Spanish Spaces
Ann Davies

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This chapter and the next consider the links between the law and national identity, as further examples of the ways in which a notion of nation can trace itself through space and place. Space is one of the ideas listed by Tim Edensor in his discussion of the imbrications of legal frameworks, national identities and everyday life. ‘In a very practical sense, national identity is facilitated by the state’s legislative framework, which delimits and regulates the practices in which people can partake, the spaces in which they are permitted to move, and in many other ways provides a framework for quotidian experience’ (Edensor 2002: 20). But more particularly space and place can become sites wherein the law is actively carried out (or, also, actively broken): the law is not simply an implicit shaper of daily experiences but something overtly manifested and displayed through policing and through criminal activity. And, as we shall see, the law is one manifestation of national identity, although not an unproblematic one precisely because the law and its policing by definition imply the possibility that the law can be broken and thus the link between law and nation fractured. But if the law is to this extent always provisional, it nonetheless offers the opportunity for the national to trace itself through textual space and place. The idea of the law, either broken or reinstated as part of the Spanish thriller, calls up once more Rose’s desire for association and space and place as the means whereby we see that desire. The law’s constant re-making and re-breaking, and its link to national identity, suggest once more a Spain always in the process of becoming.

The texts I will be considering in this chapter are Spanish thriller films, a genre which at first glance does not fit neatly into definitions of Spanish national cinema; and it is worth pausing to dwell a little on why this should be so before evoking the use of space and place in these films more directly. The difficulties can be illustrated by the example of the very successful debut film by Alejandro Amenábar, Tesis (Thesis, 1995). The plot of Tesis follows the protagonist Ángela (Ana Torrent) as she investigates a series of murders of young women that in turn provides the basis of a snuff movie enterprise. But Ángela is also
Crime scene

a student in a mass communications faculty of a Spanish university, working towards a thesis on violence in the media; and during the course of the film she and other characters make passing references not only to violence on film but also to the state of Spanish film-making and its need to compete with the more attractive Hollywood product. The issue is raised early on in the film when it is reported that Ángela’s previous supervisor died while watching a film, and one of the characters comments: ‘Española, seguro’ (Must have been Spanish), suggesting that those who watch Spanish films would simply die of boredom. But a more significant comment is the following made by Professor Castro (Xabier Elorriaga), Ángela’s supervisor, while giving a lecture to his students (to rapturous applause):


What is cinema? Don’t be deceived. Cinema is an industry. It’s money. It’s hundreds of thousands of millions invested in films and recouped at the box office. That’s why there’s no cinema in our country. Because there’s no concept of industry, because there’s no communication between the filmmaker and the audience. We’ve reached a pivotal moment when our cinema can only be saved by perceiving it as an industrial phenomenon. You are film students. You are the future of Spanish cinema. Rescue it. The American industry is out there poised to trample you underfoot, and there’s only one way to compete with it. Give the public what it wants. Don’t forget.

Castro concludes that cinema must be, above all, a commercial enterprise, and the only way in which the students can save Spanish cinema for the future is to give the public what the public wants, implying by this that Spanish cinema must eschew the obscure, the elitist and the arthouse in film. Castro thus simultaneously implies that Spanish national cinema and commercial cinema are mutually exclusive; and his own preference for Hollywood cinema becomes subsequently clear when we see him in his office – he has fake Oscar statuettes on his shelves and a photo in which he poses as James Bond. Castro’s preference is soon discredited as Ángela discovers that he is one of those involved in the snuff movie ring and the murders. Yet Tesis itself is arguably a thriller in the American mode (see Allinson 1997).

The slippery nature of Tesis and Amenábar’s deliberate questioning of the border between Spanish and American cinema also highlight the problem of where to place the thriller within the national remit; for Tesis poses the question
of whether the thriller can be done in an authentic Spanish mode rather than as an echo of the commercially successful American mode. Francisco María Benavent, for instance, in his overview of 90s cinema, dismisses the Spanish thriller as a cheap imitation of American cinema, or an attempt to achieve an ‘internationalised’ product (Benavent 2000: 25). The internationalised product that Benavent has in mind is in fact a Hollywood product, the American specificities of which seem to vanish in its globalisation. But the comments also suggest the exact opposite of the opinion of Professor Castro in Tesis, implying as it does that the desire of audiences for American-style cinema should not be pandered to within Spanish cinema, and that Spanish cinema cannot by definition include Hollywood-style elements. Benavent’s comments might even suggest that the Spanish thriller is a contradiction in terms, and that there can in fact be no such thing. These very brief considerations of the thriller suggest a hollow at the core of an assumed Spanish national cinema. At one level it indicates that an ‘authentic’ Spanish cinema must assume some form of masquerade in which the film has to dress up in specifically Spanish garb – i.e, with reference to specifically Spanish motifs – in order to fit under the rubric of national cinema; except that masquerade in itself suggests an inauthenticity, a deliberate performance (see Hayward 2000: 91, 99). At another level, it implies sealing Spanish national cinema in a vacuum within which no outside influence can intrude – which, taken to extremes, would exclude the thriller from this remit, since thrillers and noirs, whether they explicitly reference Spanish realities or not, often contain an explicit or implicit nod to American traditions. Andrew Higson highlights the difficulties entailed in such an approach:

The problem is that, when describing a national cinema, there is a tendency to focus only on those films that narrate the nation as just this finite, limited space, inhabited by a tightly coherent and unified community, closed off to other identities besides national identity. Or rather, the focus is on films that seem amenable to such an interpretation. (Higson 2000: 66)

It might therefore be more profitable to think of the thriller as an interface of the negotiation between different cinemas. Philip Schlesinger comments, ‘it is precisely the extra-territorial cultural pressure of Hollywood’s production, imported into the national space, that sets up the contemporary issue of national cinema’ (Schlesinger 2000: 24). Genres such as the thriller – usually highly derivative of American thriller fare but nonetheless made within Spain – provide opportunities to consider how such importation of Hollywood interacts with, or is refracted by, national cultural tensions. The ability of the Hollywood thriller to enter Spanish national space, in the way Schlesinger suggests here, raises the possibility that the thriller could nonetheless be co-opted into Spanish cinema, ‘naturalised’ in some way. Thus, to go back to Tesis, the film provides a critique of commercial thriller formats, and does so within that
format, but also acknowledges the possibility of simultaneously carrying out this critique within Spanish culture, with its nod to issues of Spanish cinema. The very possibility of Spanish cinema’s demise raised by Castro allows us to ask if it can be recuperated. We could therefore consider the thriller as a form of cinematic border territory, perhaps disputed territory, which allows us to avoid the danger of seeing Spanish national cinema and Hollywood cinema in terms simply of a binary, against which Hayward warns us (2000: 91), or attempting to create Spanish national cinema as a hermetically sealed entity. The thriller acts as an ambiguous site of any national identity where not only do cultural fault lines cross but where they also become points of tension and potential conflict.

I have dwelt for a while on the dubious national status of the Spanish thriller in order to underscore the fact that when we come to consider the thriller in terms of actual spaces and places its figuring of the nation is hardly straightforward. The thriller implies the endangering of a national social order that is underpinned by law – one of the markers of national identity acknowledged by theorists of nationalism and the nation state. Anthony Smith, for instance, comments that the Western concept of the nation

implies a minimum of reciprocal rights and obligations among members and the correlative exclusion of outsiders from these rights and duties. It also implies a common code of laws over and above local laws, together with agencies for their enforcement, courts of final appeal and the like. As important is the acceptance that, in principle, all members of the nation are legally equal and that the rich and powerful are bound by the laws of the patria.

... the legal equality of members of a political community in its demarcated homeland was felt to presuppose a measure of common values and traditions among the population, or at any rate its ‘core’ community. (Smith 1991: 10–11)

And Smith subsequently lists legal rights as one of the core elements of national identity (ibid.: 14). The law has, in fact, formed part of a challenge to the Spanish nation state by the historical regional nationalities of the Basque Country and Catalonia. The importance of the Basque laws or fueros – revoked by the Spanish government in 1876 – would be reflected in the subsequent development of Basque nationalism, while the Catalan nationalist Enric Prat de la Riba would point to the law as an essential part of recognising Catalonia as a nation (Prat de la Riba 1998: 92–3). The link between the law and the nation could be considered as one example of what Michael Billig (1995) has termed ‘banal nationalism’, a link or allegiance to the nation so embedded in our daily lives that we do not explicitly acknowledge it is there, but it implicitly invokes the nation nonetheless. If we talk about the law – and the breaking of it – we mean the national law, unless some other entity such as international law is explicitly named. Billig mentions in passing the American flag sewn on to the sleeves of American police, or the labelling of marshals as ‘US Marshal’ (Billig 1995: 150).
Although Billig does not pursue the link between the law and the nation further than this, I believe his concept of banal nationalism undergirds the unstated but ever-present link between law and nation; so that when a film addresses matters of law and order, it is in fact invoking the nation. Joan Ramón Resina also invokes the link between law and nation when he disputes the idea that a ‘construct’ of a nation must inevitably be a fiction:

A ‘construct’ is the state to which we dutifully pay taxes. Its status is hardly imaginary. Although it has no essence, it does have a face, or many faces, for it is actualised, among other ways, by the police force and judiciary who bring us to our senses in case we forget the positive nature of this construct. (Resina 2002: 378)

The thriller is one site where Spanish law – and thus, by implication, the Spanish nation state – is challenged. This does not automatically indicate the thriller as a genre that presses for change: Phil Powrie comments, ‘Given that the police thriller’s function is to maintain order by defining who should be included in the dominant social formation, and who should be excluded, it is by nature a conservative genre’ (Powrie 2007: 55). The restoration of order at the end of the thriller tends towards the maintenance of the status quo, which is, after all, one of the witting or unwitting functions of the law. However, the thriller simultaneously questions this law even as some of the characters within it may strive to re-establish it: other characters, after all, seem determined to break or ignore the law for various reasons and desires of their own. This clash, that in consequence questions the laws and mores of the land, is not unique to any single nation but may nonetheless carry traces of specific local critiques. Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas suggest that Spanish thrillers ‘bring to centre-stage marginal behaviours, practices and social issues (drugs, terrorism, homophobia, etc.) and refigure them as both local/national as well as international/global problems’ (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas 1998: 105). It thus becomes a question of Spanish cinema thinking globally and acting locally, producing responses to a cinema format honed above all by Hollywood but which speaks to other cinemas and other cultures – and other laws – as well. If the thriller questions the law and order that form part of any putative national identity in terms of the nation state, it also holds out an opportunity potentially to recuperate the nation by the very questioning.

If we talk about the law of the land, what I want to do now is recuperate the land dimension as well as the law, meaning here the visible and perhaps tangible manifestation of the territory concerned – thus, its landscape, space and place. Kenneth Olwig has discussed the link between landscape and the body politic, so that representations of landscape are bound up with notions of how the land should be governed. Of landscape painting, for instance, he comments that it was ‘a way of representing, and making concrete, the more abstract, social idea of landscape expressed by representative legal bodies
and the law they generated’ (Olwig 2002: 24); and ‘the landscape/country as a physical place was ... the manifestation of the polity’s local custom and common law’ (ibid.: 214). Wylie, in glossing Olwig’s work, notes that, according to the latter, ‘landscape was understood above all as referring to a political community of people – a polity – and the set of customary, local laws through which they administered themselves’ (Wylie 2007: 196). Landscape, space and place once again make visible a desire of association – a call to care – expressed by interaction with the landscape. Crime also underscores the possibility that the desire of association with Spain is not necessarily a benign one: as we shall see in one of the films I will discuss here, Spain becomes a target of criminal profit for foreign crime forces as well as for some Spaniards themselves, who wish to exploit other Spaniards. The word ‘care’ carries with it a nurturing overtone but Rose’s theory does not preclude more malign manifestations of care. Nonetheless, in crime thrillers we are also very likely to find other citizens who show a more obvious ‘care’ in their desire for justice, resolution, safety – a restoration of the law of the land. Some of these citizens are paid to do this – police and private detectives – and we shall consider them in the next chapter. In this chapter, the people concerned to restore the law and thus the land of which the law is an expression are ordinary members of the public who find themselves by chance compelled to express a desire for justice and thus by implication a care for Spain. The thriller thus offers us an instance of how the call to care can be expressed differently and indeed in ways that are diametrically opposed: different desires and ideologies compete for control over Spain as territory or terrain, and that competition itself takes place through space as well as for it.

Consider, for instance, a little known thriller La cuestión de suerte (A Matter of Chance; Rafael Monleón, 1996), in which the coastal landscape around San Sebastián plays a pivotal role. The coast proves essential to the plan of attempted murder as the victim is lured away by boat to underwater caves, but it also serves to uncover the crimes of attempted murder and robbery. The trace of the nation asserts itself in contrast to the French nationality of the femme fatale who lures a young man into criminality: the coastal terrain of the setting is where she lives but it also serves to unmask her as untrustworthy, confirming the suspicions of the local community who are alert to the dangers of the woman out of place. The coastline becomes precisely the border which facilitates both the commission of crime and its policing, susceptible to infiltration from outside (France) but for that same reason zealously guarded and watched over. Or consider the film Sé quien eres (I Know Who You Are; Patricia Ferreira, 2000), in which Mario (Miguel Ángel Solá) and Paloma (Ana Fernández) travel from the coast of Galicia to the city of Madrid and then to the country near Segovia in the quest to solve an old crime involving corruption in the armed forces and the police. National identity appears blurred through Mario, who was born in Spain, lived as a child
in Latin America and more recently in North Africa (and has a North African ex-wife): the fact that the actor who plays him is Argentinian complicates the situation still further. This cosmopolitan character uncovers an old conspiracy, organised by members of the Spanish army against other members, in which he participated. Mario helped to blow up an army officer and by chance the officer’s wife and daughter as well: this causes him to lose his memory, which he regains with the help of his doctor Paloma – a symbol of healing in the nation. *Sé quién eres* suggests that different parts of Spanish territory must be crossed in order that the crime be solved, and the camera takes time in tracing these journeys and lingers on and in the landscape as it does so. The corruption in the army and police reveal the threat to the law and to the land it protects at its very core, but the land and thus the nation is drawn together again, repaired through the camera’s detailed attention to it, foregrounding it as the site of spectacle. And in the process the rot within the army is healed, the corrupt elements are cast out.

