caoba becomes Mateo's bedmate—and head for La Candelaria with guns blazing. There they are met with strong resistance from Amador, who successfully disarms them and parades them in the same space where Ángel once proclaimed his domain over the city. The viewer evidences in this scene not only an emasculation of each member of the unit, as they are publicly shamed and ridiculed, but a calculated deconstruction of their masculinities. Stripped, they no longer follow the aesthetic and sartorial characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. The most homophobic of the group, Miguel, is also bitten by an HIV-positive member of the Candelaria community, in what can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the character's earlier disgust for homosexuals and HIV-positive men. Most striking in this demythifying scene is Amador's instructions to Ángel to crawl on all fours as they are led out of the neighborhood. The drug dealer singles him out in a gesture that displays his own dominance. Reduced to crawling, half-naked in front of the jeering crowd, the image evokes the burning dog in the earlier scene. The chronicle of the protagonist's rise and masculine

empowerment is thus met in this scene with its negative image, as he is dethroned from the position of hegemony, abjected by the peripheral gendered (and urban) bodies that force him from the apical site of the milieu. This shift, however, is only temporary, as Ángel and Rafael return later in the film's climax to take out the drug gang. Injured in the process, the film ends with them gaining more professional merits, as Ángel is finally promoted.

I want to return, however, to the image of the burning dog and a scene following it. The protagonist seeks out his informant to discover the culprit of the personal terror attacks. We move from the intimate space of the home—which has now been given an electronic security system, which only heightens the sense of intimacy within and the danger outside—to the burgeoning cityspace where the Expo is to take place. In a medium to long shot, Ángel's car comes to a stop at a construction site. In the foreground we see concrete pillars, tractors, and canals dug for infrastructure; in the background buildings and a bridge. Centered in this shot, importantly, is a large placard announcing Expo '92 Seville, "una exposición de todos." The protagonist and the informant exit the vehicle as the camera comes in closer. Ángel tells the informant to look at the billboard, and we see from an angle behind the men that the poster has been tagged with graffiti that reads "ANGEL NIÑATO YA TE COJEREMOS [*sic*] MARICONA." Poignant in this image is the semiotic linkage made between the protagonist and the Expo, and by implication the space in which it is to take place and occupy. While intercalating montages throughout the film suggest an analogous relationship between the city and the men (namely Ángel), this image shows for the first time an explicit relationship between the two.

This relationship comes to a head in the film's concluding scenes. After killing Amador, the police commissioner, Don Julián, chastises Ángel and Rafael for their corrupt practices and for taking the law into their own hands. Faced with this reprimand, Ángel answers that their methods were always widely known, and that Julián—and by extension, the institution—turned a blind eye as the unit managed to clean the drug trade from the streets of Seville prior to its positioning at the center of the international media storm. The protagonists' retort, in connection with their assault and annihilation of the competing masculinity of Amador, allows for their reinstatement to the apical position of the gender hierarchy. Immediately following this scene, Rodríguez splices in a final montage, headlined by former monarch Juan Carlos I inaugurating

the Expo to wide acclaim. In images that can best be described as coming from an official tourist video, we see celebratory images of doves and balloons being let loose, combined with long, medium, and panning shots of the grand architectonics of the compound and the different elements of infrastructure that were under construction in all the previous montages. The set of images here posits Seville's cityspace as spectacle, as an agglomeration of sites and structures meant to be exhibited and viewed by spectators—Seville effectively becomes an *escaparate* for the world. This is a triumphant montage, climaxed with different images of fireworks going off in celebration of a successful Expo.

