

## (Almost) Everybody Loves Javier Bardem . . . “For He Is a Good Actor”: Critical Reception in the Spanish and US Media

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### Problems of Scale and Perspective: National Stardom and Transnational Readings

The sun is rising in the Spanish desert of Los Monegros. In the distance, a bullfighter calls a bull. The camera moves swiftly through the dunes, finally revealing Raúl (Javier Bardem), a matador, training amateurishly, dressed in shorts and a cheap ribbed tank white t-shirt. He practices intensely with a friend, who charges at him with phony horns in his hands:

He, he! Ha-ha, bull, ha-ha! I am going to be known even in Huesca.  
In Paris . . . In the whole world!!!

Such are the first images of *Jamón, Jamón* (Bigas Luna, 1992) after the title credits, which, retrospectively, prove fruitful to frame the career of Javier Encinas Bardem (b. 1969), descendant of a family of ranchers on his father's side and member of one of the most reputed Spanish lineages of actors and filmmakers. His uncle, director Juan Antonio, is a key figure of 1950s and 1960s Spanish cinema and his mother, Pilar, is also a popular actress. Bardem's first lines in the film give us a hint of the problems of scale

*Not a bull  
fight but a  
reading of  
the film*

and perspective involved when looking at transnational stars—namely, the relational processes that are involved in star-making, from local and national arenas to international recognition and stardom.

This chapter starts with a discussion of Bardem's early work within the Spanish film industry and his typecasting as a sexual macho. It moves on to scrutinize his engagement with "the Method" through his collaboration with acting guru Juan Carlos Corazza and the transnationalization of his career via his involvement with English-speaking *auteur* productions. We argue that Bardem's career is articulated through the progressive transformation of his ethnic identity beyond his Hispanic background. Lastly, it analyzes recent events in Bardem's Hollywood career that signal his achievement of A-list status within the studios' production machinery. All in all, this chapter traces Bardem's progressive international recognition as a performer within the logics of transnational stardom production and reception. For that purpose, we analyze the reception of Bardem's acting career and public personae in the Spanish and US media to discuss the meanings and construction of transnational stardom according to a variety of time/space variables. We thus aim to demonstrate the very processes through which the star turns into a complex subset of texts, performances, and identities.

The transnational perspective in film studies implies a constant dialogue between different geopolitical contexts. In Dudley Andrew's words, "the prefix 'trans' connotes temporal as well as geographical extension, proposing not just a field to survey but also a process to understand, one that itself fluctuates in history."<sup>1</sup> Transnational stardom is deeply dependent on these constant flows, which Andrew has theorized to characterize the different time zones and periods of world cinema. His concept of cinema's "jet lag," an implicit delay between cinematic production and consumption, is useful for our purposes. By incorporating the notion of *décalage* to the study of transnational stardom, we are reminded of the fundamental displacement that operates within the processes of *becoming* and *being* a star. Once we enter the realm of stardom from this point of view, it is easier to acknowledge the complicated dialogue that exists not only on the local-regional-national-international scale, but also on the present-past-future axis. Needless to say, there is a difference between being known in Huesca and being recognized in the whole world.

The chapter is structured around a set of signifiers (sex, race, and acting) that can be mobilized to understand Bardem's cultural and economic impact. Through the analysis of these signifiers, we argue that Bardem has surpassed exoticizing accounts on transnationalism built upon linguistic markedness, sexual rawness, and cultural difference. We unravel a diverse

set of meanings based on Bardem's shifting fluidity and the added value he endows to the productions in which he intervenes.

We take as a point of departure the notion of Bardem as an embodiment of "Good Acting," something that has enabled him to cross borders and appeal to different audiences, producers, film directors, and critics. Bardem's consideration as a "good actor" transcends his on-screen personality and becomes a shared knowledge through his carefully calculated career moves, his self-conscious status as a public celebrity—which includes an obsession toward keeping his private life to himself but also a well-known commitment to political affairs in Spain—his stress on professionalism, and a balance between economic welfare and artistic value. Following these steps, we analyze how Bardem domesticates the Method and brings it into the Spanish context, to project himself as an actor and problematize the European art film versus the Hollywood blockbuster dialectics. Just as Marijke de Valck has reminded us, "if these oppositions have any value it is not as description of the (combination of) national film industries in actual geographical locations, but as popular conceptions of different sets of professional film values."<sup>2</sup>

Bardem's characterization as a "Good Actor" helps him subvert the well-known notions of accented stardom and racial stereotyping. In other words, Bardem's status as a remarkable performer cancels out or, at least, minimizes his possible stereotypical characterization as a Latino or Hispanic. His international recognition, based upon the artistic awards he has received, has allowed him to take upon a diversity of roles within the acting world that are not exclusively articulated within a racial axis.

Our account of the dynamic construction of star-status should be understood as a notion in which economic, aesthetic, and sociocultural flows attach different layers of meaning to the interaction between participants, organizations, and institutions. Taking Bardem as a case study, our intention is to provide an explanation of how stars travel and change, and how they are "a form of relayed power, an intriguing mélange of roles as, on the one hand, agents of hegemony (economic, aesthetic, and linguistic) and of considerably disruptive difference, on the other hand (prompting rethinks of the meanings of bodies, voices, myths, and typicalities)."<sup>3</sup>

