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# ORPHANS AT PLAY IN *CRÍA CUERVOS* (1976) AND *ESTIU 1993* (2017): RECONSIDERING THE PLAYSPACE

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explore the presentation of play in two child-centred Spanish films. Carlos Saura's *Cría cuervos* (1976) and Carla Simón's *Estiu 1993* (2017) demonstrate that playful interactions offer cinematic child protagonists a plethora of ways to speak in the narratives. A reconsideration of the child orphan character in Spanish cinema will allow us to move away from limited understandings of the filmic child of much Civil-War themed cinema as a mute witness or cipher of victimhood. This essay will use a tripartite approach, with the transition to democracy as a lens, examining the beginning of the transition in the 1970s as seen in *Cría*. The consequences of the transition that are apparent in 1990s cinematic childhoods in *Estiu* will then also be explored. Through a comparative analysis, I demonstrate that the protagonists frequently turn to play to make sense of the dramatic social and political changes that envelop their world. Both Saura and Simón remind audiences that children were indeed present for, and affected by, the historical events of the Franco regime (in *Cría cuervos*) and the AIDS crisis of 1980s and 1990s Spain (in *Estiu 1993*).

*Keywords:* orphan; child; Spain; Catalonia; cinema

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‘Inherent in play is the power to shift the locus of control from the official to the unofficial, from the iterative to the possible, from the centre to the margins, from adulthood to childhood. Play is, in essence, agentic behaviour.’<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The motif of children at play has long been featured in cinema by filmmakers. The Lumière brothers' early films centred on the interactions of children with their immediate environment (*La Pêche aux poissons rouges* (1895) and *Repas de bébé* (1895), both directed by Louis Lumière). In his film essay *A Story of Children in Film*,<sup>2</sup> Mark Cousins hypothesizes that in the ‘cinematic’ of the child, play is a fundamental element. In the Spanish context, Carlos Saura's *Cría cuervos* [*Raise Ravens*] (1976) and Carla Simón's *Estiu 1993* [*Summer 1993*] (2017) demonstrate that playful interactions offer cinematic child protagonists a plethora of ways to articulate subjectivity in the narratives.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, much scholarship regards the

orphan child protagonist of many Spanish films as a passive victim or as a cipher for adult concerns. Erin Hogan has argued that ‘the child’s language in cinema is not his or her own; the child is ventriloquized’,<sup>4</sup> and Anindya Raychaudhuri has stated that ‘the vulnerability of the child protagonists is made manifest in their orphanhood’.<sup>5</sup> I posit that we can rethink these notions of the child orphan when considering the films discussed in this article.

This article employs a novel, interdisciplinary approach by bringing together close analysis of film and film theory with anthropological theories from the field of childhood studies. In my reading of the films, I focus on children’s play. By viewing play as a nuanced language, or a space that is an opportunity for the young orphan protagonists to exert a certain level of narrative agency, we can in fact observe on screen their navigation of socio-political tensions in a changing Spanish society.

A comparative analysis of these two films will allow a reframing of children’s play, which illuminates our changing understanding of the child character in Hispanic visual cultures. Despite being produced some 44 years apart, the films share the link of the period of 1990s Spain. In Saura’s film, adult narrator Ana (Geraldine Chaplin) speaks to us from the 1990s, looking back to the period of her childhood in the closing years of the Franco regime in the early 1970s. Simón’s film presents the childhood of Frida (Laia Artigas) in 1990s Catalonia. Both films consider historical moments and processes of change. Rather than use the child as a device to consider the past with nostalgia, the cinematic fiction in these two narratives centralizes the child’s experience of the final years of the Franco regime and imminent transition to democracy in the early 1970s (*Cría cuervos*), and the AIDS crisis of 1980s–90s Spain (*Estiu 1993*). This analysis moves away from limited readings of the filmic child of Spanish cinema as a mute witness. I use a tripartite approach, with the transition to democracy as a lens, to examine the beginning of the transition in the 1970s as seen in *Cría cuervos*. I also explore consequences of the transition that are apparent in 1990s cinematic childhoods in *Estiu 1993*.

Saura’s 1976 feature film has been subject to a great deal of critical analysis in the areas of Film Studies and Hispanic Studies. Marsha Kinder’s notable essay *The Children of Franco* explores Saura’s recourse to the child as a way to explore his own past during the dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> Erin Hogan’s theorization of the *cine con niño* and *nuevo cine con niño* looks at both Franco-era child-centred *españoladas* and the often nostalgic *nuevo cine con niño* films that reframe the Civil War so as to give a voice to the Republicans. She posits that these films share the common theme of appropriation of the child character, whose agency is lacking, staged, or mediated in these delineations.<sup>7</sup> Paul Julian Smith reflects on Ana Torrent’s gaze in

*The Moderns*, reminding us of scholarship that has likened her eyes to the ‘dark eyes of Goya portraits’.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Stone and Wright have presented innovative critical insights on the film.<sup>9</sup> Dilys Jones and Chris Perriam focus analytically on *Estiu 1993* in the context of changing Catalan identity, recognizing Frida’s dislocation from the familial structure.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, play has not been discussed in detail in the case of either film, which this article shall endeavour to rectify. Furthermore, I consider the orphan child as a recurring figure in narratives of Spanish film. This child emerges as a figure worth studying in detail. My analysis will explore transitional girlhoods, creative play, the playspace and magical thinking to illustrate the multifaceted nature of children’s ludic activities and the range of possibilities for agency that play can offer the child protagonist of Spanish cinema.

