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Young Orson, King Midas and the emerging auteur

Alejandro Amenábar has made only five main features over a 15–year period (1995–2009). His most recent production was *Ágora*, an ambitious and challenging reimagining of the historical epic, which was released in Spain in early October 2009. Yet his relative paucity of output has not prevented him from becoming Spain's most successful, celebrated and versatile filmmaker ever. In 1995 he abandoned his Film Studies degree at Madrid's Complutense University in order to shoot *Tesis* (Thesis), his first feature. This was an arty, Hitchcock-inspired version of the 'teen slasher' formula, which represented his own final-year dissertation on celluloid. Though the film was written with Penélope Cruz in mind, it was in fact the iconic child star of the Francoist art film, Ana Torrent (who had played Ana in Víctor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973), who finally embodied the sexually ambiguous female lead. *Tesis* was also a manifesto film. Through the device of the 'snuff' movie, it warned its viewers to beware of Spain's exploitative 'telebasura' (trash television) and their own morbid fascination with screen violence. It also drew attention to the long standing disconnection between the national cinema and mainstream Spanish audiences, by underlining the appeal as well as the threat of American film imports. Paradoxically, though critical of American market hegemony, *Tesis* was widely admired by its publics (particularly the under-25s), precisely because its well-designed thriller format and strong production values did not look or feel Spanish at all, but American! In mid-1995 Amenábar was also the youngest ever feature director in Spain, at 23 years old, and the first to be let loose with a million-dollar budget (120 million pesetas approximately). Such precocity was unheard of and very soon journalists and film critics began referring to him as 'Orsoncito' (Little Orson) or 'el

Orson Welles español' (the Spanish Orson Welles), linking him to one of the most canonical and revered as well as controversial names in film history.[1]

Before its commercial release in Spain, *Tesis* was shown at festivals in Berlin and Annecy (France), where it attracted strong public interest and positive notices. Amenábar was valorised by critics for his competence in direction, scoring and screenplay, even though, at that time, he did not regard himself as a proficient scriptwriter.[2] In his review the *ABC* film critic E. Rodríguez Marchante was concerned by plotting excesses in the second half, but overall was very impressed by the youngster's grasp of suspense and thriller conventions, while also comparing him favourably with his great idol, Steven Spielberg.[3] Núria Bou and Xavier Pérez in the Catalan daily *Avui* went even further, claiming that Amenábar had already begun to show signs of 'una personalitat autoral' (an authorial personality) and a distinctive interest in certain thematic and moral concerns, which was motivated by 'la seva visió' (his own vision or worldview).[4]

Despite being based on the evidence of only one film and a good deal of wishful thinking, such auteurist spin was again evident in the extraordinary critical reception which greeted *Abre los ojos* (Open Your Eyes), Amenábar's second film, released in Spain in December 1997. Like *Tesis* this production was another generic hybrid, drawing upon resources not usually associated with Spanish filmmaking, i.e. Lynch-style surrealism and fragmented subjectivities, Philip K. Dickian musings on multiple realities, Hitchcockian suspense and male narcissism and the flawed but redeemable nature of our 'humanity'. But, unlike *Tesis* and its more accessible linear narrative, *Abre los ojos* was vastly more complex, ambitious and deep; also, its highly elliptical, flashback structure was a major challenge to audience intelligibility. In a poor year for national cinema, the critic Lluís Bonet proclaimed Amenábar's second outing as the achievement of 'un verdadero autor' (a real auteur) with an extraordinary capacity for 'la fabulación visual' (visual storytelling).[5] Even the usually parsimonious critic of *El País*, Ángel Fernández Santos, praised a brilliant and agile Amenábar as 'el dueño de un estilo propio y de una poderosa mirada sin equivalente' ('master of a personal style and a powerful gaze without equal').[6] By the beginning of 1998, and on the strength of only two feature films, many professional film critics and large sections of the Spanish media were heralding a new, star director and seriously promoting a 25-year-old Amenábar as an emerging auteur. Such emphatic hype,

based on only two films, could have been a heavy burden to bear for such an inexperienced young filmmaker. Yet, rather than play safe by making another relatively small-scale, easily manageable, European horror-thriller co-pro, Amenábar surprised everyone by risking his growing reputation and career in a major transatlantic project with the moguls of 'independent' Hollywood.

Thanks to the Sundance Film Festival of early 1998 (where the film was showcased) and the intervention of the producer Paula Wagner, *Abre los ojos* came to the attention of her business partner Tom Cruise. In the 1990s Cruise was arguably the biggest, most successful and powerful, independent, actor-producer in Hollywood. Overwhelmed by Amenábar's film and dazzled by 'dream girl' Penélope Cruz, Cruise quickly acquired the remake rights with development money supplied by Paramount. The project became *Vanilla Sky* (2001), directed by Cameron Crowe, who had already worked with Cruise on the hugely successful hit *Jerry McGuire* (1996). Not only was *Vanilla Sky* a personal, star vehicle for Cruise and a challenging new twist on his 'hot shot kid humbled and redeemed' screen persona; it was also a virtual, sequence-for-sequence remake of the progenitor film narrative, but with a far less ambiguous ending. Genuinely impressed by his creative talent and sensing other opportunities on the horizon, Cruise also offered to co-produce another Amenábar project. This was a script devised for a low-budget art film, originally written in Spanish, called 'La casa' (The House) and set in Chile, which would finally become *The Othes* (2001). Seen by Cruise as a potential Oscar opportunity, it would star his then wife, Nicole Kidman, supported by a strong Anglo-Irish cast.

Produced, financed, shot and initially edited in Spain, *The Others* was not only the most expensive Spanish feature of its day ($17 million), it was also the biggest-grossing, most successful film ever made in Spain (attracting 6.4 million spectators, taking €27 million in local admissions and grossing approximately $210 million worldwide, including $96.5 million in the USA – source: mcu.es). No other Spanish director, not even the mighty Almodóvar, had ever achieved a critical and commercial success of this type and on this global scale. It was also Amenábar's first foray into English-language filmmaking. This was a major challenge, particularly at the scripting, rehearsal and shooting stages, given the director's still uncertain command of English. The film also benefited from a large-scale distribution campaign in the USA and English-speaking countries, orchestrated

by Miramax/Dimension Films, anxious for Oscar success. It was promoted globally as a classy, old-fashioned, ghost story cum horror-melodrama and inspired stylistically by the black and white, suspense thrillers of the early 1940s, including Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). It was also heavily indebted to Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961), his acclaimed adaptation of Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw*. Apart from being a stunning commercial hit, *The Others* was a major critical success, with Golden Globes and BAFTA nominations for Nicole Kidman. It also won eight Goyas (Spain's equivalent of the Oscars, awarded by the Spanish Film Academy) and, controversially, was the first ever English-spoken production to receive the Spanish Academy's Best Film Award. Also, for a beginner, Amenábar picked up the rudiments of deal-making in Hollywood very quickly, so much so that, rather than cross the Atlantic to work, he insisted on shooting the picture in Spain. Remarkably, his American producers agreed. We are bound to admire his determination, *sang-froid* and single mindedness. Such co-pro arrangements with independent Hollywood were totally unprecedented in Spanish film history and for a 29-year-old Spanish director, with only his third film, quite unique.