The desire of association can also be re-invoked and refreshed through the use of landscape as that with which we see even when the landscape has become familiar to the point of cliché, saturated with cynicism from the point of view of the protagonist. Such is the case of Simón (Eduardo Noriega) in *Nadie conoce a nadie* (*Nobody Knows Anybody; Mateo Gil 1999*). *Nadie* seems overly insistent on the Spanishness of the setting – Seville during Holy Week – while Simón and his flatmate Sapo (Jordi Mollà) disparage the religious festivities that are a high point of the cultural life of the city in which they live. The early scene in which together they create a crossword puzzle that mocks the stereotypical images of Seville sets an initial tone of weariness and disaffection with the place they inhabit. But both in fact will demonstrate a greater commitment to Seville. Sapo will turn out to be the master criminal who threatens Seville’s religious ethos by disrupting religious processions and events, murdering religious personnel and threatening to blow up one of the Virgins around which the processions coalesce, thereby threatening carnage among the crowds gathered to witness her procession. His hatred of Seville and its religious culture is pronounced, but his fascination with the religious spaces and places of Seville and their iconography suggests also a distorted desire for the place – a call to some sort of care – even as he tries to destroy it. He creates a scale model of the entire city, and surveys the city from the rotating tower Torre Banesto and in particular the now deserted space used to house the 1992 Seville exhibition, even as he blows up one of the buildings. Simón, the unwilling hero who is not originally from Seville, has developed ties that link him to the heart of the community and that will lead him to defend it. Again, the city space is the means by which we see this. If Sapo delights in the view of Seville from on high, Simón uses it as the key with which to decipher Sapo’s plans: he literally joins the dots of the city (via a map displayed in the tower) to uncover the threat that lies at its very centre. He backs
up his deductions with memories of specific landmarks seen on television. The Seville of the film acts as host for both the spectacle of Holy Week processions and the struggle over such processions as a site of crime and its detection. If the city space is the way in which we see order restored and a care demonstrated for what those spaces represent, there is also a reinvigoration of place away from its overcoded and recycled meanings. Simón learns to see the city anew.

These are brief examples: I would now like to consider in more detail two films that suggest the trace of both the law and its breaking across space and place.

*La caja 507: two sides of one coin*

Tim Cresswell, as we saw in the previous chapter, discusses the spatial aspects of ideology and how one becomes aware of ideological norms only when they are transgressed, hence the sense of ‘out of place’ (Cresswell 1996: 166). These areas of transgression in crime films, the sites of criminal spectacle, can tell us something of the law that is being transgressed and, in turn, can reinscribe the nation as a fleeting trace that nonetheless registers itself in the use of space and place. Film is one of the few places where the whole story of crime can manifest itself in both spatial and spectacular ways (Gardies 1993: 10), because, although the results of crime may be readily visible, responsibility for it is on the whole kept hidden – criminals do not want to be identifiably seen to be acting. The constant breaking and restoration of the law needs space to make it a spectacle, make it visible; and the visibility of the spectacle thus extends to the visibility of a desire to associate with Spain. A very explicit example of this is *La caja 507* (Box 507; Enrique Urbizu, 2002) in which the nation, while not insisted upon, can nonetheless reappear as a flickering presence in the corner of the eye of the spectator. In this film Modesto Pardo (Antonio Resines), a respectable manager of a small local bank (his name – literally, ‘Modest Brown’ – suggests the ordinary man), uncovers corruption and Mafia involvement in property deals on the Spanish coast as a result of an inadvertent discovery of incriminating documents during a raid on his bank. The setting of the film is an Andalusian coast that nonetheless begins to resemble a displaced Los Angeles with a mixture of palm trees and urban decay. The Andalusian space is at the heart of the plot since it motivates the crimes that take place: the trigger for both the breaking of the law and its restoration (to a degree) revolves around a corrupt desire to exploit the space for profit. In order to make protected land available for development, criminals associated with a property company set fire to its trees, and in the process accidentally burn alive Pardo’s daughter María. Seven years later, after Pardo discovers the cover-up over his daughter’s death, and the people profiting from the cover-up, he goes back to the spot where his daughter
died: the space has been transformed into a luxury development, contrasting both with the opening scenes of the film that show the land aflame and María trapped within it, and the subsequent flashback scene as Pardo and his wife move through the scorched landscape to be confronted with a glimpse of their daughter’s burnt body. The criminal desire to exploit space, profiting from its warmth, sunshine and coasts, gives rise to the transformation of the space and the way in which people occupy it, but the scorching of the space will eventually impel a desire to uncover this malignant call to care and, in a different form of caring, will restore the law integral to an idea of Spain.