### *The practice of play*

Sociologist Megan Lee, through interviews with young children, has investigated children’s own knowledge of play.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, she notes that play emerges as being akin to a state of mind, invariably related to issues of autonomy, agency and power. Indeed, play can have a transformative power in the lives of children. Where children are frequently viewed as being on the margins or without a voice, in Western, adult-centric hegemonic structures, the practice of play offers opportunities for autonomy. Lee expands on this, stating that play, or symbolic make-believe, can be conceived ‘as a true exercise of power, a stalwart denial of the world of adults or the authority of everyday reality’.<sup>12</sup> These theories can illuminate readings of orphan children on screen. Of course, directors frequently exploit scenes of play in contemporary Spanish-language cinema as an instrument with which to tackle complex themes such as political ideology, dictatorship and persecution. We see this mechanism at work in films including *La lengua de las mariposas* (1999), *El viaje de Carol* (2002) and *Secretos del corazón* (1997).<sup>13</sup> Through a reconsideration of child’s play in *Cría cuervos* and *Estiu 1993*, however, we can also shed light on the changes in the depiction of the child. These changes move in lockstep with shifting attitudes to the child’s propensity to understand and participate in social spheres. As we have seen, directors have long used the subjectivity of the child orphan to articulate a process of witnessing and victimhood (an habitual device in Italian neorealist and French New Wave cinema).<sup>14</sup> Through the analytical lens of play, I contest Russek’s assertion that ‘to be an orphan is a metaphor for an existential void, a state in which one suffers the painful effects of the absence of an authority figure (familial, cultural, and national)’.<sup>15</sup>

My analysis of the child protagonist of both films is also informed by the notion of cinephilia, perhaps more so than intertextuality, in terms of Hispanic Film Studies. Saura's casting of Ana Torrent as protagonist speaks to her previous role in Erice's film *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973),<sup>16</sup> a film that also put great emphasis on the subjectivity of the child. *Estiu 1993* likewise encapsulates this kind of cinephilia, incorporating several visual references to Saura's earlier production. Here it will be important to outline my theoretical approach to agency in film.

### *Children's narrative and historical agency: considering film analysis*

The filmic children that we find in both Saura's and Simón's films have a narrative agency, specifically through their play. We cannot, however, take these cinematic children to represent a monolithic grouping of children the world over in their access to forms of agency. The complex and varied lived experiences of children, differing especially between developed and developing nations, signify that children on-screen cannot be stand-ins for our understanding of the real experiences of children. The cinematic, narrative agency of the young protagonists in these Spanish films instead allows us to rethink well-worn portrayals of the passive child witness. James and Prout highlight the imperative need to recognize the agency of the child, stating that

[C]hildren are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of agency varies broadly, and, as Rocha and Semiet point out, can be 'slippery' when considering children.<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this article, however, we can focus on narrative agency understood as the possibility of changing the course of events in the film, whether in the world of the child or in that of the adult. Through such consideration, it may then be possible to rethink understandings of children's experiences of historical change.

### *'Cría cuervos'*

Carlos Saura's celebrated feature film *Cría cuervos* is one of the principal films of the movement known as *cine de la oposición*. Released in 1976, a year after the death of dictator General Francisco Franco, the film follows the experiences of three children after the deaths of their parents. As the sisters transition to life with their strict and overbearing aunt, director

Saura exposes the impacts of a rapidly changing Spanish society on the world of the child protagonists. Ana (Ana Torrent) and her sisters Irene (Conchi Pérez) and Maite (Matie Sánchez) are surrounded by death, violence and political change. They are not, I argue, rendered as mere victims or passive onlookers. Where scholarship has previously focused on Ana's 'innocent gaze',<sup>19</sup> my interpretation shifts the focus to the scenes of the sisters at play. There are numerous, varied instances of play throughout the narrative, and these interactions are crucial to understanding the perspective of the child protagonists and recognizing nuanced examples of agency. The film's release fell between several key political moments during the closing years of the Franco regime. With approaching democratization, the assassination of Carrero Blanco in 1973 and the death of Franco himself in 1975, the winds of change, which arguably began with the economic development plan in 1959, were blowing strongly through Spanish society. The first free elections since the Civil War in Spain, held in 1977, began to consolidate this. Despite the relaxation in censorship, this film is no exception to Saura's tendency in the earlier part of his oeuvre to charge the content of his films with defiant youth figures. *Estiu 1993* is also centred around the notion of change and the impacts on a young girl.

