

# **Cinema and Social Trauma after Terrorist Attacks: the Spectatorship Perception. Approaching to the Spanish Case**

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## **Abstract**

If we consider the cinema as a communicative process, it is pertinent to examine the meanings that its audiences attribute to films in their sociocultural context. This article presents a qualitative study focused on the Spanish audience, with respect to the treatment given in films to the trauma and social fear arising after the New York, Madrid and London attacks. On one hand, it describes their reading of the Anglo-Saxon films that allude allegorically to those attacks and to their social consequences. On the other hand, it examines their assessment of the role that should be fulfilled by fictional cinema when it deals with the 3/11 tragedy.

**Key words:** Cinema, terrorism, spectatorship, trauma, Spanish audiences, 9/11 and 3/11 attacks.

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## **1. Introduction**

As a cultural product, the cinema expresses the traits of the society in which it is produced, and the changes that take place in it over time.<sup>1</sup> It often does this unconsciously when these traits seep into the design of the film at the aesthetic, thematic or psychological level. In other cases, there is a will to reflect on man and his social reality in a given era. The result is, then, a critical view that can be expressed directly or allegorically. The direct approach is typical of documentary accounts and those fictional treatments that, by applying a realistic aesthetic, portray historic events, political, economic and social phenomena, or the idiosyncrasies of a group through its members' daily life. But also certain genre films – above all, fantasy, science fiction, horror, disaster films, etc. – tend to treat those themes metaphorically.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the critical reading of the cinema that is made in Film Studies and Cultural Studies circles interprets films in the light of the sociopolitical framework in which they are produced, analyzing their ideological meanings.<sup>3</sup> Attention is necessarily focused on the message conveyed. However, if we consider the cinema as a communication process, it seems appropriate also to take into account, insofar as possible, the reception those films get in the cultural context in which they are received.

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We then encounter a question that is as interesting as it is complex to deal with: how spectators interpret those same films.

Here research encounters inevitable limitations since, as Gubern wisely points out, every film has a polysemous message.<sup>4</sup> Individual experience is essential and the spectator constructs the meaning on the basis of an interaction of textual, social and mental processes. When the viewer confronts the film a psychological process is triggered that is dominated by his or her cognitive skills and personal universe – experiences, education, interests, desires, etc. – at both the conscious and the unconscious levels. But it must not be forgotten that those subjective conditions are connected with the social and cultural sphere in which the spectator lives, which is the other determining factor in his or her reading of the message.<sup>5</sup>

The researcher who is interested in the spectator's experience thus encounters psychological and sociological aspects whose assessment is complex and, above all, a methodological conflict.<sup>6</sup> But from our communicative standpoint it seems more appropriate to work with the notions of the audience and audiences, in the sense of groups of spectators whose sociological similarities can lead to similar or interconnected readings, beyond their individual experience.<sup>7</sup> Although this is also slippery ground, it is nonetheless useful to observe the reactions and shared opinions that a film arouses. In fact, academic critics can often be observed turning to diverse sources in search of indicative clues: from box office results to spectators' comments published in reference media in the cinema domain, and including experiments involving the projection and discussion of films with students in classes, or experiences with showings in cinema forums. Outside this area, such considerations are also useful for the professional world. Producers, filmmakers and scriptwriters can test audiences' tastes and common sensitivities, especially as regards the treatment of controversial topics and traumatic events.

In the awareness of the importance of audience reception, the research project in progress on the depiction in the cinema of the social fear following the 9/11, 3/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks is pursuing an empirical exploration with different film audiences in Spain.<sup>8</sup> The results offered here belong to the first step taken along this path: the development of a qualitative study of young people's perception and reaction to three basic aspects. One, to determine the interest in films that allude, directly or allegorically, to the terrorist attacks and their social consequences in terms of insecurity, fear and perception of threat. Although the films studied were almost all produced outside Spain – primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom - they have been distributed in the Spanish market with notable box office success. Two, to observe how they have interpreted some thematic and aesthetic

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approaches connected with these events, taking as a reference the disaster film sub-genre. Three, to know their assessment of the cinema as a valid medium to deal with the 3/11 attack.

