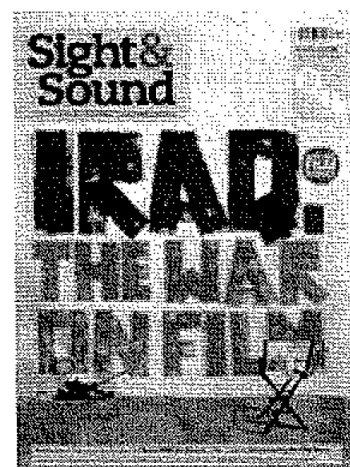




Under Franco's reign in Spain: Luis García Berlanga's 'Welcome Mr Marshall'



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# Cinema of resistance

**Paul Julian Smith** celebrates the Spanish film-makers who flourished under Franco

The 40-year dictatorship of Francisco Franco delivered no coherent film policy for Spain. Unlike the German and Italian fascist regimes, the Spanish Reich had no clear cultural brief and thus failed to fully exploit film as an instrument of propaganda.

Franco himself took only an intermittent interest in cinema. As early as 1941 he wrote the script for *Raza* (*Race*), a romanticised version of his own family history in which a noble widowed mother cares for her heroic son. In his dotage he frequently retreated to his private screening room in the El Pardo palace, where he was particularly partial to Westerns.

The regime had no state production company, but favoured private producer CIFESA churned out nationalist epics in the 1940s extolling the virtues of historical figures from Queen Isabel the Catholic to Christopher Columbus. Popular Andalusian or gypsy-style musicals called *españoladas* featured strong-willed singing stars like Imperio Argentina, who nevertheless usually succumbed to marriage to a local aristocrat in the final reel. Sentimental religious pictures, where, say, an abandoned baby is raised by a kindly community of monks,

proliferated in the 1950s, supporting the National-Catholic rhetoric that posited Francoist Spain as the focus for religious orthodoxy in a godless world. With the timid opening up of the regime to the outside in the 1960s, such pictures turned Technicolor, with the piping infants celebrating the bright new universe of consumerism that impoverished Spain was belatedly entering.

All this official mass-market cinema was dismissed by serious directors as fatally compromised. But by the 1960s Francoism (like so many repressive regimes today) had come to understand the propaganda value of a more artistic cinema of resistance. This elite film-making was directed towards foreign festivals, where it was intended to change the image of a pariah nation, and minority domestic audiences, where it served as an escape valve for reformist pressures. The so-called 'Francoist aesthetic' in such films was based nonetheless on fantasy and allegory, in a bid to outwit the censors. Late masterpieces like Víctor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) and Carlos Saura's *Cría cuervos* (1975) remain well known abroad.

But ask Spaniards who their country's most important director is and they will most likely reply not Erice or Saura, Buñuel or Almodóvar, but Luis García Berlanga, who is revered for a biting black humour held to be typically Spanish. Welcome

*Mr Marshall* (1952) is a caustic parody of the *españolada*, with a Castilian village transforming itself into a mock-Andalusian spectacle in the hope of attracting foreign aid. *The Little Flat* (1958) tackles housing problems, with a young man obliged to marry an ancient dowager in order to inherit her apartment. *Plácido* (1961) mocks the middle class who for one day only at Christmas welcome the poor into their homes.

Other Franco-era films that are celebrated in Spain include *The Strange Trip* (1964), directed by actor Fernando Fernán Gómez: a grotesque, anti-realist fable about a pair of childlike small-town siblings who commit murder in pursuit of wealth and the chance to travel. Even stranger is Jaime de Armiñán's *My Dear Young Miss* (1972), which features José Luis López Vázquez as a prim spinster who discovers that she is anatomically a man. With its hero-heroine highly dignified in drag, this affecting comedy could not be further from the fag-baiting farces also made in the period.

■ *'Spain (Un)censored', a season of Franco-era cinema, runs at BFI Southbank, London, from 15 January to 28 February; the Sight & Sound event 'Franco's Children' takes place on Thursday 7 February at 18.20, at which critics Paul Julian Smith and Maria Delgado and director Ventura Pons investigate the cultural legacy of the era*