After completing a trilogy of genre hybrids located broadly in the 'horror-thriller' domain, Amenábar could have simply remained in his comfort zone, headed for Hollywood and made another thriller or two. But, despite the global success of his third picture, he was anxious to reclaim some of the control he had ceded to Cruise and Miramax during his stressful and frustrating encounter with independent Hollywood. Moreover, he was also afraid of being pigeonholed as just another imitator of Hitchcock and seen a mere 'maker of thrillers'. This perhaps explains why his fourth feature represented such a dramatic, indeed totally unexpected, change of direction in subject matter, style and generic focus. Returning to national stories and local referents, he embarked upon a project which he had first researched in 1998, but for which he was unable to find a suitable mode of dramatisation. This was *Mar adentro* (The Sea Inside, 2004), a strongly local and very polemical bio-pic. It was based on the memoirs, poems and other writings of Ramón Sampedro, a real-life, bedridden Galician paraplegic, whose legal and media campaigns for the 'right to die' had deeply divided Spain and brought Amenábar no end of grief from the Catholic Church and anti-euthanasia pressure groups. Generically and formally, *Mar adentro* constituted a decisive break with Hitchcock and the suspense thriller mould of his first three pictures. At

the same time, it demonstrated once again that Amenábar was a serial risk-taker, self-confident enough to dramatise an incendiary legal case which was still sub judice. In so doing, he was also testing the treacherous waters of the 'issue' film, seeking to put a positive, indeed heroic, construction on Sampedro's bitter legal struggle for 'una muerte digna' (a dignified death).

Despite such dangers, the film was a major commercial success in Spain (with over four million admissions and nearly €20 million in box-office – source: mcu.es). But, because of its subject matter, no matter how hard the distributors tried (except perhaps for Japan), they could not find a viable commercial audience internationally for a 'right to die' film (this was particularly acute in the USA, where it grossed a negligible $2 million – source: imdb.com). By way of compensation, *Mar adentro* was an enormous critical success (winning well over thirty awards worldwide) and established Amenábar's reputation as a newly emerging, international auteur filmmaker, but one able to work successfully in more than one generic register. His elevation seemed complete with the award of the Oscar for Best Foreign Film of 2004, for *Mar adentro*. This brought him serious peer recognition from within the international film industry (especially from his idol, Steven Spielberg), while greatly enhancing his national standing and celebrity at home, as well as his global marketability. At the same time, back home, his Oscar was accompanied by astonishing levels of success at the Goya awards in Spain, in 2005, where *Mar adentro* won an unprecedented 14 of the 15 categories for which it was nominated. Having already seen Amenábar's film outperform his *La mala educación* (Bad Education, 2004) at the national box office, and with nothing to show from four Goya nominations, Spain's leading international auteur filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar and his producer-brother Agustín both resigned from Spain's Film Academy in deep dudgeon. They blamed the voting system for their lack of success, (notably the lack of information regarding the number of participants in each round of votes) as well as the Academy's alleged lack of generosity towards Almodóvar over many years. Amenábar was now the new face of Spanish filmmaking and appeared to have stolen the clothes of the national cinema's prickly 'pope'.

From its inception in mid-2005, the identity of Amenábar's fifth feature was kept under wraps for well over two years, until the funding was in place and the leading player, Rachel Weisz, had been signed. In Spain, between 2005 and 2007, rumours of possible

film projects were rife, public interest and media anticipation were enormous, while local distributors and exhibitors complained that, without an Amenábar film to attract audiences, the home box-office would collapse. When the announcement came, and echoing the example of *Mar adentro*, Amenábar and his producers took the whole national industry by surprise when they revealed the nature of the new project: a sword-and-sandals historical epic, set in classical antiquity (fourth century AD) and dealing with aspects of the life and notorious death of a forgotten, female astronomer and philosopher, Hypatia of Alexandria. The film presented evident continuities with *Mar adentro*: It returned to the fictionalised 'bio-pic' template, focusing once again on aspects of the life and death of a pagan martyr. It also recycled and extended Amenábar's sustained critique of Catholicism (seen in *Abre los ojos* and *The Others* as well as *Mar adentro*), but this time going much further in condemning not only religious intolerance but all forms of fundamentalist belief systems which exploit terrorist violence in order to impose their views. The film also repeated Amenábar's usual practice of alternating in his films between a female and a male lead character. And as for the type of project, his choice of genre seemed extraordinary, even daring to the point of recklessness. No Spanish filmmaker in modern times had ever directed a 'peplum', even in the glory days of producer Samuel Bronston in the 1950s and the 60s and taking into account Spain's acknowledged reputation at that time as an excellent location for making historical epics. Hence, the enormous risk for producers in backing such a project, even one placed in the capable hands of a young Oscar-winner like Amenábar. Moreover the film's colossal budget was by far the biggest and riskiest ever devoted to a local picture and, in the end, wholly funded by national companies. However, the commercial fate of the picture would hang on its achieving successful international distribution and a guaranteed release in the massive American domestic market. All in all Amenábar's fifth film was his biggest and boldest gamble to date. It would test to the limit his creative, technical, promotional and marketing skills, for an unpromising, period art film, widely seen by buyers, critics and audiences as a 'hard sell' and strongly anti-Christian.

Following his Oscar success Amenábar has been increasingly regarded as a filmmaker who has already achieved auteur status. For example, on the back cover of the second edition of his book on the director, Antonio Sempere (2004) remarks confidently: 'Calidad y

éxito se aunan en todos los trabajos de este autor, nacido en 1972' (Quality and success are combined in all the films of this auteur, born in 1972). On the international front Amenábar was even hailed as the new sensation of 2005 and even a rising film mogul. In the first issue of *Newsweek* (January 2005) he appeared nonchalant and moody on the magazine's front cover, with the caption: 'Alejandro Amenábar, Spanish Eye. The wunderkind filmmaker looks beyond Hollywood.' And, according to the inside feature, he was described as the 'Spanish director who made Kidman a star' and who 'is driven not by Hollywood' but 'by his own vision', thus reinforcing the classic auteurist stereotype.[7] By early 2006, on the twentieth anniversary of the Goya awards, Amenábar was also dubbed 'el señor Goya' (Mr Goya) by *El País Semanal* (reflecting his eight personal awards overall); he was thus feted as 'el chico de oro del cine español. Nuestro Rey Midas' (the golden boy of the Spanish cinema. Our King Midas).[8] Despite dismal international box-office returns for three out of five features (*Abre los ojos*, *Mar adentro* and *Ágora*), Amenábar has not made a bad film yet. He also heads a small group of commercially successful directors (Pedro Almodóvar, Agustín Díaz Yanes, Javier Fesser, Santiago Segura, Juan Antonio Bayona, Álex de la Iglesia, Fernando Trueba, Julio Medem etc.) on whom the Spanish film industry has come to rely for its economic well-being and critical reputation.[9] Yet, to what extent does the media construction of Amenábar as a brilliant, successful, international, auteur director hold water? What is the reality behind the hype and what sort of authorship do we mean?