To conduct the qualitative study, we have used the discussion group technique with eight participants, whose general profile is as follows: persons of both genders, young people between the ages of 20 and 23, university students at various institutions in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, residents in Spain's capital or in suburban towns, and habitual filmgoers.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. General considerations regarding cinema attendance**

In the general approach to the main theme, the participants expressed their perception of the current cinema, focusing primarily on the problems they perceive relative to the quality of the films and the conditions of exhibition in cinemas. Particularly interesting are their cinema consumption habits, since they show a pattern of conduct that we believe to be representative of the young Spanish audience in general.

The big screen premieres are a part of the cinema they habitually consume. One of the criticisms that generates the greatest consensus is *dissatisfaction with the price-quality ratio*. They judge the cost of seeing a film in a cinema to be "extremely dear", and they find that the quality of the cinema often does not match the quality of the films or the service provided in that space, leaving them feeling cheated.<sup>10</sup> This is the main reason given to explain declining attendance. We were thus not surprised to observe a voluminous home film consumption on other media, and took note of the benefits of the Blu-Ray Disc.

Despite this criticism, many young people identify the cinema as a space to spend their leisure time in company. On most occasions, attendance is seen as a social act governed by custom and the standards that regulate their close relationships with friends or partners. It is worthwhile to consider the important question of the choice of film, since the predisposition in this regard influences how the film is perceived. What do young adults see and why? Here the group dealt with the experience in the listings, but their discussion also offers clues to their consumption of films at home. It enables us to question the generalized existence of a standard model young spectator who chooses pictures directly according to information, advertising or his or her preferences, tastes and interests.

There are young adults who report that they inform themselves previously on the new films in town, and others who admit to being heavily influenced by the marketing campaigns conducted for major productions. The question, however, is that they do not always see the film they wanted to because, when they go to the cinema with other people, they inevitably have to negotiate. There are also, then, social factors that determine what this audience ends up seeing. It is advisable to bear this in mind, although it is

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true that the participants declare a varied taste that covers “all films in general”, which makes them highly receptive to different genres and themes.

Another general consensus is observed in the ludic function they attribute to the cinema. Young people participate in the consumer view of the films offered on the market: they seek entertainment, disconnection from routine and fun in the films they see. As an audience fundamentally of commercial cinema – understood as the cinema of popular genres aimed at general audiences – they observe that this cinema is not a vehicle for criticism or social reflection. They judge it to be strictly subjected to mercantile criteria, and therefore predictable in its narrative formulas. They associate the critical function with smaller budget films, which sometimes pass unnoticed by them, since they do not benefit from large-scale promotional campaigns.

### 3. Perception of genre films and sociopolitical allegory

One of the lines of investigation of the mentioned research project centers on some popular fictional genres as a territory for the allegorical connection with the Islamic terrorist attacks and their social consequences. At the aesthetic level, disaster and horror films, mainly, have taken their inspiration from the scenes of the attack on the World Trade Center, or recreate chaotic scenes and atmospheres of anxiety and collective hysteria that are familiar to us. *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and *28 Days Later...* (Danny Boyle, 2002) are two of the clearest examples of this aesthetic. At the dramatic level, science fiction, fantasy and the thriller have reflected on the generalized feeling of fear, insecurity and danger that those attacks generated in the Western sociopolitical context. Undeniably, most of the allusions are aimed at the American reaction – national security policy, surveillance, reduction of civil rights, xenophobia, etc. But their metaphorical approach allows them to transcend this framework and create a universal discourse that enables other audiences to share in the experience. *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), *The Village* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2004), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and *The Mist* (Frank Darabont, 2007) are also notable examples in this line.<sup>11</sup>

Precisely this will to go beyond borders, at the ideological and commercial level, induces one to think of how those films are perceived in societies outside the Anglo-Saxon production area but which share similar experiences and basic sociocultural traits. Apart from that, our discussion group made it quite clear that these films are a part of the cinema that Spanish young adults consume.

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It must be pointed out here that this question was put to the group deliberately and openly, without inducing, conditioning or orienting the opinions expressed. From the reference fixed on the disaster sub-genre, a general assessment was made of the other popular genres. As it turned out, the participants saw no critical reflection in these films. Only two of them mentioned two titles, a thriller and a horror film, which they feel make reference to American politics: *Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008) and *Day of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1985). This datum allows us to formulate a hypothesis: the young public makes a reading of these films in terms of their genre codes, without reaching the critical discourse that they express allegorically. In fact, their assessment is restricted to the aesthetic level – the special effects and the spectacular images – and the narrative tension that marks the action scenes.

