

Transnational Actors: A Study in International Cinema – Summary

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Recently within my Hispanic Studies minor, I took a great interest in transnational actors that were born outside of the United States but have achieved fame in Hollywood. I became even more intrigued upon learning that the United States has few, if any, native-born equivalents to these international icons, many of which are from Spanish-speaking countries. To guide my research on these actors, I set out to answer three questions: why are these foreign-born actors so famous in the United States? What goes into the internationalization of Spanish and Latin American cinema? And finally, how are these actors treated in their on-screen roles in Hollywood compared to those in their native countries?

In order to answer these questions, I first investigated the cinematic industries of Spain, Mexico, and Hollywood. According to Jo Labanyi and Tatjana Pavlovic, the movie industry of Spain has always been defined by its international nature, or its international relations with cinema of other countries (Labanyi and Pavlovic 1). Two transnationally well-known directors from Spain particularly illustrate this point: Alejandro Amenabar and Pedro Almodovar.

Almodovar, though he has not directed any films in English to my knowledge, is nevertheless famous around the world. According to Marvin D'Lugo, Almodovar is one of the most famous Spanish directors in all history (D'Lugo 114). He is well-known for his unique, autueristic style (114), and has worked extensively with many famous Spanish actors including Penlope Cruz, Javier Bardem, and Antonio Banderas (IMDb).

Amenabar is another Spanish director that has been internationally successful. As Paul Julian Smith writes, Amenabar has a unique style that combines both Hollywood and Spain

(Smith 144-145). His work, in both Spanish and English, has linked the two industries in interesting ways (145). For example, in 2001 Amenábar wrote, directed, and scored *The Others*, a movie acted in the English language but made in Spain with Spanish workers (145).

The films of Mexico also represent international success, but in a different manner than Spanish cinema. Deborah Shaw explains how Latin American cinema has recently become recognized outside of its borders, describing the way in which these movies tend to illustrate a strong social conscience through personal portraits of characters (Shaw 4-5). To speak more directly to Mexico's success, the recent fame acquired by Mexican directors in the United States for their work in English is fascinating. Mexican filmmakers such as Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Alejandro González Iñárritu have greatly impressed audiences in the United States (see Shaw 1). Del Toro has not worked significantly with any actors that I studied (see IMDb), but for the purposes of my research it is useful to look more closely at the work of Cuarón and Iñárritu.

Cuarón has directed various movies that are well-known in the United States, such as *A Little Princess* (1995), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), and *Gravity* (2013) (IMDb). He is known, according to Julia Echeverría Domingo, for his unique style of long takes that goes against the popular style of typically short takes (Domingo 141). Cuarón has worked with famous Hollywood celebrities such as Julianne Moore, Sandra Bullock, and George Clooney (IMDb).

Iñárritu has recently achieved greatness in the United States since he has won the Oscar for Best Director two consecutive years for *Birdman* (2014) and *The Revenant* (2015) (IMDb). This Mexican director, though currently associated with Hollywood, distinguishes himself from

this system because he finances, researches, and casts his movies independently (Iñárritu 123). I believe that he has become so linked with Hollywood because he often works with popular stars from that particular industry, such as Leonardo Dicaprio, Brad Pitt, and Cate Blanchett (see IMDb).

Hollywood is the most important cinematic industry of my research. It is a fascinating system because of its domination of the global movie industry (see Gledhill xiii). This particular brand of cinema has historically represented certain groups in stereotypical manners, according to Markus Heide (Heide 4). The “Latin Lover” (see Heide 4 and Keller 40-69), in my opinion, is a particularly prevalent type that constrains actors of Hispanic origin in Hollywood.

For the purposes of my study, I chose to research actors who were born in Spain and Mexico and are famous celebrities in the United States. For this summary, the actors are listed in an order according to which they have escaped sexual exoticization and type-casting. The first actor that I investigated is Diego Luna, born in Mexico and particularly famous for his role in Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también* (2001) (Young 92). Luna’s career in Hollywood reveals a difficulty escaping certain Mexican stereotypes such as the criminal and, particularly, the passionate lover. In his first major movie, directed by Cuarón, Luna’s character is highly sexualized with numerous graphic sex scenes and full nudity (*Y tu mamá también*). His character in this work is not, however, objectified since he has full possession of his sexuality and thorough character development. In one of Luna’s more well-known Hollywood roles, however, as Jack Lira in *Milk* (2008), his character is strongly objectified and characterized as merely a sexy exotic “other.”

The one and only actress in my study is Penélope Cruz. Cruz has had an extremely successful acting career in both Spain and Hollywood (see IMDb). She has encountered, however, only minimal success in diversifying her work and escaping type-casting in stereotypically Hispanic roles. In her first film, the Spanish *Jamón, Jamón* (1992), Cruz's role has a strong sexual component with a great deal of nudity, though her character exhibits power and multiple dimensions. In later works in Hollywood, however, Cruz often portrays the flat love interest that represents the male protagonist's goal, like in films such as *All the Pretty Horses* (2000), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (2001) (IMDb).