In this thriller borders are both figuratively and literally crossed – figuratively in that the dividing line between legality and illegality is broken, literally in that Spain is infiltrated by outsiders and that Spanish nationals themselves cross national boundaries. From time to time we glimpse the Rock of Gibraltar in the background, which acts as a marker of where the action takes place. Gibraltar, in addition, acts not only as a reminder of the nation that is questioned but also the questioning of the nation (by means of its territorial extent), since Spain claims Gibraltar for its own, but so does Great Britain. The Rock both is and is not Spanish. The Mafia plot line reminds us of Italy, and we hear French, German and English spoken in passing: there is a sense of crime as an international phenomenon, a thread that Hollywood has also picked up on – in such classics as *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), for instance – suggesting that the Hollywood thriller is itself not beyond infiltration. But Pardo nonetheless never strays beyond the bounds of his own backyard, becoming the little local man who sets to rights the corruption that may be international but which has also come to infect local government and the local press, who also connive in the corrupt Mafia property deals until Pardo turns up the heat on them with the knowledge of their illegal activities which he has inadvertently uncovered. While others have thought globally, he has acted locally. He has also enforced the dictum posited by Smith, cited above, that even the rich and powerful must be bound by the law of the nation. The film ends with both the international Mafia boss and the local mayor brought down, and Pardo returns to his wife (ailing, in a coma, and near death throughout the film as a result of the criminal plots that tragically affected both her and her husband; but now convalescing, thus implying in perhaps an overcoded way the precarious restoration to health of the nation). The film ends as the couple remain on a jetty, suspended over the sea, and observe the blank horizon, facing away from the local community cleansed of crime – suggesting the liminal position of the Spaniard who has moved through this boundary area in order to restore law and order and exact retribution. He has blurred the boundaries in order to reinstate them. The law of the land and the social order are always in question, since the mere existence of the law implies that it can be broken (a problem that the thriller format
underscores), so that any restoration or maintenance of order is always precarious and ambiguous, like Pardo’s position on the jetty. The Spanish sociolegal system is not that different from that of the US, but it is nonetheless a Spanish and not an American socio-legal order that is in question in Spanish thrillers. And the constant probing of the legal and social boundaries undertaken by thrillers reminds us of the border’s presence and existence. The Spanish nation reinserts itself as a flickering presence in the corner of our eyes – or, as in the last scene, out of sight but acknowledged (when Pardo’s wife asks him ‘What’s going on out there?’; to which he replies ‘the same as usual’) and implied by the existence of the jetty – a limbo hovering over the sea but implying the terra firma of the nation to which it is attached (Fig. 8).

If, as Schlesinger says, it is the infiltration of Hollywood into the national space that gives rise to the question of the possibility of a national cinema, then the infiltration of international crime in the same way sets up the question of the nation state and the national law that is an essential component of it. There are two international crime rings operating in Pardo’s local patch, and they come to act as a source of alien infection that drags in the locals. Everywhere that Pardo goes, he discovers that the locals at all levels have been tainted. This does not only apply to the mayor and the dignitaries present at the opening of the new property development that has motivated Mafia involvement in the region (the women in androgynous Andalusian costumes who decorate the event merely underscoring how boundaries have become blurred). It also applies to the fireman who investigated the death of Pardo’s daughter and subsequently produced a falsified report. And, more particularly, it applies to...
the other central character of the film, Rafael (José Coronado), an ex-cop now working for the Mafia and seeking to get back his property documents, which Pardo inadvertantly found in Rafael’s deposit box 507 and which gave him the clue to Rafael’s criminal dealings.