The festive tone, however, is mitigated by the concluding technique of the montage, as the audio of the fireworks slowly fades to silence, in tandem with the image fading to black. The usage of this audiovisual technique lends a symbolic and semantic counter-narrative to the images and sounds of success, as it suggests that all is not well or over, even after inauguration of the event. It suggests that, even with a successful Expo, things will not necessarily change in the micro-spaces of the diegesis, and that achievements reflected in the montage-narrative are not necessarily correlated with similar changes in the protagonists. If anything, we realize that this victory (in terms of the Expo, and of the unit defeating Amador) can only be taken at face value and does not indicate any lasting ontological shift. This reading is reinforced in the film's concluding scenes, as members of the unit are publicly exonerated and absolved of any wrongdoing in their affairs in a move that clearly violates the letter of the law. The film thus suggests that the Expo—as a specific sociohistoric zeitgeist—is emblematic of ontological issues and contradictions that cannot be resolved solely through the spectacular display of modernity. We can link Rodríguez's use of architecture and space in the narrative to Gevork Hartoonian's ideas on architecture and spectacle. Discussing the idea of excess, which is very much on display in all of the montage scenes throughout the film, Hartoonian notes that "the site of excess is not the form or surface, but the thematic of the culture of building."¹⁰ In other words, the notion of excess in the spaces and structures in the images of Seville prepping for the Expo is not solely in relation to their architectonic characteristics, but rather as thematic symptoms of the very cultural issues that the film attempts to work through—or at least lay out—in the main narrative thread.

The final image of *Grupo 7* poses Ángel and Rafael drinking beers, seated at the counter of a bar that is a recurring space throughout the

film. For the first time, however, the film deploys a different angle, where we see them on the left side of the image, and their reflection in a full-length mirror on the right. The image is an unadulterated and silent conclusion to a film built so heavily on action elements and the tensions between the two characters. What we are left with instead is a symbolic gesture toward a mirrored alternative, a parallel plane where the actions, results, and ethics of the narrative and its characters is perhaps not one defined by corruption and the many ills that wracked Spanish society in the transition toward a global economy. The concluding image poses both the idea of an alternate history—or the history, and a present, which could have been—and the need for self-reflection. By mirroring the men, who face away from the reflective surface, the image suggests that what truly plagues the national character is an inability to look at itself in the mirror. Note here the move from the regional or local toward the national, akin to the mirror as a surface of representation and reflection suggesting that what we see projected in it may in fact move beyond the immediate surroundings of its structure. In other words, the semiotics of the reflection encourages an expansive reading that pushes the message from Seville onto (perhaps) the rest of Spain.

A similar ethos underscores Rodríguez's subsequent *La isla mínima*, though the plot is not directly linked to a sociocultural moment so critical as the Expo of 1992. Instead, the audience is brought back to the early 1980s in Andalusia, in a space that stands in glaring contrast to the urban and modern spaces of Seville. The opening images of the film are stunning, extreme, overhead shots of the *marismas* or marshlands of the Guadalquivir River that snakes its way through southern Spain. Like *Grupo 7*, Rodríguez opens by setting images that succinctly collocate the viewer and the narrative within a specific geography that can then later be correlated to the gender formations that take place in the main plot. The film recounts the activities of two detectives brought to the Andalusian countryside—of Huelva to be exact, though much of the film was also shot in the province of Seville—in the early years of the Spanish Transition: Pedro, the somber, measured, younger of the two who shows an affiliation with the democratic project of the post-Franco state; and Juan, the older, less play-it-by-the-book detective who has a dark past as a member of the oppressive police force during the dictatorship. It is insinuated in several instances that Juan's posting to Andalusia is a measure of punishment for past indiscretions—viewers familiar with the earlier film will see several similarities between him and the men of *Grupo 7*.

They are partners but also symbolize opposing points in the political spectrum of the Transition: Juan clearly yearns for the past whereas Pedro is ambivalent, placing his bets on the tentative state in formation after Franco's death. To throw a psychological twist into their relationship, we later see that Juan is deeply infirm, suffering from prostate cancer and seeing hallucinatory images of birds. The two protagonists thus pose a tense centrifugal force to the film; their disparate natures draw the viewer in, in a similar fashion to what occurs in the relationship that evolves between Ángel and Rafael in *Grupo 7*.