Evaluating Bardem's presentational tactics in contemporary media, Philip Drake's notion of performance turns particularly useful. Taken as a cultural and rhetorical practice, performance is understood as a meeting point between the significations of an actor as a character, an artist, a craftsman, an intertextual celebrity, and even a politician.<sup>4</sup> In Bardem's case, his cultural construction as a star has shifted in the 20 years that separate his status as a local/national celebrity and his contemporary transnational

recognition. Eventually, this fact complicates our notion of both his condition as a star and his transnationalism, which is also influenced by the changing conditions of national/transnational stardom during the past 20 years. In fact, when looking at his filmography, there are early signs of transnationalism almost from its beginning. From character development (his rise and fall as a construction worker in Melilla to bankrupt real estate developer in Miami in *Huevos de Oro/Golden Balls*, Bigas Luna, 1993), through cast (his tête à tête with Argentine Federico Luppi in *Éxtasis*, Mariano Barroso, 1996), to financial back-up (Hispano-Mexican co-production *Perdida Durango*, Alex de la Iglesia, 1997) or auterism hype (Pedro Almodóvar's *Carne Trémula/Live Flesh*, 1997), his early career is full of transnational markers. However, we are concerned with the "push and pull" dynamics of transnational stardom from the point of view of reception. That is, our interest includes the logics of characterization and impersonation involved in acting to further look upon their sociocultural impact among critics and audiences in Bardem's country of origin (Spain) and his current place of residence (USA). Thus, if the equation of stardom can be considered almost inseparable from the transnational by definition, a wide set of variables problematize the identification of the star and the audience's perception of the star itself, which changes as the star's career moves away from the national into the transnational arena.

#### Bardem's Early Career: From Macho to the Method

Bardem's role in *Jamón*, *Jamón* as a *jamón* carrier, wannabe bullfighter, and occasional underwear model who haunts both the owner (Stefania Sandrelli) and a worker (Penélope Cruz) of an underwear factory earned him immediate recognition as one of the sexiest actors of Spanish cinema in the 1990s. With national press echoing the film's release in such diverse places as Sweden, Germany, Greece, Israel, Australia, and France,<sup>5</sup> the film would become a platform for Bardem's projection as a sex symbol. Soon thereafter, his erotic bodily dimension would be exploited in a series of films that focused on the sexual exploration of the human figure: *Huevos de oro* (1993), *Boca a boca (Mouth to Mouth)*, Manuel Gómez Pereira, 1995), *Carne trémula (Live Flesh)*, Pedro Almodóvar, 1997), *Entre las piernas (Between Your Legs)*, Manuel Gómez Pereira, 1999), or *Segunda piel (Second Skin)*, Gerardo Vera, 1999).

As Chris Perriam points out, Bardem's attempts to escape typecasting through interiorization tried to lessen physicality in favor of psychologically and emotionally complex roles.<sup>6</sup> The great impact of his first two major interventions on the big screen, which earned him two nominations

as Best Leading Role for the Goya, were associated with director Bigas Luna's sensual and violent re-imagination of Spanish iconography. Thus, attempting to escape the pigeonhole he was associated with, Bardem moved away from Luna's iconoclasm to impersonate a drug addict in Imanol Uribe's thriller about Basque terrorism in *Días contados* (*Running Out of Time*, 1994) and a detective in Gonzalo Suárez's metaphoric tale *El detective y la muerte (The Detective and Death)*, 1994).

Thanks to these films, he would get his first awards, winning a Goya for *Días Contados* and, above all, the 1994 San Sebastián's International Film Festival's Concha de Plata for both of them. Bardem, ecstatic after the prize, exclaimed: "*es la mayor satisfacción profesional que he recibido. . . . [E]s el más grande de este país, tiene carácter mundial*" ("It is the greatest professional satisfaction I have ever received. . . . [T]his is the biggest award in this country, it's an international award").<sup>7</sup>

Bardem's words are symptomatic of the first stage of his international projection. As Marijke de Valck has stated, "prizes are a highly effective protocol to include and exclude people and artifacts from the system."<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Bardem's festival success will mark his reception as a "quality performer" from then on. Bardem thus chooses to distance himself from most Spanish filmmaking of the period: "*Bueno, yo en el 94 he trabajado cuatro días. . . . Ahora mismo tengo unos quince guiones. . . . Por otro lado, los guiones que me dan son desastrosos. . . . Entonces, antes de hacer Jamón Jamón 3 o Huevos de oro 4. . . . prefiero no trabajar*" ("Look, in 1994 I worked very little. . . . Right now, I've got around fifteen screenplays. . . . However, the screenplays I get are terrible. . . . So, instead of doing *Jamón, Jamón 3* or *Huevos de oro 4*. . . . I prefer not to work").<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Bardem turned down several offers from French productions, which again were willing to cast him as the attractive Spanish macho who flirts with foreigners,<sup>10</sup> something that he will not refuse to do years later when Woody Allen calls him for a similar role in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2007).

Bardem's growing media exposure during the 1990s is intrinsically related to his voicing of opinions on acting, reflecting upon improvisation and the importance of truth and spontaneity. In interviews, Spanish journalists and filmmakers already call him "the Spanish Brando."<sup>11</sup> These readings of Bardem's career align him with the Method as a process of artistic creation. On the one hand, Bardem's obsession with perfection leads him to study and work with Juan Carlos Corazza, an Argentine acting professor and theater director based in Madrid, who opened one of the most important Spanish theatrical schools in 1990 and would later become Bardem's coach for his roles in *Mar adentro (The Sea Inside)*, Alejandro Amenábar, 2004) or *No Country for Old Men* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007). Corazza is a follower of the Argentinian approach to Stanislavski whose

work marks a shift toward the institutionalization and professionalization of local acting. Of course, this comes hand in hand with the rigor and discipline associated with the Method, as well as with its realistic take on acting. In Bardem's case, his stress on learning and improving, and his growing attention toward impersonation and behavioral transformation, garner him a reputation of being a knowledgeable professional. Interestingly, Bardem's methodology, rooted in great performing accuracy, incorporates traditional clichés of first Method actors such as rebellion and psychic and sentimental instability.<sup>11</sup>

This concept of "acting as a revolt" becomes part and parcel of Bardem's public persona. Whether discussing his past as a stripper or recollecting the fight that cost him a fracture in the nasal septum, Bardem gives a transparent account of his early private life.<sup>12</sup> This frankness, which will turn less explicit once he becomes a celebrity, is also underlined by his intensity in the shooting of films. Such is the case of *Extrasis*, in which he broke his hand in an action scene, or the injuries he got by an uncontrolled explosion in *Perdita Durango*. These events, even if fortuitous, are highlighted by the media and give credibility to his work.