Their submission to the rules of the genre is also evident when they are asked about the dominant values present in the cinema after 9/11. They see no important changes, only the repetition of stereotypes. They all criticize the Manichaean, simplistic depiction of the heroes and villains they see in most films. They perceive that the antagonists match the real enemies of the United States, thus assuming as a usual circumstance the fact that the cinema transmits that country's dominant social discourse. In this regard, one of the most outstanding changes has to do with the identity of the adversary in the films that portray conflicts between American interests and *the others*. Whereas during the Cold War period this role was reserved for the Russians, Communists, Chinese or North Vietnamese, after 9/11 it would be reserved for the “Arabs”.

There is also agreement in emphasizing the ethnocentrism of American films. The disasters, threats and attacks are always depicted on American soil; “the rest of the world does not exist”. However, some see that this trait has been tempered recently in disaster films that, while focused on the United States, shift the action to other international scenes. *War of the Worlds* is one of the examples cited. It seems clear that their perception connects with the ideological discourse conveyed in the last decade regarding the need the country has to face the “real” threats derived from international terrorism. But they have not established that relationship at the conscious, reflective level.

They feel that the films imperfectly reflect American multiculturalism. Excessive importance is given to Caucasian characters with respect to those of the other ethnic groups, whose appearance often seems to be for the sake of political correctness. War films are the main referent for that appraisal which, in all other respects, follows a stereotyped scheme in the casting of the roles assigned to the characters. The supporting or minor roles usually fall to representatives of minority groups. Few participants saw any changes in that regard, and they see those changes in a more plausible

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depiction of the interracial composition of the American army deployed in the war in Iraq. Nor do they allude here to the tensions and alerts that some films convey relative to the risk of xenophobia in Western societies after the terrorist attacks.

Finally, we were surprised by their perception of a monolithic political, moral and social discourse in American films. This is not so much because they failed to notice the current of self-criticism that some films have conveyed after 9/11, but because their view has scarcely evolved from the cliché adopted in the United States propaganda documentaries after World War II.<sup>12</sup> They consider that a self-complacent rhetoric predominates – above all in the war genre – where patriotism, seamless unity and feelings of pride and superiority characterize the American people. Nor do they point to major changes in the treatment in films of American institutions after 9/11. They only find isolated points of restrained self-criticism in some films that refer to the war in Iraq, such as *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005).

**4. Cinema and terrorism: the 3/11 experience**

In March 2004 Spain suffered the most massive terrorist attack of its history when bombs placed on Madrid commuter trains exploded, killing 192 people and injuring 1,858. Five years have passed and still no fictional film has been produced about those events. The main hypothesis that the members of our research group are working with is that the audience is not yet prepared for this sort of depiction. Observing the angry reaction of some American spectators when trailers were shown of *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006), film that recreated the flight hijacked and crashed into the Pennsylvania countryside, we realized that time had not cushioned the social sensitivity around this subject.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the cinema was touching on a sort of collective trauma. This concept is complex, and we deal with it as such. We understand that, beyond the victims and witnesses of the attacks, who usually suffer a psychological trauma as the result of their direct experience, the society that becomes a witness thanks to the audiovisual media also experiences a certain indirect trauma of a collective type. We are not referring to the purely psychological symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but to a perception and a common mental state with regard to the tragedy.<sup>14</sup>

We reiterate that this difficulty seems to be faced by fictional cinema, not by documentary films. The American audience had been watching television documentaries on the 9/11 attacks practically from the month following their occurrence, and remembered the events in their successive annual tributes. Some documentaries have also been made in Spain about 3/11, and, as we indicate below, they do not seem to arouse

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rejection. To dig more deeply into this question, we asked ourselves the following question: does the audience believe that the cinema is a suitable medium to deal with the 3/11 attack? The opinions of our young adults, who lived that event when they were 15 to 18 years old, are highly revealing.