### *'Estiu 1993'*

The plot of *Estiu 1993* speaks to tensions contemporaneous with the time in which the film is set, surrounding the rise in cases of the HIV AIDS virus in Spain. This epidemic dramatically impacted the life of Carla Simón, the Catalan director of *Estiu 1993*. She lost her mother to the virus in the summer of 1993. The film, released in 2017, presents these events of loss, transition and identity through the scenes of Frida (Laia Artigas) at play with her cousin, and now adoptive sister, Anna (Paula Robles). Frida moves from urban Barcelona to the countryside of Girona after losing her mother to the HIV AIDS virus. During the 1990s, Spain experienced some of the highest numbers of cases of HIV AIDS in all of Europe: 'By 1997, Spain had 120,000 cases in an adult population of around 21 million – the highest rate in the European Union and triple the average for Western Europe.'<sup>20</sup> The rise in confirmed cases of the virus in the 1990s has been linked to an increased usage of intravenous drugs, as *La movida* swept through the country and some Spaniards experimented with narcotics. Scholars criticized the Spanish administration for its perceived inadequacies in dealing with this rise in detected cases. Alvarez-Dardet and Hernandez Aguado's 1994 analysis emphasizes this failing: 'There are AIDS policies on AZT treatment or isolation of patients in

almost every Spanish hospital but no risk reduction schemes or outreach worker services at the community level.’<sup>21</sup> This kind of approach has arguably given way to a consequent lack of education on the illness, even in contemporary Spanish society, although Barcelona-based organizations such as SIDA STUDI and Creación Positiva work hard to educate and facilitate discussion on the subject. As such, lack of resources and prevention has had a knock-on effect on the adoption rates of contemporary Spanish AIDS orphans, children with the virus in Spanish orphanages being classed as ‘menores con necesidades especiales’ [minors with special needs].<sup>22</sup> Susana Morales, president of *La Asociación Familia de Colores*, has recently lamented the rejection of these children by potential adoptive parents.<sup>23</sup> In *Estiu 1993*, we see protagonist Frida’s own experience of the virus, with her intermittent visits to the doctor often framed by scenes of play before and after. This unique presentation of the child’s experience of the illness again accentuates the child’s subjectivity that Simón centralizes. Almodóvar’s renowned *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999)<sup>24</sup> also creates cinematic dialogue on the subject of the virus. In this film, the child characters (Esteban and Esteban) are secondary to the director’s explorations of women, gender and authenticity, whereas *Estiu* foregrounds Frida’s perspective. Accordingly, Frida’s story opens a necessary dialogue about the treatment of AIDS orphans in contemporary Spanish society.

The child’s experience of stigma around the virus is most explicitly addressed in a scene of Frida at play in a local park. When Frida trips and cuts her leg, her playmate, Irene, instinctively rushes to her aid (see Figure 1). Irene’s mother is looking on. She screams at Irene not to touch Frida, as she sprints over and pulls her away from her playmate. The tense moments of this scene, as Frida’s aunt Marga is frustrated by Irene’s mother’s dramatic reaction and Frida articulates her pain, reminds the spectator of Frida’s status as an AIDS orphan. The scene demonstrates the lack of understanding of the virus that prevailed in society in the early 1990s. Jones and Perriam elucidate this:

Mapped discordantly onto the history of progressive Catalunya within a highly liberalized Spain by the early 1990s is a micro-history of ill-informed and prejudice-ridden social attitudes to HIV and AIDS.<sup>25</sup>

Hence Frida’s status as an AIDS orphan specifically is of great relevance, and her return to play despite this negative interaction can work as her own form of resistance to the prejudices she faces. The following section will explore the resistance made possible through the identity of transitional female orphanhood.

### *Female orphanhood: from transition to transgression*

The image of the heteronormative nuclear family has long been a structural pillar of Spanish society and culture. It became an ideological microcosm during the Franco regime and maintains a powerful presence in contemporary Spanish culture, including in the shape of the current Spanish royal family. The family unit thus maintains its position as ‘the ideological bedrock that equates morality with mom, dad, and 2.5 children living in a private suburban home’.<sup>26</sup> The female orphans in the films analysed constitute a deviation from portrayals of the family that necessitate women and children to be dependent on the male patriarch. This section will consider how the protagonists transcend stifling portrayals of the family through their female orphanhood and playing practices.

The child protagonists of both films suffer the loss of both parents and must experience a period of transition. In each case, the orphan child protagonist is then taken into the care of their aunt. Despite this process of transition, from one nuclear family structure to another, the question of the girls’ status as orphans remains noteworthy, in that they display a desire for destruction of sorts – or as Hogan might put it, a resistance to the stifling ventriloquism of the traditional hegemonic structure of the nuclear family.<sup>27</sup> The decisions of the two directors to depict both orphanhood and girlhood can be aligned with the potential ‘to complicate linear or teleological national histories’.<sup>28</sup> By presenting female orphan child protagonists who demonstrate murderous (*Cría cuervos*) and destructive desires (*Estiu 1993*), these films also break with conventions of the *nuevo cine con niño* films, which, Kinder and Hogan have argued,<sup>29</sup> include the male orphan figure who represents traumatic childhoods during the Spanish Civil War and under the regime.

The orphan children in these two films become liminal figures of transition. Through a consideration of the biopolitical, in line with the Foucauldian definition, we are able to note how, in both films, the character of the orphan child is able to oppose the structure of the nuclear family. In the *Abnormal* lectures and *The History of Sexuality*,<sup>30</sup> Foucault perceives the ‘modern family’ (of the nineteenth century) as ‘both the target and product of biopower’.<sup>31</sup> For Foucault, the parent–child relationship is, at times, one of surveillance, with the child’s body as a nuclear element of the family body.<sup>32</sup> Pérez further notes that ‘this modern notion of [the innocence of] childhood rests on the ability of biopolitical apparatuses of control (such as the bourgeois family, the educational system and the Catholic Church)’.<sup>33</sup> In other words, ‘because children are subjects who are socially constructed as both “future citizens” and “at risk”, they are thereby seen as valid sites of biopolitical intervention in the



name of the public good'.<sup>34</sup> This understanding of the child figure is indicative of the ideological stance of the Catholic, Franco regime. As orphan children, Ana and Frida can constitute a deviation from nuclear family structures that are a site of power and surveillance. They are bestowed with an agency to move fluidly, at times, through constricting familial structures. As we will see, their playing practices demonstrate this.