Despite lining up on opposite sides of the legal divide, Pardo and Rafael are like two sides of the same coin (a motif that Urbizu himself refers to on the film’s DVD commentary). Rafael is not an inverse reflection of Pardo, although it is notable that both men have female partners who are damaged or sick in some way. Nonetheless, their fates are bound together as they unwittingly pursue each other and any further criminals involved, and as the camera follows first one character and then the other. The sense of the two characters as a coin in which the two sides are both mutually exclusive and yet fused together encapsulates the relationship of the law to its breaking. And the obverse of the coin may so easily become the reverse, for just as Rafael crossed the boundary from the law to illegality, so Pardo may not perhaps remain above the criminality he has exposed. As he himself says, he has changed: he has not only set things to rights but has profited from events, dressing more flashily and thinking of buying a car, while his wife recuperates in a luxury nursing home. This image of the two sides of the coin that suggests the relationship between Pardo and Rafael also illustrates the notion not only of the intricate relationship between the law and crime that is simultaneously mutually exclusive and inextricably fused but also of the Spanish thriller, which simultaneously encompasses the infiltration of American genres while reasserting (precariously) a Spanish nation state.

The notion of the two characters as two sides of one coin has particular relevance when it comes to a comparison of how they both use space. The two never appear together in shot – never occupy the same space together – until the climactic scene when Pardo reveals Rafael’s unreliability to the Mafia and in doing so passes sentence of death. While Pardo looks locally for answers to his questions, Rafael ranges more widely in his hunt for the lost documents. Jesús Ángulo, Carlos F. Heredero and Antonio Santamarina identify the form of crime in which Rafael participates as globalisation at any price (Ángulo, Heredero and Santamarina 2003: 33), so initially it would seem that Rafael is demonstrating anything but a desire for association with his homeland as a specifically national space. He works for Italians and moves with ease, competence and success across north Africa as much as he does at home. Home, indeed, is his weak spot, where his alcoholic partner leaves him vulnerable. Rafael’s travels across various national spaces while never being at home in any of them suggests Cresswell’s notion of transgression being visible through the use of space cited above. Rafael is out of place; but also he has to leave his homeland, Spain, and go elsewhere to seek his answers (as to where his documents are), while Pardo finds them all close to home. Spain, on this reading, is simply a
place where criminality is allowed to function and the Spanish participate equally alongside other nationalities:

Británicos, gibraltareños, italianos, marroquíes, españoles ... La caja 507 habla menos, en realidad, de la corrupción económica y social de un determinado espacio geográfico, situado a caballo entre dos continentes (Europa y África), entre dos formas de vida antitéticas (La Línea de la Concepción y Marbella) y entre tres fronteras (España, Marruecos y Gibraltar), que de la lógica implacable de un sistema que, para seguir funcionando a pleno rendimiento, necesita contar con esos sumideros o cloacas. (Ángulo, Heredero and Santamarina 2003: 37)

British, Gibraltarians, Italians, Moroccans, Spanish ... La caja 507 tells us less, in fact, about social and economic corruption in a specific geographical space, situated halfway between two continents (Europe and Africa), between two antithetical ways of life (La Línea de la Concepción and Marbella) and between three frontiers (Spain, Morocco and Gibraltar), than the inevitable logic of a system that, in order to carry on working to capacity, has to rely on those drains and sewers.

This citation returns us to the idea of the two sides of the coin: opposites joined together. These cloacal spaces posited by Ángulo, Heredero and Santamarina are essential spaces in a Spain open to exploitation, and linked to the spaces of luxury that symbolise such exploitation. As Urbizu himself remarks, the spaces of poverty and luxury are separated by a fairly short car journey (Ángulo, Heredero and Santamarina 2003: 266) – they are intimately connected. The luxury development that Pardo returns to visit, having previously gone there to learn of the death of his daughter in the fire that Rafael set (Fig. 9), arises from the back streets of La Línea where Rafael learned to take drugs and fell

Figure 9 The luxury development that motivates the action of La caja 507
from grace, losing his job in the police force and becoming corrupt: his corruption in the cloacal places, and his return to them, are intimately linked to the desires of himself and others for unlawful gain expressed in terms of property and land. The spaces and places figure a different form of a call to care, spaces wherein transgression points to desire to make Spain a luxury playground. We could also invoke again Wylie’s notion of distance that is imbricated with his ‘geography of love’, though love here is malign desire for gain and exploitation: Rafael’s distance from his goal of profit matches his desire for it, and he will commit himself to any cloacal place if it entails the recovery of the documents which will put him in the way to becoming rich. The link of nation, law and land ensures that Spain traces itself across space and place through both transgression and restoration; but the landscapes are that with which we see the precarious balance between an ordered and disordered Spain, like Pardo balanced on the jetty over the water.