The film covers an investigation of what first appears to be a double femicide in a small village suffering from high unemployment and poor economic conditions, but which we later learn is a string of murders taking place over a few years. The two dead sisters, daughters of Rodrigo, a violent, down-on-his-luck stand-in for machismo, and Rocío, a subservient wife who represents everything the two sisters would want to flee from, are notorious in the village for being promiscuous. In fact, several villagers, including the local Guardia Civil make disparaging comments on their character simply because of their perceived promiscuity. While both Pedro and Juan belong to the masculine homosocial realm of the law, they pose differing views in regard to the Guardia's sexist comments. When an officer snidely comments that the girls were infamous for having a good time, Pedro quickly retorts: "¿y ustedes no?" Juan's silence here, and his general treatment of women in the rest of the film establish Pedro's break with the masculine ethos, which was so prevalent among the actions and beliefs of the men of Unit 7. His difference from the codes of male conduct and speech set him out as a progressive, reflective of his political leanings toward change and democracy in the Transition. His masculinity is read in dialectic opposition to that of his partner, and not specifically to the masculinities of the police in *Grupo 7*, as masculinities are, we must remember, sociohistoric constructs that appeal to and construct a particular gendered zeitgeist.

La isla mínima brings into the fold the issue of gender violence or *violencia de género*, a timely topic, still palpable in towns, communities, and the national news today. In fact, we may consider that the principal present-past thematic link in the narrative is the issue of femicide and what this may say of Spanish society. By setting the plot in 1980 and at the height of the Transition, the film—like *Grupo 7*—forces reconsiderations of the past and present in a cyclical critique that displaces historiographic chronologies and causalities. Héctor Fernández Cachón

obliquely addresses this facet of *La isla mínima* in his review: “Eran tiempos en los que los hombres sentían miedo y las mujeres se resignaban a ese miedo. Eran momentos en los que los poderosos campaban a sus anchas y donde la humildad a penas se distinguía de la necedad. Eran instantes en los que los jóvenes soñaban y la vida se encargaba de castrar sus sueños ... ¿Eran?”¹¹ The film, then, is not simply a reconsideration of the present and past, but also a calculated reflection of the climate of the Transition.¹² Antonio Llorens, for example, notes that *La isla mínima* is a “disección de un universo con policías (referencias a la Brigada Político Social y a las torturas y asesinatos), [...] tráfico de estupefacientes, mafias, poderes, corrupciones ... y crímenes. Una disección a partir de las aportaciones de la serie negra, que nos refresca la memoria de unos tiempos que muchos han tratado de enmascarar.”¹³ Herein we see a direct epistemological tracing from *Grupo 7*, as both films pose two lines of temporal inquiry that are not mutually exclusive; if anything, they feed off each other in a movement that situates Rodríguez among a select group of directors (including Álex de la Iglesia, Mario Camus, and Mercedes Álvarez among others) that offers “una reflexión crítica y altamente política respecto a la temporalidad,” where “pasado y futuro devienen, como veremos, parte de una *historia del presente*.”¹⁴ Cristina Moreiras-Menor argues that in the films of these directors, “un pasado congelado y partido, objeto distante de conocimiento, se transforma [...] en una experiencia del presente, momento del reconocimiento histórico.”¹⁵

Given these thoughts, we must nuance our inclusion of Rodríguez within this poetic genealogy as there is an important distinction between Rodríguez and say Camus; unlike the other directors that Moreiras-Menor lists, he is not so much preoccupied with thawing the past within the diegetic present of film, but in representing the past (the Transition, 1992) as thematic reflections of the non-diegetic present. In other words, Rodríguez does not create a history of the present through a narratological exploration of the past, but rather poses that the present is really not altogether different from the past, and that the ontological problems of Spanishness that were behind the musings of Ángel Ganivet and Mariano José de Larra among others are still applicable.