Retracing authorship

The idea of the talented director as the crucial creative presence behind the film emerged with particular force in postwar Europe, initially through Alexandre Astruc's authorial analogy between writing and filmmaking via the 'caméra-stylo' (Cook 2007: 390). Astruc's proposition helped lay the foundation for later debates on authorship in French film criticism, notably in the influential journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, co-founded by Bazin in 1951. Such debates were made famous by Truffaut's vitriolic attack on France's dominant, commercial 'cinéma de qualité' and its studio hierarchies, which foregrounded the role and powerful status of the screenwriter (in 'Une certaine tendance du cinéma français', published in April 1954). Here, Truffaut berated a 'cinéma de papá' for its stuffiness and datedness, its emphasis on

psychological realism, its overdependence on the literary adaptation and its privileging of the 'scénariste' (screenwriter) over the director as the source of filmic value. What was required, argued Truffaut, was a decisive shift towards the specifically cinematic, i.e. towards *mise-en-scène* and film style and a much clearer distinction between the '*metteur-en-scène*' (the competent director or technician, translator of script into image) and the figure of the '*auteur*', whose creative talent and artistry deserved far greater recognition. All this was summed up in Bazin's article 'La politique des auteurs' (published in *Cahiers* in April 1957). But here, though he acknowledged the 'personal factor' in filmmaking, Bazin was reluctant to endorse the sort of extravagant, often ad hominem, auteurist criticism (then called 'author policy' or 'polemic') being developed by young cinephiles such as Truffaut, Chabrol, Rohmer, Godard and Rivette etc. Echoing the tenets of Sartrian existentialism, these young film critics celebrated concepts of artistic integrity and 'authenticity', where the individual filmmaker 'authors' his or her life and worldview on film through particular technical and stylistic choices. Such a view assumed a certain separateness or specialness for *Cahiers*' 'men of the cinema', a certain elitism, fostered by a rich diet of previously unavailable Hollywood films and the postwar traditions of the ciné club movement in France as well as the film festival circuit. These activities emphasised strong, creative (male) personalities whose film works transcended their contexts of production and reception (Stam 2000: 20). By contrast Bazin tended to argue that film gained its expressive power not through authorial stylisation or the recycling of narrative and technical aspects but through representational fidelity, i.e. realism. Moreover, as Bordwell argues, Bazin and his colleagues all acknowledged and indeed celebrated the fact that 'Hollywood displayed high-level achievements and that the real avant-garde was the advanced studio filmmaking of the sound era' (1997: 50). As a result and very controversially for the times, the 'young turks' of *Cahiers* sought to blur the boundaries between art cinema and commercial cinema by conferring auteur status on a number of major Hollywood studio directors, such as Ford, Welles, Hitchcock, Hawkes, Ray, Sirk, Lang etc. Even in the industrialised heart of darkness that was supposedly Hollywood, the pioneering Nouvelle Vague critics recognised the talent and distinction of certain commercial genre directors, whose powerful personalities, personal visions and creativity were able to rise above the constraints and standardising processes of factory filmmaking.

When translated into the context of Anglo-American film criticism in the 1960s, via Andrew Sarris, 'la politique des auteurs' mutated into 'auteur theory', shifting priorities from polemic to taxonomy. That is, it functioned as a (subjective) means of categorising and ranking American directors into rough league tables (variously designated as 'pantheon', 'second line', 'fallen angels' etc.), while demonstrating the general superiority of American filmmaking. This was done according to three rather vague and questionable criteria for authorship: (1) technical competence, i.e. the director's ability to master the techniques of filmmaking in an expressive fashion; (2) distinctive personal style, i.e. a set of visual and narrative choices which are recognisable and repeated across a series of films, such as Welles's use of deep focus and mobile camera; and (3) interior meaning, i.e. a consistent worldview, unique to the director. Accordingly, Sarris acclaimed those few 'brave spirits who had managed to overcome the gravitational pull of the mass of movies'.[10] Yet, as Maltby also argues, Sarris tended to marginalise and ignore what Bazin had famously referred to as the 'genius of the system' (i.e. the quality and the strong traditions of Hollywood genre cinema) and the many achievements of directors such as Raoul Walsh or Michael Curtiz, who were among the leading contract directors in the 1930s and 1940s, and at the top of their game in terms of their craft skills, as evidenced by *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) and *Casablanca* (1942) (Maltby 1995: 31).

Also, lest we forget, Bazin did not entirely accept the purist premise of 'la politique des auteurs', in the often bombastic form proposed by Truffaut and company. Bazin was wary of the idea of the auteur as a source of meaning, given his commitment to the freedom of the spectator and his view of the ideal filmmaker as an almost neutral, passive recorder, not a creative manipulator, of (admittedly staged) real world events (Cook 2007: 390–1). Indeed, Bazin believed that the *mise-en-scène* should be cleared of signs of individual style altogether, thereby letting the spectator engage with meaning freely, without being manipulated. Also Bazin was troubled by the practice of constructing filmic 'greatness' on the basis of regularities and supposed coherence 'found' by the auteur critic across a body of film work. This smacked of subjectivism and teleology, and seemed to leave out of account the social and historical contexts and constraints which invariably bear upon the process of filmmaking. He also stressed that the auteur inhabited a specific filmmaking ecology (or what Maltby calls, in relation to Hollywood, the 'multiple logics' of filmmaking, 1995: 30),

shaped by economics, industrial practices, national trends, cultural precedents, social movements and the specialisation of production cycles according to genre etc. In short the auteur was always treated by Bazin as a 'function within a system of forces' (Stam 2000: 21). Bazin's preference therefore, was for an impure cinema, for hybrids, rather than for a fetishised, personal creativity or imagined purity, lying behind the images on screen. And, while a keen student of Welles, he also took a particular interest in the Hollywood western and the ways in which the strong authorial personality negotiates and interacts with genre. Bazin's coolness towards authorial hero worship and his acute understanding of the logics of commercial filmmaking arguably offer a useful perspective and corrective when analysing Amenábar as an aspiring popular, auteur filmmaker.