At the same time, Bardem's attempt to obtain a different kind of acting stature will make him shoot *Live Flesh* with the most widely recognized Spanish auteur: Pedro Almodóvar. Bardem's character in *Live Flesh* is an ex-cop who is in a wheelchair due to a colleague's distraction. The part gave him room to explore physical impediment, frustration, and jealousy in a condensed, intense manner.

Also in 1997, he shoots his first English-speaking role, *Perdita Durango*, directed by Alex de la Iglesia, one of the most promising Spanish directors to emerge in the 1990s. The project with Alex de la Iglesia got him thematically and geographically closer to the United States. An adaptation of Barry Gifford's *59 Degrees and Raining: The Story of Perdita Durango*, the film entailed a complicated pre-production, including a director change (Bigas Luna was supposed to direct the film), shooting in Mexico and the Southwest United States (Nevada, Arizona, and Texas), and a violent story about a *santero* and his lover Perdita (Rosie Perez), who kidnap two US teenagers and are involved in smuggling fetuses. The film is Bardem's first long American experience, which proves revealing of his thoughts at the time. Shocked by the way US productions work, he is obliged to reconsider his status as an actor:

*La película depende de ella [Rosie Perez]... No digo que eso sea malo, sólo digo que ha sido educada así... Si uno cree autodenominándose star llega un momento en que crees que tienes luz propia. (The film depends on her*

[Perez]... I am not saying that is a bad thing, just that she has been raised like that... If someone grows up calling herself a star, comes a time when you think you have a light of your own).<sup>13</sup>

Perez's problems with explicit sex scenes were well documented in interviews with Bardem and de la Iglesia. This experience also led to Bardem's irruption as a convinced anti-Americanist, while stressing the sexuality of his persona.<sup>14</sup> Following a train of thought deeply installed in the Spanish public sphere,<sup>15</sup> Bardem does not hesitate to discuss his international experience in the following terms:

*La prefiero [México D. F.] a la mentira limpia y fascistoide de EEUU, donde no ves qué pasa. Cuando me dijeron que iba a trabajar en México y en EEUU pensé: "Qué ganas, una superproducción, América, hablar en inglés! México, qué coñazo." Pero después de haber estado dos meses en México y un mes en EEUU me he dado cuenta de que México funciona mejor. Son mejores profesionales, más listos... (I prefer it [México City] to the clean and fascist lie of the US, where you do not see what is happening. When I was told that I was going to work in Mexico and the US, I thought: "Good stuff. A big production, America, talk in English! México, what a drag!" But after two months in Mexico and one in the US I realized that Mexico is much better).<sup>16</sup>*

Despite the generic and narrative proximity to other, more profitable, violent movies of the period such as *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), the film was panned by reviewers, and in spite of Bardem's powerful presence, it did not work financially. Nevertheless, years later, Bardem would recognize how *Perdita Durango* was key to his receiving Steven Spielberg's offer to work in *Minority Report*<sup>17</sup> (Figure 8.1).



Figure 8.1 Javier Bardem raising hell in *Perdita Durango*

## Bardem Makes It Internationally

Bardem's next US experience would once and for all launch his international career. After the *Perdita Durango* fiasco and a subsequent return to the Spanish system, in 1999 he played the role of Reinaldo Arenas in *Before Night Falls*, directed by painter and filmmaker Julian Schnabel. The film is a biopic centered on the life of the homosexual Cuban poet exiled from Castro's regime due to his militancy in the gay community.

Bardem had shown a clear ambivalence toward Hollywood cinema, even questioning the possibility of joining its ranks à la Antonio Banderas, who throughout the 1990s was the national referent in order to discuss Spanish filmmaking in relation to Hollywood. Thus, already in 1994, Bardem explained: "*Banderas ha entrado porque tiene una belleza muy latina... Yo tengo un físico mucho más rotundo y quizás no entra en el mercado americano*" ("Banderas has gotten in because he has a very Latin beauty... My physical appearance is much more emphatic and perhaps it cannot enter the American market").<sup>18</sup> Precisely, it was Arenas, a Latin character much more physically feeble than him, that would catalyze Bardem's international recognition. US critics highlighted his work and identified him as

[a] beefy, masculine actor who has been consistently impressive in Spanish films such as Pedro Almodóvar's *Live Flesh* and Biggs Luna's *Jamon Jamon*. Bardem seems somehow to shrink his muscular frame into a more delicate, fragile presence, uncovering a feminine side that steers judiciously clear of effete mannerisms or queeny caricature.<sup>19</sup>

The film is extremely significant to examine Bardem's positioning in the United States. On the one hand, as *Variety* stated, the film's hooks were mostly "the gay angle, human rights issues, the enormous interest in Cuba."<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, its repercussion allows us to approach certain structures at work in the transnational circulation of Bardem. In fact, Bardem was the second choice for the role after Schnabel could not lure Benicio del Toro. Nonetheless, the Spanish actor hesitated to play the role given his sympathy for Castro's regime. Known for his political commitment in other international issues, Bardem was certainly troubled by the social and political agenda of the film. Moreover, Bardem shielded any criticism regarding his political ideas by bringing to the fore the leftist and anti-Franco militancy of his family.<sup>21</sup> After a two-week visit in Cuba in which he was confronted with countless scenes of misery and repression, Bardem accepted the role. He was finally aware of Arenas' political commitment and conscious of "the true Cuban reality."<sup>22</sup>

The Spanish press emphasized Bardem's attention to detail in his work, praising his physical transfiguration. In interviews, Bardem discussed how he approached the character, from writing letters and poems to Arenas, to a progressive interiorization of his tragic life. Bardem highlighted the problematics of playing a gay forced to act as a macho to avoid repression, focusing also on the difficulties of faking the Cuban accent. Bardem's impersonation goes so far that Arenas' friends talk about "watching the true Reinaldo Arenas," resurrected through Bardem's performance, which works as a physical and spiritual medium.<sup>23</sup>