Furthermore, the depictions of childhood we find in both *Estiu 1993* and *Cría cuervos* can be categorized as examples of what Randall has deemed transitional, queer girlhoods.<sup>35</sup> Transition, as 'a passing or passage from one condition, action, or (rarely) place, to another; change',<sup>36</sup> is identifiable in both films, and the use of childhood, usually understood as a transitory period, can be seen to underscore this:

Moreover, since they are coming-of-age films, they are about the transitional (st)age where childhood ends but adulthood does not quite begin: at their center is usually a figure who is neither a child nor a fully matured adult, but in the process of transition between the two, or residing in a state of arrested development.<sup>37</sup>

Representations of girlhood in several Spanish films, including the Marisol films of the 1950s and 60s, at times adhere to conservative, Catholic portrayals of female development.<sup>38</sup> As in the Marisol films, the girl is first a picture of angelic, adorable innocence and performs this childhood femininity. In the case of these Francoist cinematic portrayals of childhood, we are presented with a kind of 'childnormativity'. Millán theorizes childnormativity as vision or ideal of what a normal childhood, or in this case girlhood, should entail: 'The primary goals of childnormativity are to identify and uphold the rubrics of appropriate child development for the successful socialization of future citizens.'<sup>39</sup> Both Ana and Frida complicate this restricted trajectory. The coming-of-age process present in the films is, in both cases, set against a backdrop of societal change and the kind of transitional girlhood that demonstrates resistance to power structures and gender norms alike. Such resistance is often accomplished through play, as I will observe. Randall further highlights, in her analysis, that cinematic transitional girlhoods and girls' interactions with the natural world are 'indicative of an alternative "agency" or "subjectivity" that is frequently suppressed in late modernity'.<sup>40</sup> In their active rejection of their new, enforced familial structures, the filmic girls explicitly deviate from the growing-up that the adult figures desire and instead find ways to diverge from traditional vertical models of 'correct' growth.

In *Cría cuervos*, Ana shows a murderous desire and, arguably, a destructive tendency. In one striking scene, Ana takes one of her father's guns and heads to the living room where she points the pistol at her aunt, echoing the provocative images of murderous children in Serrador's *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* (1976).<sup>41</sup> As her aunt's boyfriend approaches, intending to disarm Ana, he asks '¿Para qué quieres una pistola? Es un juguete de muchachos ¿No?' [What do you want a gun for? It's a boy's toy isn't it?]. Here, as he does throughout the film, Saura uses dramatic tension to underscore Francoist understandings of female roles and subjectivities. Ana's character makes repeated attempts to query these supposedly natural concepts of girlhood and play that are gender appropriate, just as Spanish society, in the 1960s and 70s, began to interrogate the persistent gender inequality entrenched by the patriarchal regime. Although the gun is not a toy, Ana's play here casts a spotlight on sexist attitudes that were enforced on children. The shot in Figure 2, contrasting Ana's wide-eyed, 'innocent' gaze with the violence of the gun, calls into question stereotypical projections of childhood and feminine innocence and passivity.

Similarly, Frida refuses to integrate into the new family structure that she is presented with. Clearly, Frida's transition to her new home and family is not an easy road. Her struggle is articulated in several conflicts with her aunt Marga, including one scene in which Marga attempts to brush Frida's hair and which ends with Frida throwing the hairbrush out of the car window. Can we read this action as a step away from the constraints of the new family unit and as the defenestration of an object of imposed girlhood femininity (the hairbrush)? Of course, the ritual around the hairbrush could be read as a gendered disciplinary practice, compliant in a project of femininity. There are several scenes of hair-brushing in *Cría cuervos* too. Ana remembers with tenderness her mother brushing her hair, and their conspiratorial exchange of looks in the mirror, and this contrasts with the same actions performed by her aunt, turned brutish and lacking affection. In *Estiu 1993*, the hair-brushing is an act of mothering on the part of Marga, which Frida subsequently rejects. Frida's defiant act of throwing the hairbrush from the car pronounces the confusion and frustration that she feels throughout the enforced transition taking place in her life. In this way, both protagonists transgress the boundaries and traditional, constraining definitions of feminine childhood. As Randall has stated in reference to films in her own work, 'the queer, flexible and inconclusive nature of the desire of the girl characters in these films enables them to challenge images of an innocent or heterosexist girlhood'.<sup>42</sup> Thus, both Ana and Frida articulate processes of transition, processes in which they seek out ways to transgress the boundaries of their

respective worlds. A further way they succeed in this is through creative practices of play, as the following section will examine.