In the mid- to late 1960s, in response to major upheavals in cultural politics arising from May 1968, *Cahiers* criticism abandoned the auteur in favour of ideology, the filmic 'ideological apparatus' and the textual 'unsaid'. The dominant capitalist ideology was everywhere, it seems, and needed to be exposed. How was it that symbolic systems, such as cinema, sustained social and psychic relations of domination, subordination and oppression in capitalist societies? Could this be the key to explaining the defeat of the French left in 1968? Ideology was invariably embedded in all types of filmmaking, *Cahiers* argued, save perhaps for that special category 'e', examples of which might be salvaged from oblivion through oblique 'symptomatic readings' against the grain (Cook 2007: 450). Structuralism, semiotics and psychoanalysis, with support from Althusserian Marxism, all sought to displace the human subject as the source of textual creativity with a dreary, anti-humanist and pseudo-scientific view of 'language'. It was now language itself which spoke through us, unconsciously and unbidden and which authored those linguistic artefacts we once called 'texts' and 'utterances'. Auteur criticism now adopted the more rigorous and scientific methods of structuralism and post-structuralism. Astruc's nostalgic 'caméra-stylo' and the filmmaker as writer became rapidly redundant in the 'age of the reader' and an open-ended paradigm of 'écriture', according to Derrida. Sarris's 'pantheon' auteurs were thus relegated to the level of mere 'regularities' in textual organisation, their skills and creativity having been dissolved into the flow of the multiple signals and codes of the film text. And, until the arrival of cultural studies in the 1980s, film studies was quickly and successfully occupied for nearly two decades by faddish, repetitive

and ultimately tiresome incantations from Marxism, psychoanalysis, linguistics and 'ideological critique'. Yet, miraculously, though marginalised and frequently written off, the notion of the film director as auteur refused to die. Indeed, the concept is still with us and is still crucial in the promotion and marketing of films, in much press and journal criticism and even in the confection of directorial lists and league tables. Also, the expansion of 'middlebrow' film entertainment, i.e. popular art cinema for wider audiences, has extended the life cycle of the film director as creative artist. Moreover, the boundaries between art and commerce, art cinema and commercial cinema have blurred significantly, as mainstream cinema has taken up many of the formal strategies which were once the preserve of the art film.

A shared, distributed, collective authorship?

In an inherently collective and collaborative form of activity such as filmmaking, where so many different elements and processes coexist, giving primacy to the work of the director in critical terms may seem counterintuitive and analytically suspect. Yet, in practice, before a mainstream fiction film can be made, a co-ordinating figure of some description is usually involved in virtually all of the key creative decisions arising from the development phase to post-production. Apart from finance, these decisions usually include script approval, casting, locations, production, costume design, details of performance and editing. Also, the film has to be pre-visualised or storyboarded and narrative ideas have to be mapped out, before handing them over to the various production and art design teams (Katz 1991: 4–6). This co-ordinating labour has been seen traditionally as the domain of the director, the overseer of the creative input and the person who knows (or is supposed to know), through his/her skills, habits and prior experience, what the film will look like and how best to achieve the highest possible level of integration of all the various contributions. This usually puts the director in the position of unifying the project and guiding the team(s) on what is required. But, unless we have reliable, empirical information confirming the co-ordinating and unifying roles of the director, it is difficult to assign credit to these administrative and creative functions. Also, how far should other teams and specialists be credited for their contribution to the fully integrated, final film product? The problem with 'auteur theory' is that it simply pays lip service to the notion of collaboration

or teamwork before heading straight towards an evaluation of directorial input. Clearly, not all films are made by auteurs, nor are all auteurs directors; not every film has a single director, or a single guiding consciousness. Also, the critical implications of assigning filmic coherence, the integration of all specialist contributions as well as meaning to the sole figure of the auteur-director are highly problematic. They simply fail to reflect the complex realities of mounting and producing a film. More pertinently, to what extent is Amenábar the author of work usually attributed to him, such as scripting, shooting and scoring?

Let us consider a practical example from his period as a student filmmaker. One of the reasons why the producer-director José Luis Cuerda called the 19-year-old Amenábar a 'renaissance genius' and facilitated his break into feature filmmaking was his apparent 'jack-of-all-trades' authorship. That is, his unusual breadth of expertise and practical skills in virtually all filmmaking departments (even acting), as seen in the credits for the short *Himenóptero* (Himenopterus, 1992), his 'passport' into feature production. The film was reminiscent of Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) and Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). It also featured a version of Powell's Mark Lewis, called Bosco, played by Amenábar himself. Cuerda was also impressed by the very assured shooting style and the smooth flow of the film narrative. While making *Himenóptero*, Amenábar did the lion's share of the work on scripting, rehearsing, direction and editing as well as adding the sound and music. However, it was his university friend and flatmate Mateo Gil who actually shot most of the film, given that Amenábar was involved in an acting role. Moreover, as a performer, a strangely silent and autistic Amenábar (with just one line of dialogue) worked opposite three female speaking roles (played by Raquel Gómez, Nieves Herranz and Juana Macías) who carry the film. In other words, *Himenóptero* was very much a team effort and, had it not been for Gil's very assured use of the video camera and the strong female performances, Cuerda might not have been so impressed by the direction or camerawork. Of course this in no way seeks to diminish Amenábar's enormous contribution to the film or to gainsay his impressive range of skills. In fact it was Amenábar himself who took overall responsibility for the piece, especially in its crucial post-production phase. And it was his painstaking hard work and integration of all the creative elements which fashioned a highly competent, successful, prize-winning short. Moreover, compared to that of his competitors, the

short's sound quality was deemed outstanding, this being the decisive factor which ensured for Amenábar his second short film award. So, at the level of student filmmaking, on the basis of the above information, we arguably do find a degree of personal integration and coherence which emerge from a small-scale collaborative effort, in which Amenábar played key roles in virtually all departments.

As regards his full-length features, much of the media and web coverage they have attracted gives the impression that every image, dialogue line and nuance therein proceeds from Amenábar's authorial consciousness. This is obviously wide of the mark, though he has nearly always co-scripted his films, tends to take personal control of editing and (until *Ágora*) soundtrack and sound mixing and insists on approving the final cut. Moreover, he is also generous in acknowledging the contributions of those he has worked with and never presents himself as a genius or transcendent 'intelligent designer'. Indeed, on *Tesis*, for example, feeling understandably jittery and not wishing to 'cagar' (mess up) his first big opportunity as a feature director, Amenábar suggested to producer Cuerda a 'joint direction' arrangement with Mateo Gil (Interview). This proposition was rejected (Heredero 1997: 105). As a compromise, although Gil did not co-script the film, he became Amenábar's personal assistant, minder on set and a second pair of eyes, available to offer advice and alternative suggestions for set ups, as well as lighting and camera positions etc. On *Abre los ojos*, apart from co-scripting the film with Amenábar, Gil again worked as his personal assistant in much the same manner. He also collaborated on the early treatments of *Tesis* and he co-scripted and was on set during the shooting of *Mar adentro*. All in all, apart from *The Others*, a case can probably be made for regarding Amenábar's authorship thus far as strongly shared with Gil, since it is impossible to disentangle clearly what belongs to Amenábar and what to Gil.[11]