As the film started to gain recognition in the US market, Bardem acted as "transmitter" of the American experience in Spanish magazine specials. In this case, and in a much more mythomaniac way than in *Perdita Durango*, the Spanish actor re-creates his encounters with different American actors such as Johnny Depp or Sean Penn from a cinephile perspective: "*En fin, yo le veía delante de mí y me decía: ¡Joder, Javier, te estás tomando una birra con el de El clan de los irlandeses, Dead Man Walking, Desvío al infierno, The Thin Red Line!*" ("Anyway, I saw him [Penn] in front of me and I said to myself: 'Shit, Javier, you are drinking a beer with the star of *State of Grace*, *Dead Man Walking*, *U-Turn*, *The Thin Red Line!*'").<sup>24</sup> This shift from his previous American experience introduces a key aspect of Bardem's progressive Hollywood projection: a definite didactic role consisting in getting closer to media culture and US celebrities, and then domesticating them for the average Spanish audience member. In this initial stage of his international success, he comes across as down-to-earth, "normal" individual, who, at the same time, *creates opinion* and is on his way to become a celebrity himself.

Both *Before Night Falls* and Bardem get a definitive push from the Venice Film Festival. The Coppa Volpi award for Best Leading Role exemplified the critical consensus around Bardem's talent. The discourse of the festival circuit centered on Bardem's performance. From an international perspective, Bardem becomes synonymous with quality acting. Finally, the Spanish reception of Bardem's newly achieved status reproduces the local-gone-famous structure, in which high expectations about Bardem's future meet with a somehow provincial (dis)taste of his cosmopolitanism and success. In Spain's most reputed newspaper, *El País*, Alex de la Iglesia sums up these feelings in an interview with Bardem: "*¡Día un poco de rabia que se vea tu película en Venecia y los críticos crean que te han descubierta. En este país ya lo sabemos!*" ("I am a bit enraged: your film gets screened in Venice and the critics think they have discovered you. In this country, we already knew [that you were good]").<sup>25</sup>

From then on, Bardem's journey toward global stardom is followed step by step by the Spanish media. The narrativization and seriality of this news

transform the actor into a regular fixture in the national public sphere, in connection with the transnational flows that, from a flat national(istic) perspective, construct Bardem as an exemplary citizen. Continuously asked by Spanish journalists about Banderas because of the "Hollywood connection" and the "Almodóvar connection" by the larger international press, Bardem played it safe, stating his admiration for the Andalusian actor: "*Le admiro [a Banderas]. Ha hecho algo que no se ha hecho hasta ahora*" ("I admire him [Banderas]. He's done something no one has done before").<sup>26</sup>

His international projection reaches new heights when he is nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Actor in Motion Picture-Drama and for Best Actor at the Academy Awards. Once again, Spanish media discuss these accomplishments as historical landmarks. At this time, Bardem's reluctance to plunge into the "American Dream" and global notoriety is indeed another symbolic stand for the "true art of acting," as opposed to greed, fame, and money. In other words, "*para mí el triunfo es poner esa película en Miami para 1.600 exiliados cubanos*" ("for me success is to screen the movie in Miami for 1,600 Cubans who are in exile").<sup>27</sup> In turn, US organizations such as the American Cinematheque Los Angeles and New York's Lincoln Center put together retrospectives of Bardem's work, signaling a growing interest of a historical contextualization of his previous career.

Bardem's new status as a transnational star implied a turn toward the re-signification of his historical and spatial position. This singularity was further explored in his next films. This was the case of his alliance with John Malkovich in the American actor's debut as a director, *Pasos de baile* (*The Dancer Upstairs*, 2002). The film was a bizarre project: a Spanish production about Peruvian army Sendero Luminoso, shot in English with a Spanish cast on location in Ecuador, Portugal, and Spain. The parasitic link with Malkovich's respectability garnered most of the press attention and functioned as the main promotional hook for the film. At the same time, Spanish social drama *Los lunes al sol* (*Mondays in the Sun*, Fernando León de Aranoa, 2002) situated Bardem as the leading star of a well-established group of supporting actors, including Luis Tosar. His incarnation of an unemployed harbor worker from Galicia gave him a chance to reaffirm his social commitment, as well as transforming him into a bearded plump Galician with a distinct accent and way of walking.

His star status grew even bigger with the shooting of *The Sea Inside*. Greeted by the Spanish media as the awaited return of Alejandro Amenábar after his international hit *The Others* (2001), *The Sea Inside* provided a glorious chance to team up the two most internationally known icons of recent Spanish cinema: Amenábar and Bardem. Another biopic, this time based on the life and voluntary death of quadriplegic Ramón Sampedro,

the film proved an opportunity for Bardem to come together with exceptional markers of "Good Acting."

Indeed, Sampedro's euthanasia had been a major political and social issue in Spain, highlighted in newspapers and TV and radio stations all over the country. Hence, Bardem faced the challenge of giving a face and a voice to the 55-year-old Galician who did not move from his bed in over 20 years. Extensive make-up sessions of over five hours and the prolongation of his accentual training in Galician tone after *Mondays in the Sun* were key for the credibility and realist nature of Bardem's performance. Yet at the same time, accounts of his preparation for the role focus on his internal characterization, basic from a Method perspective, to deepen in Sampedro's feelings and thoughts on life and death.