### *Play as a creative activity*

According to D. W. Winnicott, playing is first something that happens in the interface between our inner world and external reality: 'Taking place neither strictly in our imagination, nor in the truly external world (i.e. all that is out of our control), playing happens in that space where our imagination is able to shape the external world without the experience of too much anxiety.'<sup>43</sup> Many of the scenes in both *Cría cuervos* and *Estiu 1993* present creative play. This kind of play is one of the ways in which the protagonists of both films reach an understanding of the events unfolding in their immediate environments. 'In playing the individual is able to be creative, and in being creative is able to affect the environment and at the same time to discover the self.'<sup>44</sup> In *Cría cuervos*, Ana and her sisters enact arguments that took place between their deceased parents. In fact, scholarship focusing on this scene has already pointed out its symbolism: the authoritarian father is equated to Franco, and the submissive mother is an image of the nation under dictatorship.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in *Estiu 1993* Frida and Anna play-act Frida's own relationship with her mother as her condition worsens under the effects of the AIDS virus (see Figure 3).

In the scenes shown in Figures 3 and 4, the girls use play to work through a traumatic event with each other, to make sense of their recent experiences. This form of creative play, and play as a performance, allows the girls to understand and explore the events of their past. They create a world that is somewhat between reality and fantasy. This kind of recreation is also an example of socio-dramatic play. In the case of *Cría cuervos*, Ana and her sisters play with the power dynamic and strained relations between their deceased mother and father. Through this play, the girls also push the boundaries of the power structure dictated by their strict aunt. Dressing up in her clothes and playing the roles of adults in their lives, it is almost as if they are parodying the problems of adult relations. Sutton-Smith has 'drawn attention to the power rhetoric of play where children address issues of hegemony and hierarchy in their own right'.<sup>46</sup> The girls question the power dynamic in adult-centric worlds, and the one between their mother and father. In the dialogue they act out, the mother figure played by Ana is wondering where the father is, as he has been absent from the family home for a long period (see Figure 4). The scene develops into a marital dispute. Ana plays a defiant and combative version of her substantially more subdued and weak mother.<sup>47</sup> I echo the thoughts

of Sarah Wright here and consider this adult drag as a way for the girls to occupy an ‘interstitial space’ that rejects the roles available for, and expectations placed upon, females.<sup>48</sup> When the aunt returns, she breaks through the wall of the heterotopic playspace and the creative play scene is brought to an abrupt end. D’Lugo has noted that this scene of play articulates Ana’s inquiry

into the ways in which she can break out of the snares she identifies with both her family and her present condition as an orphan. Out of that inquiry the young child begins to discover her own strength and defiance to break away from the emotional and even physical entrapment signified by the family.<sup>49</sup>

The scenes of play, and the playspace, show the potentially liberating role of play. Indeed, the play scenes in these two films from Spain help to embody for the cinematic spectator the oppression experienced under the regime and, in the later film, the devastating effects of the AIDS crisis on children. It is clear, however, that children were anything but passive spectators of these events, as we see when they play out their memories of loss. In *Estiu 1993*, Frida enlists her cousin Anna to help her re-enact her mother’s struggle with the virus. Frida and Anna play out the dynamic between Frida and her deceased mother. Anna (playing the role of young Frida), asks repeatedly to play, as Frida lies sprawled in the chair (playing the role of her own mother), explaining that she is feeling too sick to play with her. *Estiu 1993*, then, almost imitates the scene of play from Saura’s earlier film, adapting it to address instead the social impacts of the AIDS epidemic on Spanish youth. The cousins’ role-play articulates Frida’s experiences of the AIDS virus within her family sphere and the process of watching her mother’s health deteriorate:

ANNA: Mami, ¿quieres jugar conmigo? [Mummy, do you want to play with me?]

FRIDA: Estoy la cantidad de cansada. Necesito descansar, hija mía. Me duele todo el cuerpo... pero pregunta más veces. [I’m SO tired. I need to rest, my love. All of my body hurts... Ask me again.]

ANNA: Mami, ¿quieres jugar conmigo? [Mummy, do you want to play with me?]

FRIDA: Enróllate, déjame descansar. [Leave it, let me rest.]

Frida is active in using the process of creative play to recount her experience of illness and death. The heterotopic space of the play realm enables Frida to bring Anna into a world that is ‘neither strictly in our imagination, nor in the truly external world’.<sup>50</sup> This realm of play is off limits to adults, emphasized by the shot in which Frida’s uncle passes through the scene

(see Figure 5). Where Frida is in the centre of the shot, her uncle is cut out of the frame. His fleeting presence seems not to interrupt the flow of the play, and the child protagonists return quickly to their play-acting.

