



Rules, Made to be Broken

Subverting censorship, Spanish cinema flipped Franco the bird

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Spain (Un)Censored

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MOMA

In "Spain (Un)Censored," MOMA presents a series of 20 films made during Franco's 35-year dictatorship, from early efforts like *Furrows* (1951) and *Welcome, Mister Marshall!* (1952), which explored rural poverty at a time when it was rarely seen or discussed, to *The Cuenca Crime* (1979), a graphic depiction of torture and repression made after Franco's death, but before Spain's full transition to democracy. All of the films in the series were created under the thumb of the Spanish censors, who restricted formal innovation and most overtly political or sexual content. Directors were forced to turn to more subtle means of getting their point across—symbolism, innuendo, and gentle irony—or risk having their work banned.

While members of the Generalissimo's Movimiento Nacional were busy promoting "traditional" family values and Roman Catholicism, filmmakers quietly chipped away at these notions of decency, partly by exploring the true plight of young people under Franco. ("It is curious that many of these films show extremely violent filial relationships," the curator Marta Sanchez dryly observes.) *Nine Letters to Bertha* (1965), directed by Basilio Martin Patino (who will appear at MOMA on October 19 to discuss the film), a 15-year-old student studies abroad in Swinging London for a year. Upon returning home, he subsumes his longing for England's cosmopolitan freedom in a series of letters to Bertha, the daughter of a Spanish exile. *The Delinquents* (1959) depicts a group of boys who form their own ironic counterpart to Franco's fascist youth movement, roaming the streets like the Sharks and the Jets and pursuing their dream of becoming bullfighters—one of the only avenues of social mobility open to them—by pulling off a variety of incredible and not-so-incredible heists.

Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961) lifts a bold middle finger to the Spanish establishment in almost every frame. eponymous teenage heroine keeps a crown of thorns in her valise when she travels. is studying to become a nun, and her Mother Superior orders her to visit a dying uncle before she takes her vows. "Try to show him some affection," the teacher urges her disciple, in the first of a profusion of crude allusions that led to the film's rejection by the Spanish censors (it was finally smuggled out to France, where it played at Cannes to great acclaim). Viridiana arrives at her Tio Jaime's house to find that he is fixated on his dead wife, whose dainty bridal pumps he likes to slip onto his feet in moments of loneliness or passion. He and his mild maid Ramona, who acts as his procuress, convince Viridiana to dress up like her aunt, and soon the girl is drugged and either raped or not raped by her uncle (he never quite comes clean), who proceeds to hang himself. Viridiana inherits his property and innocently invites a group of deformed peasants to live with her on the estate. Inevitably, these objects of Viridiana's Christian charity run amok, staging a blasphemous orgy that culminates in yet another sexual violation of their benefactress. They are the old Spain raping the new, an assertion of the robust sexuality and anti-clerical values that existed before Franco and were destined to rise again after his demise.



Films starring children were a familiar subgenre of Spanish cinema by the 1970s. Often, these were cutesy, stylized productions in which the child actors' voices were overdubbed by adults affecting a squeak. Victor Erice's quiet 1973 masterpiece *The Spirit of the Beehive*, an obvious influence on Pan's Labyrinth, revolutionized the genre by allowing children to speak for themselves and examining their inner lives with both decency and wonder. Its wispy plot deals with a family living on a remote Castilian plain, struggling with the after-effects of the Spanish Civil War. While their elderly father and young mother are preoccupied with other matters (beekeeping and adultery, respectively), sisters Isabel (Isabel Telleria) and Ana (a grave, astonishing young actress named Ana Torrent) are left to their own devices. After a village screening of James Whale's *Frankenstein*, Ana becomes haunted by the image of the monster, which she believes she has discovered when a fugitive soldier escapes to a field near her house.

In *Spirit*, Ana's innocence is crushed just as thoroughly as Viridiana's, but by the monstrosity of war and the even more monstrous peace that followed.