Another tracing can be noted in the film’s engaging of gendered bodies with specific spatial coordinates. While in *Grupo 7* the dialectic was defined by masculinities and the urban (shown in diegetic scenes and in the montage images), *La isla mínima* focuses instead on the antithetical components of this relationship; instead, there is an association made

between femininity and the non-urban. The latter is a more appropriate designator of the spatial concerns of the film instead of the rural, as the urban “involves a much larger and more complex configuration, a specific geography that, by its very definition, tends to be dynamic and expansive in its territorial domain.”¹⁶ Edward Soja notes that the urban is more than the political delineations of the city per se, as “it will always contain inhabited or, for that matter, uninhabited wilderness areas that do not look urban in any conventional way, but nonetheless are *urbanized*, part of a regional cityspace and thereby deeply affected by urbanism as a way of life.”¹⁷ In essence, the rural becomes by implication the non-urban through its association with and modeling of the urban; by naming the spaces of *La isla mínima* as non-urban, we address an important plot point that explains the sisters’ initial disappearance. They are lured, like many others, into the promise of finding employment and living the city life—away from the economically depressed and culturally conservative spaces of the *marismas*. The rural thus becomes, through their lived experience, the non-urban as it is antithetical to the spaces they wish to inhabit. My reading of the non-urban here follows Benjamin Fraser’s understanding of urban cultural studies, which he argues, “recognize that the rural and the urban should be held in dialectical tension.”¹⁸ Fraser furthers that “the progressive urbanization of society has been accompanied by a corresponding urbanization of consciousness,” which addresses my contention that space in *La isla mínima* enters into direct dialog with its gendered analogies both within the film and in the director’s broader oeuvre.¹⁹ In fact, we can return to the correlation of the urban detectives in the rural setting as evocative of the dialectical tension that Fraser cites, as their provenance plays heavily into their relationship with the local police and the other inhabitants of the town.

The dialectic of space and bodies in *La isla mínima*—that is, the non-urban and femininity—poses further dialogs with *Grupo 7*, though unlike their individual relationship to the components of the dialectic their relationship is somewhat complex. While the changes of the urban—as chronicled in the montages of Seville and the Expo—reflect upon and are analogous to the changes in the masculine homosocial in the latter film, the lack of spatial change in the former may seem antithetical. In fact, the scenic images and montages in *La isla mínima* solely reinforce the stagnant nature of the geography, as an unchanging though beautiful scenery that lacks movement and dynamism. We can, however, glean meaning from this representation by correlating space to gender as in

the earlier film. The motionless and torpid geographies of the non-urban in the film run parallel to the motionless and torpid bodies of the two dead girls when they are discovered by the river. In the representation of space in the setting of montages, Rodríguez effectively sutures their bodies and gender roles, especially given the quiet inertness of their mother. The relationship here is one of sketched linkages: femininities in the film are to the images of the *marismas* as masculinities are to the montages of Seville. The latter is alive, creative/productive, and dynamic; the former is dead, unproductive, and immobile. The two corpses are vacuous and stricken of life and meaning (they hold no organic clues as the Guardia Civil is quick to erase these due to shoddy police work), similar to the economic and social potentials of the *marismas* from which they attempted to escape. Such a reading, however, is not intended to pose a rigid framework by which one may analyze Rodríguez's films but, rather, a general outline that establishes key representational modes between gender and space in the moving image.