At the same time, on Amenábar's first three features, José Luis Cuerda and Fernando Bovaira intervened very extensively on the scripting and preparation of *Abre los ojos* and *The Others* respectively. In fact Cuerda was crucial in reshaping the whole narrative outline and philosophical/ethical basis of *Abre los ojos*, while Bovaira supervised the script development of *The Others*. In a rather different mode of auteurist intervention, Nicole Kidman was also very influential in reshaping the role of Grace in *The Others*. The sort of changes she persuaded Amenábar to make radically changed the concept of

Grace as a hysterical, conflicted, disagreeable, Catholic mother with a very dark side. Also we are unlikely ever to discover the true nature and extent of Tom Cruise's micro-management of the production (including his constant notes and queries to Amenábar and then Bovaira, after viewing the dailies) and the difficult editing phases of *The Others*. With regard to film crew, it is worth mentioning that in the editing room Amenábar tends to rely on a co-editor (such as Nacho Ruiz Capillas). In relation to *mise-en-scène*, after outlining his concept and requirements, he normally leaves production design, lighting and cinematography almost exclusively in the hands of the relevant specialists, such as Benjamín Fernández, Guy Dyas and Javier Aguirresarrobe, who provide him with options and designs. In relation to soundtrack and music, until *Ágora*, he was normally fully credited as the main composer. Yet, given his lack of formal training, he has usually relied on a series of professional musicians (such as Mariano Marín, Lucio Godoy and Juan Carlos Cuello) to correct, orchestrate, transcribe and prepare for recording the musical templates he creates at home on his keyboard and computer. He also indicated that in his fifth film he wanted to hand over responsibility for the scoring to a professional, just to see what happens (Interview). He did so by hiring the Oscar-winner Dario Marianelli to prepare the score for *Ágora*.[12]

Amenábar is a highly talented director, whose skills and experience are clearly honed and strongly enhanced by the expert support of many others. At the same time the various teams of specialists (from production and art design to editing, camerawork and costume design to sound mixing) all seek to identify with the project, share and shape the director's requirements and work together to realise the concept. As Bruce Kawin argues, such a collaborative enterprise is not simply the result but also evidence of a group effort; the integration and coherence of the finished film can also be largely credited to the shared objectives of its makers (1992: 300). But in the end Amenábar ultimately bears the overall responsibility for the finished product, while justifiably taking the credit for its successes as well as the brickbats for its weaknesses and failings.

Amenábar and genre

In an essay which traces the passage from the 'margins to the mainstream' of horror filmmaking in Spain in the 1990s, Andrew Willis underlines the importance of Amenábar's *The Others* (2001) in the

process. He regards it as a film which in its time raised significantly the otherwise low critical and cultural esteem of Spanish genre filmmaking, particularly that of horror. He also sees *The Others* not simply as a catalyst but as the culmination of the rapid growth in 1990s Spanish horror, which helped increase levels of Hispanic co-productions and strengthen the global appeal and commercial viability of the genre at home and abroad (2004: 237). In other words, *The Others* was a key film whose success in terms of global audiences, box office and critical recognition lifted Spanish horror squarely into the international mainstream. In order to theorise recent trends in Spanish horror, Willis draws upon two concepts used by Jim Collins to study aspects of 1990s Hollywood genre production, those of 'eclectic irony' and 'new sincerity' (1993: 242–63). In Collins's schema, the first of these terms emphasises the collapse of generic boundaries, playful excess and 'ironic hybridisation', (e.g. the *Back to the Future* franchise), while the second eschews playfulness, irony, parody, overt cinephilia and self-conscious spoofery in favour of seriousness, narrative coherence, generic unity, 'good taste' and a broadly realist aesthetic (e.g. Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Alongside *The Others*, Willis places Guillermo del Toro's *El espinazo del Diablo* (The Devil's Backbone, 2001), seeing both films as examples of Collins's notion of 'new sincerity' filmmaking. Both films, he argues, consolidated public acceptance of Hispanic horror as an appealing, transnational, mainstream product; both also enjoyed major commercial and critical success worldwide; both satisfied dominant critical expectations by working within culturally 'respectable' gothic traditions and both have become assimilated into the ranks of 'serious' cinema, opening up spaces for other such works to do likewise (2004: 248–9). In other words, Hispanic horror has achieved significant mainstream distribution by going upmarket and appealing to more middlebrow audiences, while also catering to Spain's large youth market domestically. Willis describes this outcome as 'The victory of the serious' (2004: 247), i.e. a horror formula based on realism, narrative coherence, generic unity and art cinema style as opposed to the explicit violence, gore, parodic comedy and general semiotic excess which characterises Collins's notion of 'eclectic irony'. This is a useful point of entry for a brief consideration of Amenábar's attitudes towards genre and the ways in which his generic choices and film style have developed and interacted with his authorship.

Let us begin by recalling that a major turning point in the early 1990s in the revitalisation of the genre film in Spain was Álex de la Iglesia's début feature, the big-budget *Acción Mutante* (Mutant Action, 1992), produced by Almodóvar's company El Deseo (see Buse, Triana-Toribio and Willis 2004). Though not a massive box-office hit (368,289 spectators, €990,00 – source: mcu.es), the film marked a ground breaking broadside, in aesthetic and thematic terms, against the PSOE-sponsored art movie of the 1980s with its aggressive, 'in your face', lowbrow, counter-cinematic style. Against the depth and verisimilitude attributed to realism, de la Iglesia counterposed a visceral superficiality and anti-illusionism, with his two-dimensional, grotesque, comic-book characters and cheesy narrative. And against the relative stability of realist generic boundaries he offered fantasy, black humour, impurity and hybridity, through which he seemed to ridicule the cultural and social status of Almodóvar's effete 'niños bonitos e hijos de papá' (pretty, spoiled rich kids) and 'maricones diseño' (designer poofs). The film also led to a very successful follow-up, i.e. *El día de la bestia* (The Day of the Beast, 1995), which had a significant influence upon the grungy aesthetics of a new crop of abrasive, quasi-Rabelasian, parodic comedies. These included Juanma Bajo Ulloa's *Airbag* (1997) and Ray Loriga's *La pistola de mi hermano* (My Brother's Gun, 1997) as well as Álex as de la Iglesia's *Perdita Durango* (1997), *Muertos de risa* (Died Laughing, 1999), *La comunidad* (The Association, 2000) and *800 balas* (800 Bullets, 2002). Many of these films also took a much harder line against the didactic and politically correct agenda of the socialist art film, articulating a far more conservative political, sexual and moral outlook. By far the most successful film cycle in this vein was and continues to be Santiago Segura's *Torrente: el brazo tonto de la ley* (The Dumb Arm of the Law, 1998), *Torrente 2: Misión en Marbella* (Mission in Marbella, 2001) and *Torrente 3*: *El protector* (The Bodyguard, 2005). Made without any government subsidy, the first *Torrente* (1998) was Spain's biggest box-office hit of the 1990s, attracting three million spectators and nearly €11 million (source: mcu.es). It thus grossed double its nearest rival, Fernando Trueba's period musical satire *La niña de tus ojos* (The Girl of Your Dreams), starring Penélope Cruz (1998) (Heredero 1999: 314). *Torrente 1*'s appeal was based on its hybridity, i.e. its attractive combination of classic, mainstream American genre conventions (e.g. the 'fascist cop' movie, with echoes of *Dirty Harry*) and the local 'esperpento' or black comedy, comprising an ironic and exaggerated

