



## Spain Jonathan Holland

'Due to recent budget cuts,' read one poster at Madrid's summer 2011 protests, 'the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off.' It may not be quite that bad for the Spanish film industry, but at year's end, its problems do remain fairly constant and cutbacks of one form or another loom ever larger. P2P piracy continues to be an unresolved issue, with recent research showing that an astounding 77 per cent of digital content in Spain is downloaded illegally. The resistance to Spanish film of many Spanish cinemagoers, of the opinion that the films are awarded unfairly high government subsidies and that they are all navel-gazing rubbish, continues to represent a problem of perception which the industry is seeking to rectify by making more crowd-pleasers, mostly thrillers. But the decline in cinema audiences continues apace anyway, with four million fewer cinema seats being filled during the first six months of 2011 compared with the same period the year before.

The Government and producers agree that the way forward, in financing terms, is through collaborations with foreign producers, with Spain's ICAA announcing new grants for international co-productions during the



Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's *Intruders*

summer. High-profile Spanish co-productions include Rodrigo Cortés' forthcoming **Red Lights**, starring Robert de Niro and Sigourney Weaver, and Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's **Intruders**. France and Argentina remain Spain's biggest production partners, with new countries coming on board. But it's a decent plan that's only half working, as the number of big-budget projects that might appeal abroad has declined since the credit crunch started.

Commercially, the biggest recent hits have been Woody Allen's Gallic historical romance **Midnight in Paris**, which by mid-November was the fifth highest-grossing Spanish film of all time. But, of course, that project is Spanish only in terms of financing, not artistically. The

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biggest Spanish waves of of the year were made by the latest instalment in Santiago Segura's record-smashing grungy cop comedy series **Torrente 4, Lethal Crisis** (*Torrente 4, Crisis Letal*), which had grossed close to US\$30million by year's end and which, largely single-handedly, doubled the country's market share during the first half of 2011, compared to the same period in 2010, to nearly 18 per cent. To put that in perspective, Pedro Almodóvar's cold, slick thriller **The Skin I Live In** (*La piel que habito*), featuring Antonio Banderas as a troubled surgeon seeking cosmetic revenge for the rape of his daughter, was Spain's third-highest grossing movie as of November 2011, but made only US\$6.5million.

September and October were boom months for Spanish films, with the market share rising to over 20 per cent. Responsible for this were a handful of high-profile productions that displayed the range of quality of Spanish top-end fare. As usual, Almodóvar was partly responsible, with *The Skin I Live In* attracting critical and commercial success internationally, reaffirming his status as practically the only Spanish director whom non-Spaniards can name. Three successful chillers released around the same time, Andi Baiz's Spanish/Colombian co-production **The Bunker** (*La Cara oculta*), about the mysterious sudden disappearance of an orchestra director's girlfriend, and Jaume Balaguero's **Sleep Tight** (*Mientras Duermes*), starring Luis Tosar as a psychopathic janitor taking out his frustrations on one of the residents of the house he tends, showed that Spanish thrillers work



Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In*

particularly well when based on character and confined to enclosed spaces. Fresnadillo's *Intruders*, starring Clive Owen, was a slightly underwhelming addition to the canon of Spanish chillers about monster-seeing kids.



Enrique Urbizu's *No Rest for the Wicked*

While Spanish horror continues to make its mark internationally – **Rec 3: Genesis**, the third instalment in the popular trilogy, is set for release in 2012 – advances are being made in other genres. Enrique Urbizu's latest, **No Rest for the Wicked** (*No habrá paz para los malvados*), is a hard-boiled, thoroughly contemporary noir about a bad cop (Jose Coronado) who shoots two people dead in the first ten minutes and spend the rest of the film covering his tracks. Paco Cabeza's derivative but enjoyably muscular **Neon Flesh** (*Carne de neon*), about a Barcelona street kid who sets about making some serious money, was similarly turbo-charged, turning its thriller clichés into an underrated crowd-pleasing comedy thriller, with nods to Tarantino, Guy Ritchie and *Trainspotting*. Mateo Gil's revisionist English-language western **Blackthorn**, starring Sam Shepard as an ageing Butch Cassidy, breathed new life into an old genre. And Kike Maillo delivered one of the year's strongest debuts with **Eva**, a rare Spanish incursion into sci-fi, about an android designer and a little girl. That the story was as much about our lost humanity as it was about robots gave it an unexpected depth.

Other debuts included Jonas Trueba (son of Fernando) with the broken-heart drama **Every Song is About Me** (*Todas las canciones*

*hablan de mí*), which mixed love, literature and life lessons into an engaging but retro piece, suggesting that the *nouvelle vague* had never left us. Another outstanding debut, Paula Ortiz's **From Your Window to Mine** (*De tu ventana a la mía*), spanned three generations and told the story of ordinary women whose lives are suddenly tainted by an extraordinary tragedy. The film won the Best New Director award at Spain's Valladolid festival. It was also, sadly, the only feature to be directed by a female Spanish filmmaker in 2011.



Montxo Armendáriz's **Don't Be Afraid**

If international waves were mostly being made by escapist genre fare, there was a still a steady flow of social realism on offer. Montxo Armendáriz tackled the difficult topic of child abuse in **Don't Be Afraid** (*No tengas miedo*), and, aided by terrific performances by Michelle Jenner and Lluís Homar as daughter and father, made a film that was both compassionate and profoundly unsettling. Enrique Gabriel's underrated **Small Lives** (*Vidas Pequeñas*) tackled poverty and unemployment head on, examining the interlinked lives of a group of people living in a caravan park on the outskirts of Madrid. Ramón Termens' three-parter, **Catalunya Über Alles**, tackled immigration in various forms with wit, passion and palpable



Ramón Termens' **Catalunya Über Alles**

anger, while Max Lemcke's tragicomic **Five Square Metres** (*Cinco Metros Cuadrados*) explored the phenomenon that has brought the Spanish economy to its knees: property speculation. It took the best film award at the Malaga Festival.