The female bodies in *La isla mínima* are thus neither superfluous nor simple accessories for the murder investigation, though a cursory watching of the film—by itself or in reference to *Grupo 7*—may see the viewer focus more intently on the masculine dyad of the detectives. A reading of masculinities may very well be fruitful, as Pedro and Juan (especially considering his sickness and that his near death is implied) may metonymize the political changes of the Transition; this does not come as a surprise as *Grupo 7* effectively poses and works through hierarchical masculinities as metonyms of broader Spanish society. But a similar critical trajectory faces obstacles in *La isla mínima*, as its plot is not as neatly tied together as *Grupo 7*'s. Carlos Reviriego notes that the “trama de *La isla mínima* [...] es, efectivamente, algo imprecisa, lo que no afecta ni a su magnífico desarrollo, ni al incesante ritmo [...] ni al valor metafórico del período y del lugar que recrea.”²⁰ In as much as this is so, we discover, for example, that nothing is as it seems in the village and that several community members, including the girls' father and police officers, are involved in a burgeoning drug trade. The traffickers use the quiet waters of the *marismas* to move product, thereby linking the economics of the village to the gendered bodies of the two dead girls. Indeed, we discover that the principal suspect, Quini, who had dated all of the killed women, is not working alone, but is likely in cahoots with Don Alfonso Corrales, a rich landowner who controls the local economy. Similarly, we learn that the women were lured with the promise of finding work in the cities by

Sebastián Rovira, a criminal on the run with a record of sexual violence, now hiding in the village and surely working together with the two other men. The female bodies in the film are thus connected—ontologically, spatially, and economically—to the lived space and images of the *marismas*.

The film ends with Rovira dead, Quini in handcuffs, and Marina, Quini's girlfriend and a friend of the sisters, found alive in the trunk of the former's car, made almost another of Quini's victims. Corrales remains ubiquitously absent from the proceedings, protected by the local police due to his influence and societal position. The ending and its assignation of culpability may be read as symbolic of the wider social problems extant in Spanish society, where the rich and socially powerful seemingly never pay for their misdemeanors. One does not have to go any further than the Bárcenas case to see how members of the majority Partido Popular have managed to twist the judiciary in their favor.²¹ Wider interpretations can also be gleaned from the relationship between the two detectives, as Pedro confirms, through photographic and journalistic proof, that Juan served as a torturer during the dictatorship and was responsible for several deaths during his involvement with the Brigada Político Social, even though the latter confessed that he had never killed anyone and had simply taken the fall for a partner. Pedro does not confront his partner after learning the truth, leaving him at a bar drinking with female company. The audience can surmise that his fate is a done deal and that the alcohol is only an anesthetic for the cancer that will lead to his imminent demise.

There is a tacit critique of the dictatorship in the film's conclusion, but more so of the legions of the old guard who quickly folded into the government and institutions of the new democracy, their past unmentioned and judgment never delivered. If anything, Pedro's not confronting Juan about his past and of lying to him, and Juan's overall impunity, echoes many of the sentiments visible in contemporary debates of the Transition, where the *pacto de silencio* has been critiqued from a human rights perspective as an enabling mechanism that never brought about true justice.²² Rodríguez does not portray the *ex-franquista* in facile ethical terms. He is neither intrinsically good nor bad, but instead may be located along a complicated spectrum where his detective acumen and desire to seek justice for the sisters result in the film's narrative and ethical denouement. *La isla mínima* thus does not give the viewer any easy

answers or a discursive way out of unraveling the knots of the Transition and its aftermath, but suggests instead that a cautious, conscientious, and judicious comb must be used to tease out the ethical quandaries and conclusions that may bring about a semblance of justice and closure.

Given the film's ending and the political implications that may be garnered from it, let us return to the space-gender dialectic that I maintain is at the center of both of Rodríguez's films. In *La isla mínima*, the epistemic drive to find those responsible for the dead female bodies (expertly created by the film's ambience, performances, and key twists) translates into a simultaneous though not mutually exclusive drive to examine the *marismas* not solely as imaged spaces in the montages, but as lived spaces by a community that—in its temporal and linguistic specificities—may at first seem foreign to modern audiences. Yet, like the hermeneutic working through of the plot, where the dead female bodies are simply iterations of a serial wave of crime, the film suggests that the *marismas* too are stand-ins for a wider lived space. In other words, the backwaters of the marshland are not altogether different from broader Spanish social spaces—both in historical and contemporary terms—where many of the sexist and *machista* attitudes that permeate the members of the plot are widespread and not reclusive to the countryside, but can instead be found in any town or city. The film thus poses a consideration of Gail Mason's claim that "violence can also be understood as an act of spatial management," pushing our boundaries to what exactly this space is in contemporary Spain and how the present may find clues to itself through an examination of traditional attitudes and *zeitgeists*.²³