vision of certain social values and customs, laced with vicious black humour, surrealism, explicit violence, grotesque stereotypes and the recycling of forgotten Spanish film, television and musical stars and celebrities (Tony le Blanc, El Gran Wyoming, El Fary etc.). *Torrente* thus offered an array of recognisable if overblown signs of local and national 'Spanish' identities, which represent urban, lower- class, 'backdoor' Spain, in all its baseness, monstrosity and visceral prejudice. It also aggressively reaffirmed its deviation from and negation of the norms of 1980s subsidised art cinema (championed by Pilar Miró, Director General of Cinema, in Spain's Ministry of Culture (1983–85). *Torrente* presented itself as an 'anti-establishment' film on the basis of its unashamed commercialism and celebration of 'trash' cinema. Largely because of its playful sense of narrative and semiotic excess, the Torrente cycle can be seen as a commercially successful riposte to the hegemony of Hollywood in Spain's domestic market. It also provides a potential model of national cinema, one of transnational, ironised, generic hybridity, with rootings in Spanish media, cultural and even sporting traditions.[13] However, if it is able to compete nationally with dominant American action cinema whilst retaining clear signs of its local identity, its cultural rootedness and many of its localisms tend to impede intelligibility, universality and thus exportability and foreign sales.

Doing it straight

The ultra-violent, parodic, cartoon-like comedy style found in Álex de la Iglesia's first two feature films, as well as in Bajo Ulloa's *Airbag* (1997) and in the *Torrente* cycle, established a major stylistic register for Spanish popular genre cinema in the 1990s. Here, let us recall that, as a student and maker of shorts (and to some extent echoing Álex de la Iglesia), Amenábar was vaguely and temporarily attracted by the combination of Berlangian sardonic humour and the postmodern, parodic grotesque. Evidence of this can be found in his first short *La cabeza* (The Head, 1991), which I discuss in more detail in the following chapter. It is also visible in *Tesis*, especially in the early script treatments, which initially focused on a single male character, the 'porno-gore freak' Chema, and his engagement with the mechanisms and tricks of exploitation cinema. Amenábar has stated: 'Hay en mí una parte cutre que me hace reír mucho; pienso que si optara por la comedia, tiraría por ese lado' (Rodríguez Marchante 2002: 63) (There

is a very vulgar side to me which makes me laugh a lot; if I ever chose to do comedy, I think I would explore this side of it). In his first short, *La cabeza*, Amenábar was unsure of how to resolve and close down the narrative. So he opted for a comic, cartoon-like finale, characterised by violent decapitation, lots of fake blood, female hysteria and black humour. This appears to be the only moment in his entire filmography which relies on explicit screen gore (in *Tesis* Bosco's dismemberment of his female victims is largely suggested through sound rather than overtly displayed). Otherwise, even in his student days, though perhaps tempted, he was never seriously committed to developing a film aesthetic dominated by stylised, excess violence, by the parodic grotesque or by techniques of ironic distantiation. And, because of bigger budgets, in this area of filmmaking Amenábar believes that Hollywood achieves far better results on a technical level than any Spanish production (Rodríguez Marchante 2002: 163). Also, as someone who is physically squeamish towards violence, who avoids confrontation and also suffers physically when filming (Rodríguez Marchante 2002: 149–50), he derives no personal pleasure from screen violence as such, be it realistic or parodic. Besides, parodic horror may be fun and may provide scenarios for the masturbatory fantasies of adolescent boys, but it is not scary (Interview).

As a film spectator Amenábar argues that he has never been seriously scared by a screen ghost, vampire or werewolf. In his own films the supernatural is used as a metaphor for dealing with more worldly issues, including troubled family relationships or the exploitation and abuse of young children. Even the ghosts in *The Others* appear human and alive until the final revelation (Rodríguez Marchante 2002: 158). Amenábar believes it is far too easy for filmmakers nowadays to create screen scares using fake blood and CGI, which rather than scare tend to provoke nausea and disgust. Sadly, he argues, there is no lasting impression, the after-effect tends to be rather superficial, the spectator quickly becomes attuned to the visible excess and the affective impact quickly dissipates. Amenábar prefers to be scared by psychological horror and mystery, by the denial of information and the suppression of clues, by the unknown and the unseen, and by being forced to share the point of view of the victim (Rodríguez Marchante 2002: 29–31 and 59). In this sense he diverges considerably from Hitchcock, who preferred to build suspense on the basis of spectator power and omniscience over the characters. Amenábar prefers to delay the release of information and tease the viewer for as long as possible,

maintaining confusion and uncertainty, until the catharsis of a surprise ending. Moreover, as a horror fan, he goes to the cinema to be genuinely scared, but not to throw up or be bombarded by special effects, which tend to destroy spectator immersion in the onscreen action: 'Lo que me gusta en realidad es el cine que da miedo, no el que da asco. No soy aficionado al gore. Me gusta tener la sensación de terror pero tiene que ser un terror limpio' (Heredero, 1997: 86) (What I really prefer is scary rather than gory cinema. I'm not a fan of gore, I like the sensation of horror but it has to be clean horror). For Amenábar what the horror director should be aiming to create are not only surface intensities but also a form of viewing engagement which helps unlock the dark spaces of the subconscious: 'Para mí, dejar un espacio a la imaginación es la esencia de las ansiedades, obsesiones e incluso paranoias latentes en nuestra conciencia colectiva. Despertarlas hará volver el espectador a los rincones de la infancia ... a aquel escalofrío' (Payán 2001: 48) (For me, leaving a space for the imagination is the essence of those anxieties, obsessions and even paranoias which are latent in our collective consciousness. By awakening these, we can take the spectator back to the dark corners of childhood ... to that shiver).