The centrality of Bardem's character and his in-bed placement in most of the film reflect his mastering of performance and spatial control. Amenábar went so far as to claim that "[Bardem] ha sido el alma de la película. Hemos sentido a Ramón allí, en el rodaje" ("Bardem] has been the soul of the film. We have felt that Ramón was there, in the set").<sup>28</sup> The stress on Ramón/Javier's presence is a discourse of authenticity that, like Drake points out, is nevertheless produced during reception.<sup>29</sup> Of course, this process highlights in turn Bardem's commitment and devotion to "Good Work": "*Cada día, cuando el maquillaje estaba asentado, durante no menos de 10 minutos, me había a puñetazos y patadas con cojines, cajas y todo lo que pillaba en el camerino para descargar energía y poder meteme en la cama con un cierto relajó*" ("Every day, when make-up was over, for no less than ten minutes I would kick and punch pillows, boxes and everything I could get in the dressing room to release my energy and get relaxed in bed").<sup>30</sup> As some scholars have explained, prosthetic transformation is paradoxically perceived as a quality marker, a reminder of the star's work and existence even if he is almost unrecognizable to most. Thus, reception turns again into a question of presence, in which cinematic conventions are used in a twisted way to "make-believe" in both the star and his role time.

US and European critics alike found Bardem's "majestic neck-up performance"<sup>31</sup> to be the core of the film. A second Coppa Volpi in Venice and a long list of international awards (Goya, European Cinema Award, and Golden Globe nomination among them) set Bardem into a list of good actors not yet too expensive or too famous to be hired for A-category films<sup>32</sup> (Figure 8.2).

After the critical acclaim of these performances, Bardem's first role—albeit a supporting one—in a high-profile Hollywood film was to play "Hispanic" drug lord Félix in Michael Mann's *Collateral* (2004). As in the case of fellow Spaniard Luis Tosar, who plays Montoya, an untraceable drug kingpin in South America in *Miami Vice* (Michael Mann, 2006), Bardem



Figure 8.2 Bardem's "majestic neck-up performance" in *The Sea Inside*

fills the role of an evil Latin American Other whose identity is defined by nothing, but its racial "markedness." Both US and Spanish reviews of the film systemically ignore or superficially praise Bardem's presence in the film, which becomes secondary to the discussion of Mann's auteurist pedigree and the performances of Tom Cruise and Jamie Foxx.

#### Bardem: Between Texas, Hairdos, Tourists, and Barcelona

A few years later, Bardem played his first Hollywood lead in *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Mike Newell, 2007). Based on the eponymous novel by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, the film is a Hollywood version of a euro-pudding film. The production companies involved (New Line, Grosvenor Park Media, and Stone Village Pictures) are from the United States. The cast, however, is a mixed bag of several nationalities. The two leads, Bardem and Giovanna Mezzogiorno, are Spanish and Italian, respectively. Benjamin Bratt grew up in San Francisco but is of Peruvian descent. Liev Schreiber is a white American. Unax Ugalde is Basque. Others, such as Marcela Gardeazabal or Luis Fernández Hoyos, are established TV Colombian actors. The film also employed first-time onscreen local talent. Mike Newell himself is a British director who made his first big international splash with the romantic comedy *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and has since then joined the A-list Hollywood studios by directing *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2005). A box-office fiasco that made only four million dollars in the domestic box-office, *Love in the Time of Cholera* was also critically destroyed.<sup>33</sup> A year before, Bardem had acted in another English-language pudding film, the US-Spanish co-production *Goya's Ghosts*, directed by European and Hollywood veteran Milos Forman, along the likes of Natalie Portman, Randy Quaid, or Stellan Skarsgård, another box-office disaster.<sup>34</sup>

Bardem's own stardom in the flawed *The House of the Spirits* (Bille August, 1993) along with Winona Ryder, Glenn Close, and Meryl Streep may seem today an odd "prequel" to *Love in the Time of Cholera*, at least in terms of production values and terrible box-office performance. Bardem seems to have followed a similar path only to a certain degree. Their linguistic and racial alterity has repeatedly functioned both as a limitation to their acting choices and as an asset for Hollywood studios to employ once the Latino or the "somewhat Spanish/European" element comes to the fore as a building block of the featured narrative. This is, in fact, the bread and butter for foreign stars trying to make it to Hollywood: they typically go through a transition period in which their "foreignness co-mingles revealingly with the honed down or very often switched codings of" their ethnic and linguistic origin.<sup>35</sup>

This racial profiling that contemporary Hollywood performs on a regular basis to secure and strengthen their control over foreign film markets is based on three tactics. First, it attracts emerging or established talent from other film industries to expand its tentacles. Through a process of "planned differentiation,"<sup>36</sup> it targets not only the domestic market but also the global one and specific age, ethnic, or national groups. Second, they efface cultural and linguistic Otherness or at least subordinate it to the cultural dominants at work in the studios' production system and privileged modes of codifying meaning. Third, they continue to capitalize on the physical and/or bodily idiosyncrasies of the "recruited" film stars and instrumentalize them to increase a film's global appeal. Thus, the Andalusian Bardemas can easily become an Arab in *The 13th Warrior* (John McTiernan, 1999). Likewise, Bardem can turn into Cuban, Colombian, "generically Hispanic," or simply an "outsider," as we will discuss in relation to *No Country for Old Men*. In such a scenario, the realization of Javier Bardem as a transnational film star via Hollywood, functioning beyond his established reputation as an "actor's actor" in the Spanish film panorama, is indelibly infused with the constant and notorious codification of his linguistic and physical alterity into racialized and cultural Otherness. In other words, he partakes in the dynamic of shameless, *transcultural ventriloquism* that Hollywood favors when integrating foreign talent in its modus operandi in order to enhance the marketability of its products.

Bardem's and Bardem's career trajectories show a significant difference though. Whereas the former has almost exclusively concentrated his efforts on popular cinema and generic excess (which has also affected his muscular complexion and his drive from Almodovarian psychodrama and interiorization to action and family film outwardness), the latter has managed to alternate between such projects and the collaboration with highly regarded

auteurs of contemporary cinema—namely Woody Allen, Joel and Ethan Coen, and Alejandro González Iñárritu.

Bardem's consideration as a flawless performer leads to collaboration with two "vintage" American directors. In this respect, 2007 was a key year in his rise to transnational stardom thanks to his participation in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and *No Country for Old Men*. Playing a central role in *No Country for Old Men*, Bardem got the industry recognition that had eluded him in his previous nominations.