While armchair critics of the later film are invariably drawn to the similarities with the North American *True Detective*, I have shown through an analysis of body and space that Rodríguez's *La isla mínima* follows a thematic trajectory that situates it in a mnemonic genealogy of Spanish film, where the past and present move laterally in circular self-examination. *Grupo 7* and *La isla mínima*, however, pose a further chronology to this exercise, as in working through specific moments of the Spanish Transition—and its linkage to the Francoist past—Rodríguez implicitly posits instead that clues to the post-2008 present may very well be found in the years leading from the dictatorship to the nation's entry into a global modernity.²⁴ As a result, Rodríguez's films can be most productively situated in a long list of cultural artifacts that probe and critique the ontological fallacies of the national character.

NOTES

1. Quino Petit, “Fuimos una máquina contra la droga,” *El País*, last modified April 29, 2012, accessed May 21, 2015, http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2012/04/28/actualidad/1335638296_116872.html. Eduardo del Campo, “Ella destapó el verdadero Grupo 7,” *El Mundo*, last modified April 22, 2012, accessed May 21, 2015, http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/04/21/andalucia_sevilla/1335031348.html. Several news reports and interviews with the film’s writer, Rafael Cobos, indicate how the police unit in the film is based on some of the anti-drug operations run by Units 6 and 10 in Seville in the years immediately prior to the Expo.
2. Nathan Richardson, *Constructing Spain. The Re-imagination of Space and Place in Fiction and Film, 1953–2003* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 175.
3. Raewyn (R. W.) Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 122.
4. Todd Reeser, “Concepts of Masculinity and Masculinity Studies,” in *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, ed., Stefan Horlacher (Leiden; Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015), 21. The term “hegemonic masculinity” is defined per the sociostructural model proposed by Connell. To examine it within cultural production implies, as Todd Reeser comments, the usage of a “relational model predicated on power as the central organizing element of gender.” The term itself is not axiomatic, and has been critiqued in Masculinity Studies circles, in works like those of Tony Coles (2009). Perhaps the most significant rebuttal to this claim is posed by Demetrakis Demetriou (2001), where he argues that the fluidity of the sociostructural model allows for multiple hegemonies, which is what I imply here in my noting of a gendered realm in the film. For a problematization of local and global hegemonic masculinities, including a discussion of Demetriou’s thesis, see my article on “Challenging Global Masculinities” (2013).
5. The analysis of the correlations of the male body and masculine gendered positions vis-à-vis the city involve a cross-theoretical approach that melds literary, cinematic, sociological, and axiographic analyses. In terms of examining masculinity in literature, Stefan Horlacher’s edited volume *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice* (2015) is of interest. For readers with training in Hispanic Studies, my *The Body as Capital: Masculinities in Contemporary Latin American Fiction* (2015) poses methodological strategies for reading masculinities within Hispanic (non-Anglo) frameworks. For scholars interested in Hispanic cinema, the chapter on masculine becoming in *El último verano de la Boyita* in my *New Maricón Cinema: Outing Latin American Film* (2016) may be of interest.

6. Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies-Cities," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 385.
7. Ibid.
8. Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 78. My usage of the term apical here can be read as an iteration of Raewyn Connell's sociostructural hierarchies of masculinity described in the seminal *Masculinities*. Connell divides masculinities into four distinct categories: marginalized, subordinate, complicit, and hegemonic. The latter, on which I base my naming of apical masculinity, is the dominant form of masculinity crafted and reiterated in a specific sociohistorical milieu. Culturally, it is the most valued representation of masculinity, easily seen in *Grupo 7* through Ángel's bravado and acceptance by all those around him, both male and female. Yet, Ángel is not solely a part of the hegemonic group, he is also the hegemon within the group, situating him thus at the apex of gender relations. In essence, his position asserts him micro-strategically over the other men who also occupy the position of hegemony.
9. One thing to note here is that they do not approximate what Anglo cultures have called the metrosexual, but rather pose a similarity to the idealized *capillita sevillano* or *pijo* within Spanish sartorial and gendered practices, which in its own way is a very hegemonic position, as it wields economic and physical virility over the simple brute force that was mastered by the *macho ibérico*.
10. Gevork Hartoonian, *Architecture and Spectacle: A Critique* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), 3.
11. Héctor Fernández Chacón, "La isla mínima," *Alucine: un blog de cine*, last modified September 26, 2014, accessed May 21, 2015, <https://www.blogdecine.com/carteles/alucina-con-este-epico-poster-que-reune-lo-mejor-del-genero-fantastico-la-imagen-de-la-semana>.
12. The opening date in fact coincides with the Partido Socialista de Andalucía voicing its support for Adolfo Suárez's plan for Andalusian autonomy.
13. Antonio Llorens, "La isla mínima," *Efectocine: La web del cine de autor*, last modified September 2014, accessed May 21, 2015, <http://efectocine.es/2014/09/la-isla-minima-de-alberto-rodriguez/>.
14. Cristina Moreiras-Menor, *La estela del tiempo. Imagen e historicidad en el cine español contemporáneo* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2011), 12.
15. Ibid., 12.
16. Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 16.
17. Ibid., 16.

18. Benjamin Fraser, *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies: Henri Lefebvre and the Humanities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 22.
19. *Ibid.*, 23.
20. Carlos Reviriego, "Lodos y marismas del Guadalquivir," *Caimán Cuadernos de Cine* 31 (2014): 38.
21. In reference to the former treasurer of the Partido Popular who is said to have maintained a *contabilidad B* ("second level of accountancy") for the party and its main players. We may also reference the *caso Nóos* ("Nóos case, ongoing case of alleged political corruption") and the involvement of the Royal family, or the infamous *tarjetas black* ("opaque credit cards") that high-ranking members of Caja Madrid used for personal expenditures.
22. The actions further echo some of the ideas and tropes present in contemporary cultural production: Juan is not unlike Inspector Dávila, a recurring character in the popular *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (2001) TV series known for torturing protestors and curbing free speech, but who later gains partial redemption from helping one of the main characters in an investigation during the years of the Transition.
23. Gail Mason, *The Spectacle of Violence: Homophobia, Gender and Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 68.
24. This epistemological line perhaps explains the director's next feature, an adaptation of Manuel Cerdán's exhaustive inquiry into the assassination of Luís Carrero Blanco, which, despite not technically occurring during the Transition, may be viewed as a catalyzing element for the decisions made in the final years of the dictatorship.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Vinodh Venkatesh is Associate Professor of Spanish at Virginia Tech. His research is primarily centered on issues of gender, subjectivity, and urban space in contemporary Hispanic narratives. A secondary area of research concerns the cinematic production of Spain and Latin America. In addition to journal articles and chapters in critical editions, he has edited journal issues on urban studies, masculinity, and cinema, and co-edited *Horacio Castellanos Moya: El diablo en el espejo* (Albatros, 2016). He is the author of two books: *The Body as Capital: Masculinities in Contemporary Latin American Fiction* (Arizona, 2015), and *New Maricón Cinema: Outing Latin American Film* (Texas, 2016). He is currently researching the aesthetics and politics of superheroes in Latin American moving images.

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