In 1997, talking about film horror and his admiration for Peter Medak's *The Changeling* (1980), Amenábar said: 'Creo que hay que devolverle al cine de terror el tono serio' (Heredero 1997: 103) (I think we need to go back to a horror cinema with a more serious feel). Amenábar admires a film like Medak's which relies on atmosphere not blood, conveys a strong sense of traditional suspense and horror, especially through its performances, the interactions of the gazes, the reactions to offscreen sounds and a sophisticated use of music and soundscapes. And even though the film exploits a supernatural element, 'lo hace de forma muy seria' (Heredero 1997: 103) (it does so in a very serious way). In other words, spectator pleasure is based on alignment and empathy with characters whose traumas and tragedies (seen and unseen) matter to us, who play out our anxieties in credible, realistic, ways and where film style is subordinate to storytelling. Amenábar thus prefers this straight, 'serious', rather classical, conservative delivery. This is so, in part, because it seems to fulfil its intended emotional effect on him, by engaging him affectively and intellectually, on a personal level. It also appeals because it reflects the styles of a number of his key filmic reference points, including Medak, Hitchcock, the Kubrick of *2001 A Space Odyssey*, *A Clockwork*

Orange, *The Shining* and the Spielberg of *Jaws* (1975) and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). In other words, Amenábar sees spectator engagement and pleasure being better served by a suspension rather than a foregrounding of disbelief in the film diegesis.

To summarise, Amenábar was and is a cinephile and a horror buff; he is also a fan of the popular genre film, but of a type which aligns itself with art cinema (i.e. a form of cinema which is usually seen as unfettered by or beyond genre). Alongside Mateo Gil he also derives great pleasure and benefit in messing with and subverting the conventions, codes and forms of mainstream genre cinema. He is thus a filmmaker who tends to respect and to establish hierarchies of genre cinema, clearly demarcating his own tastes, and finding greater legitimacy, perhaps, in the thriller than in the horror genre, with a preference for the family melodrama and bio-pic over, say, the romantic comedy. Amenábar thus appears to want to distance himself somewhat from genres of low cultural status. He seeks legitimacy and distinction by disavowing the bad reputation of violent horror, 'horror gore' and its associated fan groups, in favour of a hybrid form of horror (dominated by the codes of the thriller) which privileges stylistic unity and coherence, symmetry, atmosphere, repeated motifs and realism. We might say that his kind of clean, 'serious' horror represents the more predictable, safe, more conservative end of the spectrum, i.e. horror suitable primarily for middlebrow tastes and middle-class audiences.

The contemporary auteur

Warren Buckland has argued persuasively that mastery of the film-making process (which he refers to as 'internal' authorship) is no longer a sufficient criterion for film authorship (2006: 14) nowadays. Today's auteur directors, he argues, also require control over external factors, including production, finance and deal-making; they thus need business acumen, managerial skills and the ability to create a brand image, in order to achieve market advantage over their competitors. Thus, in terms of defining contemporary authorship, a major scholarly shift over the last twenty years (see especially Corrigan 1991: 103–4) suggests that signs of authorship can be seen as traces not only in film texts themselves but outside of them too, in the domains where authorship and commerce intermingle. Here authorship emerges in the realm of what Catherine Grant (echoing Corrigan) calls 'a cultural

and commercial intersubjectivity' (2000: 103), that is a zone or zones where the auteur can promote his/her status as organising agency and the motivating presence behind filmic textuality. As such, authorship emerges in the activities of film reception and consumption, in the traces left in journalistic, publicity and Web materials, promotional interviews, magazine photo shoots, festivals, award ceremonies and personal appearances, wherever the auteur figure functions as power broker, media star and celebrity marketeer. In short, signs of authorship arise in those areas which Genette calls 'paratexts', i.e. all those secondary texts and activities which surround and frame the main film text and shape its consumption and reception (1998: 52).

In this domain Almodóvar is arguably the paradigm case in Spanish filmmaking. Almodóvar's name will open a film since it offers a distinct brand image and track record, supported by his well-known production company (El Deseo, founded in 1985), jointly run with his brother Agustín. His name is enough to secure financial backing as well as a wide support network of financial institutions. It can also generate production and distribution partners and a host of 'associations' linked to an 'Almodóvar-branded' film product. Also Almodóvar's cleverly promoted and carefully designed photo shoots and marketing appearances at premieres, festivals, award ceremonies, stores and bookshops emphasise the centrality of his place, not only as the director but also as the multi-talented stand-in actor who can play all the parts of his own films. The ubiquity of Almodóvar's star image, always far bigger than that of any of his actors, has helped project him as the consummate promotor, performer and publicist of his own films, at home and abroad. By contrast Amenábar has been regarded very differently and though influential enough nowadays to attract financial, production and distribution partners for his films (notably via Fernando Bovaira and his company Mod Producciones), he has lacked any comparable media recognition, public image or star profile. In this connection, his almost total absence from the marketing and publicity campaign for *The Others* was symptomatic of his surprising lack of visbility and public recognition, outside of Spain and Latin America. Though far more adept than before as a 'mediático' (media-friendly celebrity), and having 'come out' in 2004, he remains shy and tight-lipped about his personal life and very discreet about his working relationships on and off set.[14]

He also finds it very difficult to shake off the image of an eternally youthful, polite, 'boy next door', a low-profile representation which still

emerges in much of the media coverage, including Web interviews and blogs. In his amusing piece published just before the Oscar awards in February 2005, Ryan Gilbey recalls interviewing a 'schoolboy' called Amenábar in a London hotel, as if the young director had been 'dressed by his mother for prize giving day' (2005). Gilbey added jokingly that Amenábar was far too young-looking to be making the sort of gloomy, challenging, serious films he seems to specialise in.[15]

This book

In their monographic study of François Truffaut, Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram use their Introduction to comment on one of Truffaut's key shorts, *Les Mistons* (The Mischief Makers, 1957).[16] They argue that this short film provides the seed or kernel of the distinctive thematic and stylistic elements which reappear in the rest of Truffaut's considerable output (three shorts and 22 features). They even make the claim that the film is a crucial precursor and model for the Nouvelle Vague and indeed for French national cinema as a whole: 'The twenty-three fleeting minutes of *Les Mistons* are, then, pointers not only to themes and filmic practices which will nourish and sustain the later work, they are also a key to the Nouvelle Vague, to its approach to cinema and its desire to create a cinema that is French' (1998: 8). At the same time the authors also claim that *Les Mistons* 'is rich and diverse, open, like later films, to readings other than those intended by its author' (1998: 8), yet the approach they adopt towards Truffaut's filmmaking is still a strongly organicist one – that is, one of biological growth whose patterns and direction already appear to be laid down, already encoded into the filmic DNA of the model, foundational short. Claims for organic growth, clearly delineated patterns of meaning and recurring thematic issues may make sense following a full-scale review of a lifetime's filmmaking, such as Truffaut's. However, with Amenábar, it would obviously be inappropriate to make any definitive claims of this type, given his limited output and the fact that he is still in the early stages of a potentially long and glittering career. So, in order to avoid the potential pitfalls of metaphors of biological growth and authorial hero-worship, I have taken a rather decentred as opposed to an organic approach and a relatively empiricist rather than a thematic model for my main chapter analyses.