Bardem's cultural Otherness in *No Country for Old Men* allows us to explore further the interstitial role of non-US actors working within the Hollywood production system and the ways cultural difference and identity are established. The Coen Brothers expressed that they had long wanted to work with Bardem, again adding to the actor's respectability and admiration. However, their films are almost always so typically American that they had found no room for the Spanish actor until *No Country for Old Men*.<sup>37</sup> Although their Oscar-winning film is an American western noir hybrid, Bardem's character Anton Chigurh, is in the Brothers' words "an outsider." This allowed them to short-circuit the problems associated with a foreign accent that the casting of Bardem entailed and gave him the role. Consequently, Chigurh is a nonspecific Other whose foreignness delivering lines is narratively justified because of the character's ethnic and cultural lack of specificity, especially when compared to West Texas's identification of the rest of the cast. Extensively documented elsewhere, both the Spanish and the US press unanimously praised Bardem for his performance in the role, comparing the perfectly executed evil he was able to capture to the likes of Hannibal Lecter.<sup>38</sup> He had rightfully entered the Hollywood pantheon of top villains.

Operating in a cross-border space in Texas, Chigurh is believable not only as an "outsider" but also as a by-product of the cross-cultural world he inhabits. As opposed to Forman and Newell's films, *No Country for Old Men* does not swallow up the cultural diversity it approaches through lavish production and stale generic formulae but, instead, reshuffles well-known conventions of the western and the noir to create a chilling depiction of a violence-driven society. Within this product, Bardem thrives as a performer and his tough look and retro-hairdo become the icon of the movie. His calculated, firm approach to the character developed into a series of parodies, from *The Simpsons* to local spoof *Spanish Movie* (Javier Ruiz Caldera, 2009), which also included a comic twist of Bardem's realistic take on Ramón Sampedro in *The Sea Inside*.

As for his collaboration with Woody Allen, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* may be read as an interesting dialogue on the transnational condition of Barcelona *vis à vis* *Beautiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010). Allen's

film is a touristic view of Barcelonian and Spanish cultural idiosyncrasies as well as another node in Woody Allen's uneven tour of European cities. Allen seems to be happy with abducting Barcelona's clichéd iconicity with a few establishing shots to then plunge into a romantic comedy in autopilot mode where Bardem and now-wife Penélope Cruz represent the attributes of what the Spanish charming and impulsive national character is supposed to be. Since this is Allen's first work in Spain, the national and especially the regional Catalan press did an unprecedented, cult following of every detail of the project from pre-production to release. There was a heated debate over the public funding endowed to Allen's film, the version of Barcelona the film would project internationally, and the politicians' attempts to appear in every photograph with the Brooklyn director.<sup>39</sup> In this context, once the film was released, the Spanish press mostly emphasized *Vicky, Cristina, Barcelona* clichéd depiction of Barcelona and Spain. Bardem's performance was seen as one more component of this stereotypical equation. Sergi Sánchez, for example, writes in *Fotogramas* that "*Bardem y Johansson parecen desgarrados*" ("Bardem and Johansson seem nebulous"). Santiago González in *El Mundo*, September 20, 2008, titles his piece "*Barcelona subvenciona*" ("Barcelona subsidizes") and notes that not even Bardem, despite being an excellent actor, can be saved from a film in which "*Allen revela la mirada tópica y superficial de turista del medio oeste americano en viaje organizado*" ("Allen reveals the topical and superficial gaze of a midwestern tourist visiting Spain through a summer vacation package"). The US press, although recognizing the stereotypical drive at the core of Allen's film, redeemed Bardem's acting. Manohla Dargis in *The New York Times*, on August 15, 2008, labels the Spanish actor as "a national treasure" and states "Mr. Bardem, relieved of his ghoulish Prince Valiant bob from *No Country for Old Men*, invests the cliché of the Latin lover with so much humor and feeling that he quickly vanquishes the stereotype." Peter Travers, in his *The Rolling Stone's* review of August 21, 2008, says "Bardem, spinning 180 degrees from his bad-haircut villain in *No Country for Old Men*, is charm personified." Scott Foundas in *The Village Voice* on August 12, 2008, even partakes in the clichés that inform Allen's view of Spain in the film, starting his review with the following words: "Set in Spain, where the blood runs *my caliente* under the drone of the Mediterranean sun..." In such a critical landscape, Bardem did nothing but solidify his global status as both a great actor and a charming Latin lover, which brought another sexual and social layer to his public persona through his love affair with Penélope Cruz.

*Beautiful*, for its part, entailed a career shift for Bardem, returning to a Spanish-speaking role after an "exile" in Hollywood productions. In addition, he worked with González Iñárritu, a director who has garnered a

*Beautiful* (Iñárritu)  
*Barcelona* (Allen)  
*No Country for Old Men* (Coen)  
*The Sea Inside* (Sampedro)



global notoriety as an *auteur* working in a liminal space between the mainstream and art-cinema modes of address. The film explores the bleak underworld of the peripheries of Barcelona, centering on Uxbal (Bardem), a petty pawn and “wounded male” of the city’s underworld who battles a fatal illness and a dreary urban landscape of sweatshops, crammed apartments, rampant racism against immigrants, and a difficult relationship with his wife while attempting to bring up his two children. The camera follows Uxbal non-stop, gravitating centrifugally from his eyes, movements, and gestures to the diverse worlds he traverses in his deals with the multi-ethnic urban fabric he negotiates. Borja Hermoso (*El País*, May 17, 2010) titles his review “*Bardem, principio y fin de Biutiful*” (“Bardem, Beginning and End of *Biutiful*”), pointing out that “[todo] gira alrededor de *Bardem, de tal manera, con tanta obsesión, que uno se pregunta qué sería de esta historia de pobreza, corrupción, enfermedad y amores imposibles... sin el marchamo de Bardem*” (“Everything in *Biutiful* circles around Bardem with such an obsession that one wonders what would it be of this story of poverty, corruption, illness, and impossible love... without Bardem’s imprint”). Hermoso goes on to state that, according to Bardem himself, he does not act, he simply is: “*En eso consiste mi trabajo, en ser antes que en ser actor*” (“That’s what my work is, to be, rather than being an actor” [emphasis ours]).