La voz de su amo: male noir angst in a rural landscape

If malign as well as benign desires for association can be traced on to the spaces and places of the Andalusian coast, similar things also occur in settings right at the other end of Spain, in the Basque Country. La voz de su amo centres on Charli (Eduard Fernández), a former footballer turned bodyguard to a businessman, Oliveira (Joaquim de Almeida), who has been threatened by ETA terrorists. Charli takes Oliveira’s daughter Marta (Silvia Abascal) into his flat for protection, and he and Marta duly begin an affair. When Oliveira is subsequently kidnapped after a rendezvous with ETA terrorists, Charli seeks desperately to recover his boss, only to discover that the kidnapping was a fake, engineered by Oliveira himself and in collaboration with not only ETA but the corrupt police inspector Sacristán (Imanol Arias). Charli discovers that everybody but himself was in on the set-up, including Marta and some of his friends. He thus finds himself betrayed on all sides – by his boss, his friends, his lover, the police and the trickery of ETA. What I want to do here is discuss Charli’s status as noir protagonist in terms of the landscape with which he is confronted, and the situation that pertains in the Basque Country that surrounds him. Although the main action of the film takes place in 1980, which, as we are told at the beginning, was a particularly bloody period in ETA’s history, we discover that ETA is no more than part of a political and social context which betrays Charli on all sides. They are no better and no worse than the corrupt police and corrupt private sector.

Charli’s situation throughout the film is very much in the mould of many noir and neo noir male protagonists, victims of circumstances beyond their control. Frank Krutnik, in his seminal work on noir and masculinity, refers to noir’s emphasis on passive and emasculated men, the male as victim (Krutnik
1991: 127). Most obviously, the noir hero is in danger from any *femme fatale* that crosses his path, but he is equally vulnerable when it comes to men in whom he believes he can put his trust. Noir questions not only traditional gender roles but also male homosocial bonds; and perhaps the duplicity of the male friend or colleague is that much more cutting than that of the *femme fatale*, already notorious for her untrustworthiness. Charli also fits into the group of male noir protagonists that Andrew Spicer has identified as the damaged male (Spicer 2002: 86–7). He took up his work as a bodyguard and gopher after an injury put paid to his footballing career. There is a sense of the male body wearing out, of not being up to the job of being male, decisive, active. This may perhaps explain his reluctant capitulation to the sexual advances of the young Marta: she is clearly the dominant party in their affair, but the relationship carries the hint of an attempt to recapture lost youth. Charli’s attempt to rehabilitate himself after the end of his career in football is reminiscent of the American noirs of the late 1940s that featured former war heroes trying to fit back into a civilian life they now find alien. He is more overtly marked out as solitary, and this becomes of greater significance given his status as a *maketo*, an outsider in the Basque Country. Because of his function as outsider in a country or region that is very polarised and in some sectors very nationalistic, the sense of the male protagonist as a foreigner in what may or may not be his own land is particularly pronounced. Director Martínez-Lázaro entwines the dilemma of the male protagonist around the dilemmas of life in the Basque Country so that the two become intricately related. As Ramón Freixas puts it in his review of the film, Charli lacks the ‘compromiso social en un Euskadi donde hay que tomar partido’ (the social commitment in a Basque Country where you have to take a side; Freixas 2001). Charli ultimately finds himself alone against everyone else, and although he initially commits himself to Oliveira before everyone, he withdraws from this commitment too, so that ultimately he is without allegiance.