We can also note the political function of play at work. This scene blends elements of Jordana Blejmar's theories of subversive play and playful memories of trauma.<sup>51</sup> While Blejmar's analysis centres on Argentine cinema, we can draw some useful parallels with her text in order to gain critical insight into the play dynamic at work. In her consideration of post-dictatorship Argentine cinema, Blejmar states that many artists use play to 'speak of their own (unspeakable) experiences of trauma'.<sup>52</sup> She finds that play, or playful memories, can function as useful tools of memory transmission. We see this in the cases of Ana and Frida: their scenes of play articulate their memories and discuss topics such as death – not to relive the past, but to present these situations for the cinematic spectator in order to speak to the future and simultaneously transform understandings of childhood agency. Through the inclusion of these kinds of play scenes, both directors demonstrate that children are affected by historical change, making meaning and seizing agency through play. In this way, 'play can also have serious, practical and political ends'.<sup>53</sup> Play is practical as a tool for understanding, and it is political as, through play, the children gain narrative agency in the playspace and the cinematic space. As Geoff Maguire argues of *Infancia clandestina*,<sup>54</sup> the focus on the child's perspective grants children 'a sense of narrative agency and, through a more complex understanding of the child's subjectivity, [allows] for a more critical perspective to emerge'<sup>55</sup> – in this case, the effects being those of *La movida* and the linked AIDS crisis on the later generations. In both films, the play worlds have an explicit connection with the social, as the children use the socio-dramatic to play through traumatic, lived experiences from their memories. In *Cría cuervos*, Ana's play resists the patriarchy that was so inherent to the Franco regime. In *Estiu 1993*, Frida and Ana's play resists the non-diegetic critical gap in exploring the impacts of gradual liberalization in the country. The identity of the children as female orphans supports a kind of play that questions the strictures of the hegemonic family-centred discourse. Playfulness offers further opportunities for agency in the form of literal and virtual spaces away from such discourse, as the following section investigates.

### *Playspaces and hide-and-seek*

In both *Cría cuervos* and *Estiu 1993*, we see multiple examples of the playspace. Although the kind of play examined in the previous section has clear links with the social, the

movement of the child into the playspace offers access to another world that can also support a harnessing of agency. Randall has explained that these playspaces allow children briefly to escape social restrictions, and to exercise what could be termed their own imaginative agency.<sup>56</sup> She further categorizes playspaces as heterotopias of sorts, in that they create a space that is 'other'. The child protagonists in the Latin American films she analyses 'appropriate spaces' in order to create, in Foucauldian terms, counter-sites or 'places outside of all places'.<sup>57</sup> In the two films that I analyse, the game of 'El escondite' (hide-and-seek) in the outside spaces of the garden highlights the potentially liberating function of play. Through their games in the open countryside, the girls negotiate their own space for play, away from the rigid structures of adult rules. Along with the journey of the child into the potentially heterotopic space of the garden in order to play hide-and-seek, in each of these scenes we see the use of tension to uncover power dynamics and the child protagonists' attempts to transgress boundaries of danger and death. Although it is a game with rules, hide-and-seek still offers the opportunity for free play, in a space that is different space and an other place.

The space of play itself becomes an overarching heterotopia for the protagonists of both films. In *Cría* the girls often use the outlet of play to explore their understandings of life, death and loss. The game of hide-and-seek within the garden space combines multiple iterations of Foucault's heterotopic space: '[T]he garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world.'<sup>58</sup> The movement of the girls in both films from the constraining, adult-centric structure of the house into the open space of the garden for play accentuates both the liminality of childhood and the liminal space of play. The intermediary nature of the space of play, between the garden and the house and between fantasy and reality, works in line with Seymour's definition of children's spatial agency. Seymour asserts that these in-between spaces are 'the small gaps or interstices within power relations where subordinate groups can exercise resistance'.<sup>59</sup> Further to this, the game of hide-and-seek situates the child protagonists within the heterotopic playspace in an intermedial position. As Noble has argued of *Cría cuervos*, this highlights the non-diegetic positioning of the film at a crossroads between the stifling authoritarian nature of the Franco dictatorship and the opening up of society in the early 1970s: 'Like the films discussed above, *Raise Ravens* immediately places the child and childhood at the juncture of two conflicting temporalities [...]. *Raise Ravens* emphasizes the extent to which the child is caught between past and future.'<sup>60</sup> In Saura's film, the girls venture into the space of the garden to embark on a game which plays out life and death, as Ana shouts at her sisters 'te tienes que morir, ¡muérete!'

[you have to die, drop dead!] upon their discovery. This game, in its blending of life and death, then, speaks to the turning point facing Spanish society at the time of the imminent transition to democracy. As the dictatorship came to its eventual conclusion, Spanish society found itself at the beginning of the road to a new phase of re-democratization, but at the same time the wounds and trauma from the Civil War and dictatorship continued to haunt people in their day-to-day life. We can see this reflected in the game, as the children ‘institute scandalous heterospatialities and heterotemporalities, which can be seen to challenge traditional histories’.<sup>61</sup> In effect, the transitory nature of movement in hide-and-seek speaks to the transgressive, liminal nature of the children as they navigate a society that is very much on the move. As Maguire states in regard to *Infancia clandestina*,<sup>62</sup> the film ‘provides a filmic space in which the child’s agential interactions with and within the domestic domain allow for a more complex examination of these intergenerational tensions’.<sup>63</sup>

The game is a prevalent childhood trope in many Spanish horror films in order to build on the uncanny nature of children in horror. Hide-and-seek as seen in the films considered in this article, however, offers a chance for the children to enter their own playful realm, in which they hide from each other and take pleasure from being hidden and found. According to Barrit, ‘the fun of hide and seek lies in the dialectical tension in “together, but alone”’. The process of playing hide and seek means the children can be at once present and absent in the world’.<sup>64</sup> The children face up to the fear of being suddenly alone, hoping that they are being sought after but also not wanting to be found. In *Estiu 1993*, Frida plays with this tension with her cousin, leaving her not to be found, reflecting the way she feels she has been left out and pushed around following her move from urban Barcelona to the Catalan countryside village of Les Planes d’Hostoles. In the games, the girls play in a world in which the death, pain and destruction experienced in historical reality coalesce with fantasy and adventure. In *Cría cuervos*, Ana’s subjectivity is expressed in the game of hide-and-seek through a pan shot as she looks around the garden in search of her sisters. These kinds of shots allow the spectator to view the world through Ana’s eyes, using a distinct kind of focalization. Lury has demonstrated that this type of shot accentuates the liminal nature of the child character:

The motif of movement is sustained via the most common framing of the children, which is from behind, with the camera seemingly trying to catch up with them as they walk and run, round and up and down the streets and passages of the village, over the nearby fields and up the rocks and cliffs.<sup>65</sup>

The shot in *Estiu 1993* in which we follow Frida and Ana (see Figure 6) also exemplifies this suturing of subjectivity. In this film, we follow the girls' journey into the heart of the forest, a pivotal moment in the narrative as Frida wants to remove Ana from the picture. Her act of defiance, in leaving Ana in the forest, then leads to disputes between her adoptive parents about her care and lack of desire to integrate into this new familial unit. As later becomes apparent, Frida has no desire to complete the 'seek' element of hide-and-seek. In both films, the camerawork of these outside hide-and-seek scenes also supports the notion of transitional girlhoods. We follow both Frida in *Estiu 1993* and Ana in *Cría cuervos* in the outside garden spaces with point-of-view and over-the-shoulder shots, devices which visually suggest the transgressive potential of childhood. An additional form of playful change is presented in the films through episodes of magical thinking, as the following section will explore.

### *Magical thinking*

The concept of 'magical thinking' has been explored in visual Hispanic Studies by Sarah Thomas in her analysis of *Las malas intenciones* (2011), a Peruvian film.<sup>66</sup> Thomas's insights on magical thinking as agentic action support my filmic analysis in what follows. In both the films I present here, the young protagonists harness magical thinking as ways to assert their own imaginative agency. Again, both scenes analysed here have a link with death, and in fact both films articulate the child's relationship with, and understanding of, death and dying. In *Cría cuervos*, a clear example is the scene in which Ana sees herself on the roof of the house and imagines herself taking flight into the sky (see Figure 7). We also see scenes in which Ana believes that bicarbonate of soda is a poison that she can use to murder her overbearing father. In these scenes, we see her attempts to control the adults that form part of the oppressive nature of her world. Believing that she has successfully done away with her authoritarian father with the 'poison', Ana later attempts to guide her unforgiving aunt to the same fate by lacing her drink with the powder. D'Lugo goes as far as to state that 'the motif of death clearly obsesses Ana'.<sup>67</sup>

These are instances of the girls attempting to assert control over their surroundings as a progressive claiming of agency. For example, the use of over-the-shoulder camera shots underscores the child's subjectivity. In *Cría cuervos*, this shot then transitions into a point-of-view shot as Ana flies through the sky. Where Ana's taking flight could be interpreted as a morbid death drive or a wish to soar away from the constraints of her day-to-day life, I maintain that we see here a return to the depiction of Ana's imaginative realm in which she



plays with the limitations of reality. The high-angle aerial camera shot surveys the garden, offering a symbolic shot of the empty swimming pool, a surreal crumbling extravagance, and Ana's older sister Irene cycling through the garden on her bike. Karen Lury notes the potential of bicycles to epitomize motion and transgressive qualities in child protagonists on screen.<sup>68</sup> If we apply this reading to the films in this study, we can again see the transitional yet heterodox girlhoods represented in them.

Similarly, there are many scenes in *Estiu 1993* in which Frida works to come to terms with the loss of her mother, yet simultaneously enters the world of her imaginary, where she can leave gifts and speak on the telephone with her deceased mother. In both films, great change occurs in the worlds in which the children find themselves. The viewer may understand play as simply a mechanism to escape from harrowing realities, but upon closer inspection we see that, in the case of Frida especially, magical thinking enables her to maintain a connection and to control her relationship with her mother even after her death. In *Estiu 1993*, Frida brings cigarettes to a statue of the Madonna, intending that the figurine will pass these on to her mother (see Figure 8). The ritualistic way in which she visits the shrine speaks to the prevalence of memory practices in contemporary Spain. The location of the shrine in the garden further supports the notion of the garden as the child's world, and as an empowering in-between space. Frida leaves the house during the night to visit the shrine, crossing from the domestic inside space to the outdoor playspace. She delivers her playful offering, a packet of cigarettes stolen from her aunt's purse, and thus maintains her connection with her mother. Sarah Thomas posits that the inclusion of imaginative and magical agency in films helps to present a 'nuanced representation of child subjectivity, presenting a rich inner world standing in marked contrast to the external events'.<sup>69</sup> As Thomas also outlines, the magical nature of this agency helps to bring the (adult) spectator into the child's world. Furthermore, Blejmar emphasizes Giorgio Agamben's notion that 'the realms of play and the sacred are closely linked'.<sup>70</sup> If we consider the idea of both Agamben and Blejmar that play derives from the realm of the sacred but also transforms it, we can make a fruitful reading of Frida's playful offering. Frida exemplifies Agamben's notion that play is the 'topsy-turvy sacred'.<sup>71</sup> She harnesses agency by shifting the religious practice towards a more playful means of communication with her mother and also creates 'a safe, and at times a sacred, space for new beginnings and for Frida to come to terms with her grief and loss'.<sup>72</sup>

The religious practices of Frida's grandparents, which the audience witnesses in an earlier scene, have a clear influence on Frida's playful actions. Intergenerational tension is

once again interrogated here, and the role of Frida's Catholic grandparents, their disagreement with Esteve and Marga on Frida's move, tells a story of a changing Spain. Following the death of Franco, the country transitioned from a Catholic secular state towards the liberalization and opening up of society. Frida's transformation of the religious to the magical articulates both these intergenerational tensions and the child's propensity to successfully navigate such divides.

