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Broken Marriages, Fucking Around, and a Million Cigarettes

Charles Mudede Runs Out of Space Writing About the Festival of New Spanish Cinema

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The Festival Of New Spanish
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The first thing that one gathers from watching two or more of the films in this traveling festival of Spanish directors is that the people in that part of the world smoke like fiends.

For them, everywhere—bed, kitchen, bar, steps, street—is a place to smoke. Puff, puff, puff—that is the first impression. The next one is that this festival is of a much higher quality than the Italian one that passed through SIFF last year. Not one decent film could be found in the New Italian Cinema Festival; the entire event was creatively bankrupt, an artistic dead end, an intellectual wasteland. Whereas Hollywood was certainly the model for the films in the Italian festival, the independent spirit is the model for the films in this series.

Now, despite being generally good, none of the films in this series really stands out. None is exceptional; all were made with enough creativity to place them in an area just above average and just below greatness. Indeed, one film, the least political film in this very political festival, *Three Days with the Family*, is just pretty to look at. The first shot: A young city woman (Léa) arrives at a country station on a beautiful bullet train. Her appearance is supremely ordinary—not too big, not too thin, not too attractive, not too plain. Her parents are handsome, and her middle-class family of uncles, aunts, and

cousins has its winners and losers. There's a funeral and a little drama at a dinner table, and the film ends with Léa returning to the city on the bullet train. And what's this film all about? The pleasure of watching the mode, manner, and accessories of that milieu. Whereas *Three Days with the Family* presents the audience with the charms of the *burguesía*—its family dinners; its warmly broken marriages; its heavy, social smoking (from kids to grandparents)—*After*, a film by Alberto Rodríguez and set in Seville, the financial and cultural capital of Andalusia, is a raw indictment of that class. The film's three characters (Manuel, Ana, and Julio) are all very unpleasant and spiritually empty people. Two (Manuel and Ana) live in a gated community, and one (Julio) has the same soulless job as George Clooney in *Up in the Air*—he goes around the country firing people for companies looking to quickly and painlessly cut some fat from the staff. Julio has a serious coke problem and gets all of his sex from the internet. Somehow, all three meet, fuck around, drink, drive around drunk, and emotionally crash in the morning. The firing man, Julio, masturbates over a woman who has passed out on a couch (he is nice enough not to rape her), the woman (Ana) has pleasureless sex with two young strangers, and the other man (Manuel) gets the shit kicked out of him by a gang he provoked for no reason at all. The film does not have one redeemable character.

The films *Me Too*, *Stigmata*, and *The Condemned* have nothing but redeemable characters. But this point will receive no elaboration in the remaining space of this review. I want instead to turn to and focus on what I feel is the most important film of the festival, *Rabia*, which concerns two immigrants (José María and Rosa) who fall in love and then fall into deep trouble. Rosa, a maid, is just a nice and rather naïve woman; José María, a construction worker, is a man filled with rage at the social forces that turned him into a powerless, illegal immigrant in a strange land. He wants respect, more money, and the chance to raise a family, but every door toward that goal is locked. Soon after meeting the love of his life, who works in a big home owned by an old Spanish family, he kills his boss at the construction site. José María flees the crime scene and, unbeknownst to anyone, hides in the top and empty floors of the big house.

From above (in the shadows), José María watches the family and their maid—the love of his life. The mother of the house is kind to Rosa, the father is neither here nor there, and their overgrown son is a total bastard. He rapes Rosa (who happens to be pregnant) and continues life as if nothing happened. The crime, he is confident, will never see the light of day. What is angry, hurt, doomed José María to do? The end of this movie is very grim indeed (it involves rats).

Because much of *Rabia* is set in a house, it recalls the wonderful Bolivian film *Zona Sur* (*Southern District*), which also translates larger social and political issues into the interior spaces of an old home owned by an old family that's in decline. At this point, I wanted to say much more about these two films (to connect them with Foucault's idea of micro-power and also attempt to articulate something radically new: a kind of allometry of power), but as you can see, there is no space left.