Bardem’s transnational stardom and acting turn into an ontological practice, something defined in universal terms that predisposes and directs audiences to pay and see Javier Bardem being. So much so that Bardem risks turning into an empty signifier in terms of acting. What we see consequently is not Bardem as Uxbal but Bardem trying to be Uxbal but decodified as Bardem, a transnationally recognized acting powerhouse, playing Uxbal and fulfilling the expectations of the media gatekeepers that have associated his acting persona with an incomparable capacity to decisively influence the production of meaning in the films in which he participates. Even when critics denounce the pamphlet-like and exploitative tone of González Iñárritu’s film in relation to the depiction of misery and illness, Bardem remains unscathed. Melissa Anderson titles in *The Village Voice* on December 29, 2010: “*Biutiful*: More Bloated than *Babel*, Even with Bardem.” A. O. Scott (*The New York Times*, December 28, 2010) similarly affirms that, “Bardem... combines muscular, charismatic physicality with an almost delicate sensitivity, and this blend of the rough and the tender gives *Biutiful* a measure of emotional credibility that it may not entirely deserve.” Even though the Spanish actor’s performance in *Biutiful* may be worthy of such epithets, there seems to be a media overdetermination in judging his acting at this point of his career. Critics seem to have fixed the indelible star persona of Bardem to the point that he invariably elevates

over the films in which he acts. Even in projects “universally” trashed such as *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the reputed brand of transnational stardom called “Javier Bardem” eludes the irate pen of critics. Stephen Holden in *The New York Times* (November 16, 2007) talks about his “appropriate tragicomic balance of nobility and absurdity” in playing Florentino Ariza. Robert Willonsky (*Village Voice*, November 6, 2007) after labeling the film as the worst adaptation of a major novel by a Nobel Prize-winning author and a “sudy telenovela” states that Bardem’s talent is simply wasted. No other actors involved in the film command such respect.

#### Conclusions: On the Verge of Reaching Franchise Status . . .

During the spring of 2011, it was announced that Javier Bardem was chosen to star in *The Dark Tower*, a multimedia project based on Stephen King’s literary saga. Bardem was supposed to incarnate Roland Deschain in three feature films and two limited-run TV series, beating out Daniel Craig, Christian Bale, and Viggo Mortensen for the role. Only three months later, Universal pulled the plug on the franchise due to financial concerns. Despite the cancellation of *The Dark Tower* franchise (at least for now), it remains undisputable that Bardem has positioned himself to make the leap to A-list blockbuster status. In other words, he is a fully established Hollywood star.

Indeed, after Bardem was awarded his first Oscar, Spain’s President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero sent him a telegram praising him for representing a recognition to “*todos los creadores españoles... Ejemplos como el suyo nos hacen creer en el poder del arte para eliminar fronteras, y confirman que la cultura es uno de nuestros mejores embajadores en todo el mundo*” (“All Spanish creators and examples like his make us believe that art can help us eliminate borders, and confirm that culture is one of our best ambassadors in the world”).<sup>40</sup> At the same time, he acknowledged Bardem’s courage to defend his principles and actively engage with social issues. On the one hand, Bardem has fought for the rights of the Sahara and has been one of the producers in the humanitarian documentary *Invisibles* (2005). His recent promotion of *Hijos de las nubes* (Alvaro Longoria, 2012), a film about the Saharawi conflict, has been widely recognized in the Spanish media while also bringing Bardem into one of the rare and increasingly sporadic interventions in Spanish television as a guest in late night show *Buenos noches y Buena Fuente*. Besides, Bardem’s presence in the film adaptation of his brother Carlos’ novel *Alacrán enamorado* (Santiago Zannou, 2013), and in the rally against the Spanish government’s tax rises and crisis policies, have brought him back to national headlines. Consequently, while being the “poster boy” for a (failed) franchise, Javier Bardem also

pol. bubble  
advertising

mobilizes the recognizability of his Hollywood star persona to act in other fronts. His marked transnational stardom becomes at the same time a tool for potential social change, and target of criticism for local activists, who distrust his political engagement in the light of his wealth and social privileges.

With projects that range from James Bond #23 to a film with Terrence Malick, Bardem's transnational stardom transforms him into a commodity fetish, ready to be consumed. His charisma, sophistication, and unquestionable reputation locate him on a critical and public reception no-zone in which the global audience is ready to experience Bardem's sublimity. As a transnational star, Bardem has become "an empty vehicle for auditing."<sup>41</sup> In fact, recent accounts of his participation in 007's *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012) and Malick's film in the Spanish press coincide in Bardem's secrecy to give details about either film.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, these mysteries are paralleled by Bardem's refusal to speak about his private life to the Spanish press, something that has been controversial when compared to his interventions in American TV. Through professional and personal silence due to contractual, artistic, and private reasons, Bardem's career has become an arena for gossip and speculation, a sublime object of desire.

Indeed, Bardem has achieved a larger dimension of stardom in his private and celebrity life through his marriage with Penélope Cruz. For the Spanish press, Javier Bardem has become "los Bardem." The love affair, wedding, and later birth of their son Leo have turned them into a vessel for trash talk and national entertainment. Cruz's plans to give birth in Madrid changed, and she finally gave birth to her son in LA's Jewish Cedars-Sinai Medical Center (Bardem is known for demonstrating against the Israel's treatment of the Palestinians). The subsequent family move to California has made them unpopular to parts of the press and Spanish readers.<sup>43</sup> Besides, Cruz's career, less thorough and artistically respected, is now connected to interpretations of Bardem's figure, which grows more complicated and contradictory as an object of popular consumption.