In general terms, the cinema that recreates terrorist attacks strikes them as “morbid”. It attracts them, both because of its narrative and dramatic tension and due to the knowledge that it provides to them about a real event that they may not have known. It is important to state that only under these criteria, and above all the first, did they mention the film *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006). They neither questioned its appropriateness, nor expressed qualms about seeing it: they judged it to be just another product of what they call “action”. It should be mentioned in passing that they were not enthusiastic about it; they found it wearisome. We must not forget that their young ages at the time the attack occurred – between 12 and 15 years – determined the way in which they assumed it. But their opinion reveals that Spanish viewers have a psychologically and emotionally distant position with regard to what happened in the United States, although they also experienced those events live through the audiovisual media. As an audience for these recreations on film, they behave differently from the American public, becoming involved in the story mainly through the conventions of the genre – the young men place the Oliver Stone film in the disaster category. Once again it would be confirmed that the critical reading of the same film differs according to the sociocultural contexts in which it is produced.<sup>15</sup>

The posture changed when reference was made to the hypothetical making, in the near future, of a fictional film recounting what happened on 3/11. Their rejection was unanimous and, at first, categorical, although later some of the young people tempered their position. One of the main impediments is the temporal and physical closeness of the events, since it conditions their assimilation process (“perhaps in twenty years. Now I consider it too soon, too soon”). It must be emphasized that, five years after the bombing of the trains, the feelings, emotions and images that the tragedy aroused remain very present among Madrid's university youths, who were, at that time, adolescents. They are still moved; they still feel affected when they remember it (“right now we are touching on the subject and my hair is standing on end”, “it’s a very painful subject”, “what a bad time I had”, “not a day goes by that you don’t think about it”).

It is probable that the event made an indelible mark on them at a critical time in their life cycle and their socialization process, that they internalized it as their first great tragedy experienced close up, a tragedy in which they realize they could have participated (“9/11 was there, it was New York, you knew the area, but it was very far away, but 3/11 was here, it was near your house, you take the train....”). In any case, their sensitivity indicates the mental state of Spanish society regarding this subject. They are distrustful

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at the prospect of a film treatment of the events, that “could be deeply offensive” and, above all, judge it unnecessary both for them and for the victims. They all agree that they do not wish to relive the emotion and the unpleasant sensations that the memory of the event brings back to them. Therefore the showing of a film on the attack would arouse rejection (“I know I would have a bad time of it”) or they would not attend (“To go and cry? To go and have a bad time?”).

Another impediment that some participants mention more discretely is of a moral nature: they do not consider the exploitation of the tragedy by the commercial cinema correct (“there’s always someone who’s going to make a profit from pain”).

Curiously, these prejudices are expressed about the fictional treatment, not about the documentary films that have dealt with the event. If the possibility is raised in the future, they believe a generation must pass before this fictional depiction is confronted, although they are convinced that it will be done sooner and that “it will be seen”. They all agree that such a film would have to be respectful so as not to hurt sensibilities, and very careful not to distort the events. There would thus be no room for speculation, only “the substantiated facts”. From that point onward, several creative ideas come forth. They propose a choral dramatic approach, with “different, parallel lives” in prominent roles. The film they envision would delve into the “characters’ personal background”, and would in no way reflect the worst clichés of Spanish and American cinema. They also feel that the story should be handled as an investigation aimed at understanding the attacks, and not just a recreation of them. The attacks should be given a discreet treatment in the overall film (“without shots of trains in flames and people suffering”). Their insistence on these views clearly reveals their categorical refusal to see images of the tragedy and to relive it – with its pain – in a crude way.

What aroused disagreement were the ideological perspectives of the 3/11 attack and of its “political background”. Here the generational discourse that had predominated during most of the conversation gave way. The young people aligned themselves with the various conflicting social discourses on the subject (“Why was it? Why did it happen?” or “Who is to blame for all this?”), when the time came to determine the contents that should be included and excluded in a possible future film. Even the question of where the film would have to end was controversial, whether it should include the trial held in 2007, since some consider it provisional and inconclusive in the clarification of the events. We find this debate also representative of the ideological perception of the events by Spanish society.

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**5. Conclusions**

Considering the caveats given at the beginning of this article, we believe the results of the qualitative study are significant and highly useful, both for the research project in the making and for academic reflection. The notable convergence in the opinions expressed and the absence of self-references due to ideology and to the participants' own interests make them a reference group of the way in which the young Spanish audience perceives commercial cinema.

In general terms, we have observed that this type of audience has a different interpretation from the academic critics' analyses with regard to Anglo-Saxon films that deal allegorically with Islamic terrorism and its consequences for Western societies. Their reading is oriented mainly by the conventions of each film genre, without an awareness of the underlying ideological dimension.