The next actor that I investigated, Antonio Banderas, is unique in my study because he did not act in both English and Spanish simultaneously during his career as the other actors have done. Instead, Banderas worked exclusively in Hollywood for most of his career after transitioning to this industry in the early 1990s (IMDb). The Spanish actor's image, according to Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito, is internationally associated with a masculine "other" identity as it relates to race (Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito 2-3). In Banderas' first full-length film, Almodóvar's *Laberinto de pasiones* (1982), his small character is almost fully naked and engaged in sexual relations with another character within minutes of his first appearance (*Laberinto de pasiones*). This movie constitutes a sexualized start to Banderas' career that carried over into his Hollywood work. In *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), for example, Banderas' character Alejandro is sexualized in a way that emphasizes his Hispanic traits and makes him into a heroic version of the Latin Lover stereotype.

Banderas has had such a busy career, participating in about 80 movies during 34 years, that it is clear that he is in great demand in the international world of cinema (IMDb).

Interestingly, Banderas frequently occupies the role traditionally held by female characters as an erotic spectacle for the central female character and, thus, for the audience in a significant number of his films (see Mulvey 136-137). From Banderas' filmography, it is clear that he makes a captivating action hero as well as a memorable voice for numerous animated works. These types of roles, however, do not allow Banderas to showcase his true acting talent very often in Hollywood.

Javier Bardem is the first actor in my study that has had success in escaping sexual type-casting and diversifying his film roles. In one of his first major films, *Jamón, Jamón* (1992) with Penélope Cruz, Bardem is intensely sexualized and objectified. In his more famous Hollywood roles, however, Bardem portrays memorable villains such as Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and Raoul Silva in *Skyfall* (2012) (IMDb). Despite these two types, though, Bardem has diversified his roles as the result of great effort and intention on his part (Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito 18), and become internationally well-known for his astounding acting ability.

The final transnational actor of my study, and perhaps the most fascinating, is Gael García Bernal. A native of Mexico, Bernal has been friends with Diego Luna since childhood and the two men currently run a production company together (Young 92). I analyzed more movies of Bernal than any other actor in my study for several reasons. Firstly, Bernal has worked with the most internationally famous directors than any of the other celebrities (excepting Bardem), collaborating with Cuarón, Almodóvar, and Iñárritu multiple times (IMDb). Secondly, I believe him to be the most versatile and talented actor of my research, though he is one of the least well-known in the United States. Finally, and most importantly, I wanted to seize the

opportunity to write about Bernal because not many scholars have done so thus far. While there are whole books written about Banderas, Bardem, and Cruz, I did not come across any major scholarly text about Bernal and his international work during my research.

Bernal worked with Iñárritu at a very young age in *Amores Perros* (2000) (IMDb). His character, Octavio, is lustful but not objectified or flattened by the script in my opinion. Bernal's next major film, Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) alongside Luna, involved a much more sexualized role with complete nudity and explicitly sexual scenes (*Y tu mamá también*), although once again Bernal portrays a multi-dimensional and relatable character. His impressive list of work in the Spanish language also includes Walter Salles' internationally famous work *Diarios de motocicleta* (2004) in which Bernal plays a young Che Guevara, as well as Almodóvar's *La mala educación* (2004) (IMDb). The latter work is especially impressive because it was the only film that I could find, in either English or Spanish, in which a Latin American plays a Spaniard and not vice versa. The global cinematic industry thus demonstrates a degree of eurocentrism, but Bernal was able to break through this barrier.

One of Bernal's more notable films in English is *Rosewater* (2014), directed by Jon Stewart (IMDb). In this movie, Bernal plays Maziar Bahari, an Iranian journalist who was tortured for espionage during a trip to Iran to cover some elections (*Rosewater*). Bernal's performance in this role is marvelous; he is so absolutely human that you cannot resist crying, laughing, and feeling for him throughout the movie. In my opinion, this role establishes Bernal as an incredible American actor.

Bernal has had the most success in varying the types of his roles among the transnational celebrities that I investigated. He has played many different kinds of characters

over the course of his career in both the English and Spanish languages (see IMDb).

Interestingly, Bernal has acted in roughly the exact same amount of movies in Spanish and English, once more distinguishing himself from the other actors in my study (IMDb).

All of the actors that I researched started their famous international careers in highly sexualized roles in their native language. The first major movies for all five celebrities involved full or nearly-full nudity and graphic sex scenes when the actors were in their late teens or early twenties (see IMDb). I believe that these sexualized beginnings are not coincidental with later Hollywood fame; Hollywood was likely attracted to these actors because of clear sexual appeal and consequently appropriated them as sex icons. The general tendency among these celebrities is that they portray more one-dimensional characters in their Hollywood works; they tend to be sexualized in both Spanish and English but more objectified as the exotic “other” in many of their Hollywood films.

My final conclusion drawn from this investigation relates to the implications of having only one actress in my study. Penélope Cruz is the only cross-culturally iconic actress born in a Spanish-speaking country that I discovered. The reason for the surplus of males in this area may be related to sexism in the global cinematic industry. I think it is more likely, however, that more male actors of Hispanic origin become famous in Hollywood because American *women*, even more so than American men, are attracted to the Latin Lover stereotype. This flat type of love interest seems to satiate the sexual desire for the exotic “other” for female audiences in the United States to a great extent.