Spanish history perhaps received less attention from filmmakers than it has in other years. Yet it still provided a fair share of turkeys. Among them was Chema de la Peña's **23-F**, an attempt to bring to the screen the near fateful coup of 23 February 1981, and perhaps the year's most emotive piece, Benito Zambrano's **The Sleeping Voice** (*La voz dormida*), which dealt with life in a women's prison in the aftermath of the Civil War and featured a standout performance by María León.



Benito Zambrano's **The Sleeping Voice**

The year also saw some terrific documentaries. Mercedes Alvarez followed up her magnificent *The Sky Turns* with **Futures Market** (*Mercado de futures*), a beautifully-poised but savage attack on property speculation. In **Jacques Leonard, el Payo Chac**, Yago Leonard used photographs taken by his grandfather, Jacques, of the gypsy community under Franco as the basis for a lyrical study of memory and forgetting. Isaki Lacuesta brought two documentaries to the table: **All Night Long** (*La noche que no acaba*), about the mutually adoring relationship between Ava Gardner and Spain during the 1950s and 1960s, and **The Double Steps** (*Los pasos dobles*), which followed Spanish artist Miquel Barcelo to Mali in the footsteps of the French artist Francois Augieras in



Sandra Sanchez' **Behind the Lights**

oder to explore the key Lacuesta themes of myth-making and storytelling. *The Double Steps* won the best film at San Sebastián. Equally compelling, but in a very different way, was **Behind the Lights** (*Tralas Luces*), Sandra Sánchez's intimate, affecting study of a gipsy woman struggling to keep her itinerant fairground family going.

The number of Basque-language titles on the release list seems to be rising and for the first time, some of them are worth seeking out. Among them is Immanuel Rayo's **Two Brothers** (*Bi Anai*), a lyrical, gorgeous-looking study of a 1950s Basque family. **The Stone** (*Arriya*), an attractive portrait of village life in the Basque country, had two clans fighting over a rock in the village square, and like all the finest work from the area, was suffused with a strong sense of place as it tackled the relationship between tradition and modernity. Altogether more raucous was Telmo Esnal's black comedy **Happy New Year, Grandma!** (*Urte berri on, amona!*), in which a family is broken apart, initially amusingly and then bleakly, by a matriarch's refusal to be sidelined.

The change of government in November 2011 from the Socialists to the centre-right Partido Popular had the film industry quaking in its boots, with a luminary of the stature of Antonio Banderas suggesting that the Partido Popular's cuts would mean the end of industry subsidies. Among proposals mooted by the Partido Popular is one releasing the private TV channels from their obligation to finance Spanish and European cinema. This would lead to a loss of some €60million a year,

which could, in the eyes of industry doomsayers, lead to its collapse. It fell to Enrique González Macho, the recently-elected president of the Spanish Film Academy, to qualify the gloom: 'There will be changes and cuts, but I don't believe this will be a catastrophe for Spanish cinema.' Somehow, the industry has always struggled through crises before, and chances are that it will again – albeit under reduced circumstances.

### The year's best films

**Behind the Lights** (Sandra Sanchez)  
**Catalunya Über Alles** (Ramon Termens)  
**Don't Be Afraid** (Montxo Armendariz)  
**No Rest for the Wicked** (Enrique Urbizu)  
**The Sleeping Voice** (Benito Zambrano)

### Directory

All Tel/Fax numbers begin (+34)

**Escuela de Cinematografía y de la Audiovisual de la Comunidad de Madrid (ECAM)**, Centra de Madrid a Boadilla, Km 2200, 28223 Madrid. Tel: (91) 411 0497. [www.ecam.es](http://www.ecam.es).

**Federation of Associations of Spanish Audiovisual Producers (FAPAE)**, Calle Luis Bunuel 2-2º Izquierda, Ciudad de la Imagen, Pozuelo de Alarcón, 28223 Madrid. Tel: (91) 512 1660. Fax: (91) 512 0148. [web@fapae.es](http://web@fapae.es). [www.fapae.es](http://www.fapae.es).

**Federation of Cinema Distributors (FEDICINE)**, Orense 33, 3ºB, 28020 Madrid. Tel: (91) 556 9755. Fax: (91) 555 6697. [www.fedicine.com](http://www.fedicine.com).

**Filmoteca de la Generalitat de Catalunya**, Carrer del Portal de Santa Madrona 6-8, Barcelona 08001. Tel: (93) 316 2780. Fax: (93) 316 2783. [filmoteca.cultura@gencat.net](mailto:filmoteca.cultura@gencat.net).

**Filmoteca Espanola**, Calle Magdalena 10, 28012 Madrid. Tel: (91) 467 2600. Fax: (91) 467 2611. [www.cultura.mecd.es/cine/film/filmoteca.isp](http://www.cultura.mecd.es/cine/film/filmoteca.isp).

**Filmoteca Vasca**, Avenida Sancho el Sabio, 17 Trasera, Donostia, 20010 San Sebastián. Tel: (943) 468 484. Fax: (943) 469 998. [www.filmotecavasca.com](http://www.filmotecavasca.com). [andaluciafilmcom@fundacionava.org](mailto:andaluciafilmcom@fundacionava.org).

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