### *Transition as lens: childhood back to the future*

Saura's film demonstrates that even in the early moments of democratic transition in the 1970s, filmmakers were already thinking about the future of the family in a post-transition Spain. This is further evidenced by the monologues to camera by the adult Ana situated in the imagined 1990s. The changing family unit serves as an intriguing link between the two films analysed here, with *Estiu*'s setting in the 1990s presenting the after-effects of the excesses of the generation of *La movida*. According to Thomas, 'The Spanish Transition is a time tightly bound up symbolically and materially with youth and young people.'<sup>73</sup> Examining the child's experience, *Cría* looks forward to the imagined 1990s, while *Estiu 1993* looks back to the 1990s and the children's lives as impacted by the social change of 1970s and 1980s. In the former film, then, we see the beginnings of social change, and in the latter, the consequences.

Wheeler has explored the challenges faced by youth and adolescents in this period of transition and change:

In 1982, the leadership of the Spanish Socialist Party, amongst the youngest of any major European party, rode into government with the slogan 'Por el cambio'. In many respects a golden age for young Spaniards, they were also frequently victim to unemployment and drug addiction, two of the major challenges to face the population in the 1980s.<sup>74</sup>

The two films analysed in this essay serve to frame this cultural, political and socio-economic transformation. We have seen this change explored cinematically, principally by Almodóvar in *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980), but also more recently in films such as *El calentito* (2005).<sup>75</sup> Where Almodóvar's *La mala educación* (2004) does combine themes of childhood,<sup>76</sup> the transition to democracy and *La movida*, *Cría cuervos* and *Estiu 1993* are unique in their emphasis on child-centred perspectives. It is important to note that, although the two films have a backdrop of socio-cultural change, the processes occurring are very different. The transition to democracy that *Cría cuervos* alludes to and the effects of the AIDS crisis in 1990s Spain are, of course, two diverse events. *Cría cuervos* ends with a long-

range shot of the cityscape, and the camera then follows the sisters on their journey to return to school. As they leave behind them the playspaces that have made up their summer holiday, they pass towering advertising billboards and cars speed past them, alluding to the impending transition to democracy and rapidly modernizing shifts to be brought with it. *Estiu 1993* culminates in a scene of play, in which Frida and Ana jump around on a bed. As Esteve joins in, Frida bursts into tears, finally releasing the grief that she has held in for much of the narrative. These two scenes recapitulate the way that Saura's film articulates the impact of socio-political change on the child protagonists, and Simón's, the consequences of the liberalization and excess brought on by that socio-political change.

### *Conclusion*

It is night. Children are playing in the streets of Barcelona. The game is Grandmother's footsteps. 'I tu per què no estàs plorant?' [And why aren't you crying?] an older boy asks Frida, the young protagonist of *Estiu 1993*. Frida stands, frozen in silence. It is true, she is not crying, despite, as we later find out, the recent death of her mother as a result of AIDS. Instead, she plays. Her play throughout the film is a chance to process grief, but her play also functions as a method of navigation and a way to draw strength from the playful realm. This article has demonstrated how, in both plots, the protagonists frequently turn to play to make sense of the changes that envelop their world. Saura and Simón remind audiences that children were indeed present for and affected by the historical events of the Franco regime (in *Cría cuervos*) and the AIDS crisis of 80s and 90s Spain (in *Estiu 1993*). It is therefore fascinating to observe the films' similar scenes of play, as this article has highlighted.

Through this comparative analysis, we have seen that 'playing practices can be spatially fluid and creative',<sup>77</sup> ranging from structured play with rules, such as hide-and-seek, to more abstract playful experiences such as magical thinking. What is more, the analysis has considered female orphanhood as a way of transcending limiting structures, contextualizing play within questions of identity. What is common to all the kinds of play studied here, though, is the possibility for agency that they offer. Processes of play that have been previously overlooked in scholarship can offer a more nuanced reading of these child-centred films. Where previous scholarship has sought to identify how directors repeatedly co-opt the child for allegorical purposes, especially around the theme of the Spanish Civil War, this article generates new readings that recognize play as intrinsic to children's agency. In many ways, readings that understand the child as victim are reminiscent of the biopolitics of

Francoism. Where the orphan has been viewed as a metaphor for loss and victimhood, these films instead present orphanhood as an identity that can be read as more nuanced than this. This comes about through a shift away from the nuclear family structure and transitional processes that lead to creative forms of play. Thus, this article has evidenced how child characters are transgressive, liminal actors who navigate changing societies.

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## NOTES

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[RACHEL BEANEY  
ORPHANS AT PLAY IN *CRÍA CUERVOS* (1976) AND *ESTIU 1993* (2017)]