Concerning the film treatment of 3/11, the group makes plain its psychological and ideological disposition, which we believe could be extrapolated to the rest of the Spanish audiences, independently of other sociological variables. The first evidence is the fact that the terrorist attack in Madrid inflicted a deep wound on Spanish society, which it has not cauterized. Its handling in fictional cinema thus appears to be delicate and problematic. There are two impediments derived from this social sensitivity. The first has to do with the film interpretation of the events: it is feared that they will be trivialized, made the object of ideological manipulation and the vehicle of an inadvertent insult to the pain suffered by the victims and their families. Here it seems appropriate to make a distinction in generational terms. It is quite probable that the rejection expressed by this young public is due to its perception of the cinema as a primarily ludic instrument dominated by mercantile criteria. Other publics probably have a more favourable attitude toward the possibility that the cinema will deal with the tragedy, and will assess its expressive and communicative potential.

This is related with the second impediment that arose: the categorical rejection of an explicit, unvarnished treatment of the attacks. Again, the young people immediately expressed their fear of that narrative option, perhaps because they are used to the audiovisual exploitation of violence in the films they consume. In any case, we believe that this rejection would be common in the other Spanish audiences, and that it connects with the collective trauma. Spectators do not wish to relive the experience as indirect witnesses they underwent when they saw the dramatic images broadcast during and after the tragedy. This fact brings up an interesting reflection within the framework of the potential of the cinema as a trauma transmitter, since in this case it would act on spectators who were previously traumatized through other images.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> P Sorlin, *Cines europeos, sociedades europeas*, Paidós Comunicación, Barcelona, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Douglas Kellner, who shared his reflection on this subject with me through the galley proofs of his book, which will soon be published. D Kellner, *Cinema Wars. Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2010, pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> My use of the term *ideology* here follows the interpretation that Pierre Sorlin gave it in the context of cinema: the presence of slogans, statements, judgments that circulate in a society. P Sorlin, '¿Público o públicos? Cómo plantear la cuestión' in *Ver Cine. Los públicos cinematográficos en el siglo XX*, J-V. Pelaz and J.C. Rueda (eds), Rialp, Madrid, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> R Gubern, 'Una experiencia de antropología cinematográfica' in Pelaz and Rueda (eds.), op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> M Aaron, *Spectatorship. The Power of Looking on*, Wallflower Press, London, 2007, pp. 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Aaron points to the battle between the unconscious processes of psychoanalysis and the social processes of cultural studies. Aaron, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Sorlin distinguishes the 'spectator' from the 'audience', placing the emphasis on the fact that the former's motivations and tastes must not be confused with the characteristics of a group. To determine the 'audiences' that comprise a general audience, he works with different variables: from age and sex to the cultural context, social class, place of residence, etc. P Sorlin, '¿Público o públicos? Cómo plantear la cuestión', pp. 26-29.

<sup>8</sup> Research Project 'The Film Treatment of Social Panic After the 9/11, 3/11 and 7/7 Attacks (2001-2008)'. Reference: URJC-CM-2008-CSH-3710. Head researcher: Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla. Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (Madrid).

<sup>9</sup> The session took place at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Communication Sciences Department (Fuenlabrada Campus), Madrid, on May 20, 2009. The moderator was Jordi M. Monferrer, professor of sociology and expert in this sort of qualitative studies. In addition, he is the author of the basic report used for this article. The individual profiles of the participants comprehend four men and four women, of whom three are students of Advertising and Public Relations, three of Journalism and two of Political Science and Law.

<sup>10</sup> The average price of a ticket to a Madrid cinema is 8 euros.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla and Raúl Álvarez are the main researchers working on this subject.

<sup>12</sup> C Springer, 'Documentales propagandísticos de Estados Unidos en la Segunda Guerra Mundial y en la Guerra de Vietnam'. *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, vol. 55, Febrero 2007, pp. 80-97.

<sup>13</sup> P Harris & A O'Keeffe, 'Hollywood Salutes 9/11 all American Heroes', in *The Observer*, Sunday 9 April, 2006, viewed on 30 January 2009,

[<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/apr/09/september11.film>]

<sup>14</sup> Our use of these concepts is inspired by the work of Joshua Hirsch on cinema and trauma. J Hirsh, 'Posttraumatic cinema and the Holocaust documentary'. *Film & History*, vol. 32, 2002, pp. 9-21.

<sup>15</sup> Gubern alerts us precisely to the need for more empirical studies on the conditions of reception of the same film in different cultural contexts. Gubern, p. 34.

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