Chapter 2 contains a brief biographical profile of Amenábar, but the main focus is a detailed analysis of his shorts, and the ways in which

a set of templates and devices (stylistic, narrative and thematic) begin to emerge from them, as well as a series of working practices. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the shorts (of both Amenábar and Gil) appear to prefigure and underpin significant aspects of the features, especially in the first two thrillers. Chapters 3 to 7 provide the main body of the book and offer detailed accounts of Amenábar's five feature films to date. Though the approaches adopted and the menu of topics vary in each chapter, I seek to combine important aspects of contextual information (historical, social, industrial) with detailed production and reception notes. I also pay close attention to aspects of film form and style (e.g. the interplay in *Tesis* between classical Hollywood narration and 'art film narration', also the problems of viewer comprehension created by the non-linear diegesis of *Abre los ojos* and how Amenábar and Gil resolve these difficulties). However, my main focus is to explore the ways in which Amenábar appears to conduct experiments in generic hybridity in order to create a personal, auteur cinema which satisfies his cinephilia as well as his desire for ambiguity and profundity while at the same time demonstrating his commitment to the tastes and pleasures of film audiences. In my selections and mode of coverage of such material I have been guided in large part by questions already raised in scholarly writings on Amenábar, but also by other issues and evidence which have emerged during the research for this book.[17]

Notes

1 Welles made his film-directing debut and most acclaimed feature *Citizen Kane* (1941) at the age of 25. See also A. del Barrio and L. Pérez, 'De estudiante a director de cine', *El Mundo*, *Suplemento* (27 September 1995), 3–4.
2 A. Corral, 'Amenábar. La tesis del debutante', *Antena Semanal* (21 April 1996), 37.
3 E. Rodríguez Marchante, '*Tesis*: hay películas que matan', *ABC* (13 April 1996), 86; see also Carlos F. Heredero, 'La "*Tesis*" de Alejandro Amenábar', *Diario 16* (17 February 1996), 32.
4 N. Bou and X. Pérez, ' La fórmula de l'èxit', *Avui-Barcelona* (21 April 1996), 8.
5 L. Bonet Mojica, 'Nada ni nadie es lo que parece', *La Vanguardia-Barcelona* (24 December 1997), 40.
6 A. Fernández Santos, 'Celuloide en las venas', *El País-Madrid* (21 December 1997), 39.
7 Sean Smith, 'Finding the story inside', *Newsweek* (27 December 2004–3 January 2005), 68–70.

8 Rafael Ruiz and Gregorio Belinchón, '20 personajes para 20 años de Goyas', *El País Semanal*, no. 1531 (29 January 2006), 47.

9 With regard to Medem, it is worth pointing out that *Caótica Ana* (2007) was something of a watershed in his career. Apart from being a critical and commercial flop (attracting a mere 247,593 spectators, compared to 377,094 for *La pelota vasca* (The Basque Ball, 2003) and 1.3 million for *Lucía y el sexo* (Lucia and Sex, 2001, source: mcu.es), it triggered a serious reappraisal of his approach to filmmaking. In particular it seems to have created a new awareness of and concern for his lost national audiences, their tastes and preferences, and a determination to re-capture them. See his remarks in interview with Rocío García in 'Julio Medem empieza de cero', *El País* (27 June 2008), 38. Alas, Medem's supposedly commercial, 'comeback' film, his sexy lesbian romance *Habitación en Roma* (Room in Rome, 2010), imploded in Spain, attracting a mere 86,000 spectators and a disappointing €500,000 gross (source: mcu.es).

10 Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directions and Directors, 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 31.

11 Also, among his main collaborations, Amenábar has written music as well as working in other capacities for Guillermo Fernández's short *Al lado del Atlas* (Next to the Atlas, 1994), Mateo Gil's three shorts, *Antes del beso* (Before the Kiss, 1993), *Soñé que te mataba* (I Dreamed I Killed You, 1994) and *Allanamiento de morada* (Breaking and Entering, 1998) as well as scoring Gil's first feature *Nadie conoce a nadie* (Nobody knows Anybody, 1999). He has also scored José Luis Cuerda's very successful *La lengua de las mariposas* (Butterfly's Tongue, 1999).

12 Marianelli won an Oscar for *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007); he was also Oscar-nominated for *The Brothers Grimm* (Terry Gilliam, 2005).

13 For example the cast for *Torrente 4* includes a rare gamut of cameos including, among others, the late dictator Franco's eldest granddaughter (Carmen Martínez Bordíu), Esteso and Pajares (television comedy duo), Andreu Buenafuente (television comic and presenter), David Bisbal (successful solo singer) and Cesc Fábregas (professional footballer).

14 This same impression of shyness and reserve is evident when one visits Amenábar's official home page, hosted by ClubCultura. Despite its spooky soundtrack and vaguely interactive elements, the page quickly translates into rather conventional textual postings, such as the interview material on *Mar adentro*: see www.clubcultura.com/clubcine/clubcineastas/amenabar/mar03.htm. See also Núria Triana-Toribio, 'Auteurism and Commerce in contemporary Spanish cinema: *directores mediáticos*', *Screen*, 49:3 (Autumn 2008), 259–76. Triana-Toribio provides a useful insight into how media-savvy Spanish directors, such as Isabel Coixet and Álex de la Iglesia, exploit (in different ways) their official websites to enhance their commercial appeal as well as their auteurist credentials.

15 Ryan Gilbey, 'That's so Amenábar', *Independent on Sunday* (22 February 2005), 13.
16 D. Holmes and R. Ingram, *François Truffaut*, French Film Directors (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).
17 To date, in relation to Amenábar scholarship, for example, we find one short study in Spanish, covering only his first two films (Sempere 2000, expanded in a revised edition in 2004 to include *The Others* and *Mar adentro*); a 170–page, book-length interview in Spanish, with an introduction and a final essay by ABC's film critic (Oti Rodríguez Marchante 2002); a volume of interviews, in the *¿Cómo hacer cine?* series, involving the main cast, management and crew of *Tesis* (Vera 2002). There are also several shorter interviews (Heredero 1997 and Payán 2001), several overview pieces (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas 1998, Stone 2002, Triana-Toribio 2003), and a growing number of scholarly articles and reviews (e.g. Allinson, Amago, Buckley, Hills, Jackson, Jordan, La Caze, Lev, Maule, Ortega, Perriam, Russell, Smith, White, Zatlin etc.). More recently I have also been pleased to receive notice and copies of a work written in French, a short, monographic study of Amenábar's first three films, by María Asunción Gómez and Santiago Juan-Navarro (2002) and a much more extensive volume of 11 essays, plus a very long interview with the director, edited by Professor Nancy Berthier, 2007. See the main bibliography as well as my review article of the Berthier volume in *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*, 4:3 (2007), 199–212.