Meanwhile, his worldwide reputation continues to rise. Whether kissing Josh Brolin in the 2011 Academy Award Ceremony or celebrating his unconditional love for Cruz at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, Bardem's extrafilmic performances keep gaining notoriety. His performances in travel films such as *Eat, Pray, Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010) or the aforementioned experiences with Schnabel, González Iñárritu, or Woody Allen have catalyzed Bardem's identification with transnational cosmopolitanism as well as with globalization, while his off-screen persona is further subsumed into the Hollywood lifestyle. When one looks at Bardem smashing plates in *slow motion* in *The New York Times' Fourteen Actors Acting* (2010), one is reminded of the sexual rawness and powerful method of the Spanish

performer, though he is no longer the half-naked matador-wannabe, but a stylish, professional star that (almost) everyone loves.

#### Acknowledgements

This work has been written as a part of the research project CSO2010-15798, "El audiovisual español contemporáneo en el contexto transnacional: aproximaciones cualitativas a sus relaciones transfronterizas," financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. The authors would also like to thank Chris Perriam and the librarians at the Biblioteca de Cinema "Delmiró de Caralt" of the Filmoteca de Cataluña. Finally, Raquel Cabañas at Estudio Corazza para el Actor and Juan Carlos Corazza himself were of great help to contrast our ideas on Javier Bardem, the Spanish acting scene, and "good acting."

#### Notes

1. Andrew, "Time zones and jet lag," 64.
2. De Valk, *Film Festivals*, 15.
3. Perriam, "Two transnational Spanish stars," 33.
4. Drake, "Reconceptualizing screen performance"; Drake and Higgins, "I'm a celebrity?";
5. Rubio, "Javier Bardem estrena *Jamón, Jamón*," 42.
6. Perriam, *Stars and Masculinities in Spanish Cinema*.
7. Sarrugarte, "Como actor cómico no tengo gracia," 51.
8. De Valk, *Film Festivals*, 31.
9. Castillejo, "Javier Bardem," 39-40.
10. Rubio, "Bardem: 'Llamé al director.'"
11. Esch, "I don't see any method at all."
12. Sánchez-Mellado, "Javier Bardem. El noble bruto."
13. Arenós, "Javier Bardem," 44.
14. Bardem: "Un país en el que el sexo molesta no quiero ni pisarlo" (I do not even want to step on a country where sex is a problem). Castellano & Elola, "Javier Bardem. La sensibilidad tiene cara de bruto," 38.
15. Chislet, *El antiamericanismo en España*.
16. Arenós, "Javier Bardem," 44.
17. De la Iglesia, "Charla de colegas," 51.
18. Torrecillas, "'A mí nunca me han dirigido,'" 3.
19. Rooney, "Schnabel's portrait of a man," 29.
20. *Ibid.*, 21.
21. "Jo vinc d'una família d'esquerres i Bardem és un cognom molt associat a l'esquerra profunda i a la lluita antifangustista" (I come from a Leftist family and Bardem is a surname associated with the Left and the anti-Franco fight). Rimbau, "Javier Bardem," 4.

22. *Ibid.*
23. Rivero, "Así resucitó Javier Bardem a Reynaldo Arenas," 49.
24. Bardem, "Mi hermano Javier," 60.
25. De la Iglesia, "Charla de colegas," 46.
26. Martín, "Javier Bardem. El gran aprendiz," 28.
27. De la Iglesia, "Charla de colegas," 49.
28. Cines Renoir, "Mar adentro."
29. Drake, "Reconceptualizing screen performance," 86.
30. Angulo, "Javier Bardem. El Gran Camaleón," 51.
31. Holland, "The Sea Inside."
32. Bardem's salary after *Before Night Falls* went up to 1 million dollars. At the same time, he moved on to be represented by United Talent.
33. According to Box-Office Mojo, *Love in the Time of Cholera* made \$4,607,608 domestically and \$26,729,976 internationally. Despite being in 852 screens, in its opening weekend did not even reach the \$2 million. See <http://boxoffice mojo.com/movies/?id=loveinthetimeofcholerahm>.
34. The film was produced by Antena 3, Xuxa Producciones S.L. and Kazzaman and The Saul Zaentz Company. It earned \$1,000,626 in the domestic market and \$8,447,456 internationally. See Box Office Mojo: <http://boxoffice mojo.com/movies/?id=goyasghosts.htm>.
35. Perriam, "Two transnational Spanish stars," 34.
36. Wyatt, *High Concept*.
37. González, "Hermanos Coen," 76.
38. Perriam, "Javier Bardem: Costume, Crime, and Commitment."
39. Savall, "La pellicula de Woody Allen batrá el record d'ajudes públiques."
40. *El Confidencial*, "Zapatero felicitó a Bardem."
41. Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect*, 354.
42. Salvans, "Skyfall. Bardem."
43. Galaz, "No más fotos de Leo."

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## From Heroine to "Brand Shilpa": Reality Television, Transnational Cultural Economics, and the Remaking of the Bollywood Star

Sreya Mitra

### Introduction

In January 2007, the Indian media was abuzz with the news of Bollywood stars Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai's engagement, but soon the national obsession with these impending nuptials was undermined by another "breaking news"—the alleged racial abuse of Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty, who was in Britain participating in the reality show *Celebrity Big Brother*, at the hands of fellow contestants Jade Goody, Danielle Lloyd, and Jo O'Meara. Goody and her cohort's racial and ethnocentric comments denigrating Shetty's cooking, eating habits, and nationality not only incited viewers' ire, but also landed the show in the midst of a political maelstrom. In spite of attempts by the show's producer, Endemol, and its telecaster, Channel 4, to frame the "bickering" as "girly rivalry,"<sup>31</sup> an inevitable clash of culture and class, the controversy soon escalated into a transnational crisis. Outraged at the "racial bullying," South Asian Labor MP Keith Vaz tabled a motion in the House of Commons denouncing the show, while Prime Minister Tony Blair tried to reassure beleaguered British South Asians that Britain was still "a country of fairness and tolerance."<sup>32</sup> The reaction in India was no less volatile, with the country's leading English