This noir theme of individual male crisis is underscored further given Charli’s relation to the landscape that surrounds him. The noir genre is very much linked to the city: in American noir the underside of New York and Los Angeles have become the quintessential backdrops. In Spanish noir Bilbao is coming to rival Madrid as Spain’s noir city, in Enrique Urbizu’s *Todo por la pasta* (All for the Dough, 1991) or Imanol Uribe’s *Adiós, pequeña* (Bilbao Blues, 1986). *El invierno en Lisboa* (Winter in Lisbon; José A. Zorrilla, 1991), a noir in virtually a retro style, moves between the docksides of Lisbon and San Sebastián. Nonetheless, noir of any sort is not always confined to the city, and there are examples of classic noirs where characters begin, traverse or end up in rural or provincial settings (such as Jacques Tourneur’s *Out of the Past* of 1947 and Tay Garnett’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* of 1946). There are possible examples in
Spanish noir, too: for instance, the thriller *Un cos al bosc/Cuerpo en el bosque* (Body in the Woods; Joaquim Jordà, 1996), set in rural Catalonia. *La voz de su amo*, too, deals primarily with settings outside the city. Synopses and press releases for *La voz de su amo* proclaim Bilbao as its setting, but in fact we spend little time in Bilbao. Instead, settings are primarily rural or coastal. Crime, in particular, is rural: two of the major set pieces – the fake kidnapping and the murder of one of Oliveira’s business associates – take place on rural roads in the midst of Basque fields, forests and mountains. There are bars in provincial towns, where Charli and Marta attempt to deal with ETA for the release of Oliveira: these are, it should be noted, hostile places where the clientele treat Charli with some antagonism. Charli is even led out of Spanish territory altogether as the hunt for his employer takes him across the border to France. Or the action takes place by the sea, sometimes using docksides that are themselves typically noir, but also places such as the seaside hotel where Charli spies on Oliveira’s mistress Katy and her clandestine lover, or the coastal backdrop where Charli discusses the possibility of negotiating with ETA for Oliveira’s release. Only at the end do we move back to the more urban surroundings of the train station, where Charli is injured during the final, climactic shoot-out, and the bar in which Charli and Marta appear to go their separate ways with wistful regret. Thus we experience a move through the film from city to country and back again, so that the city’s problems are displaced on to, and negotiated in, the countryside.

Of all the principal characters, only Charli lives in an urban setting. Oliveira and Marta live in a comfortable country house, while other characters seem devoid of a ‘home’ setting apart from Katy, whose flat is the site of her death early on in the film. The shift from city to country thus parallels Charli’s own crisis of masculine identity. He has to move outside to the countryside to discover that he does not belong anywhere. An additional clue to his lack of belonging occurs in the provincial bar where he and Marta first arrive in search

*Figure 10* Charli’s discomfort in the country in *La voz de su amo*
of an ETA contact. In the bar he encounters a man who had heckled Oliveira at a meeting, and whom Charli had forcibly ejected from the meeting room. Now the heckler aggressively confronts Charli, secure in the knowledge that this time he (the heckler) is on his own turf and backed up by his own friends: Charli is protected only with the intervention of a man who turns out to belong to ETA. The pivotal moment of betrayal also occurs in the Basque countryside, as Charli waits for Oliveira to return from a clandestine meeting in an unspecified place. This landscape may be picturesque but it also underscores Charli’s isolation, as Oliveira abandons him in all the greenery (Fig. 10). Charli distrusts the solitary figure in the landscape that he can see, the worker in the field – he fears he is an ETA collaborator (and indeed the worker refuses to back up Charli’s story of the subsequent kidnapping). This sequence ends as Oliveira appears to be driven away by force: Charli leaps into his car to give chase, crashes and has to be rescued, a clear reinforcement of his loss of control in this scene: the hay bales scattered in the road suggesting an appropriately rural obstacle to a successful pursuit of his boss.

As Nathan Richardson points out: ‘Like every other Spanish nationalism except the Catalan, Basque nationalism has historically employed the tension of country versus city to represent its struggle against Castilian imperialism’ (Richardson 2002: 181) The city is where Charli belongs, where he is at his most comfortable and productive, a part of his community as demonstrated by the football coaching for local children. The work for Oliveira, however – which sets him on a trajectory towards his betrayal on all sides – immediately takes him out of the city to liminal and marginal places. Charli also travels a good deal, using rural roads: if in the previous chapter I suggested that the use of the road implies a movement away from commitment to the cause, simultaneously with a move away from the Basque motherland represented by the landscape, now the road, used by Charli in a different way, suggests movement away from belonging. Everyone insists that Charli must choose a side, but ultimately he opts to choose no side, merely to survive in a moral landscape where everyone appears equally corrupt. Charli’s desire for association, then, shrinks to include only his local community in Bilbao, the only place that he can make his own: it is the place of healing, as he recuperates from his bullet wound, and where he finds a role as a father figure by acting as a football coach. The community also cares for him in the form of the local priest (in contrast to the rural monastery which shelters Oliveira). All the other major characters abandon Bilbao through death or exile. In the final meeting between Charli and Marta, it is clear that she still loves him, as she initiates the encounter on hearing his voice in the bar where she sits with friends. But she too is about to leave Bilbao to go to a rock concert in San Sebastián with friends. The film’s final shot has Charli watching her leave with her friends: as she looks back at him, we see, from her point of
view, Charli framed centrally against the backdrop of Bilbao as if fixed there. It is the urban rather than the rural where Charli belongs and which nurtures him. His final position, framed in a low-angle shot as he stands on a bridge, gives him a moral authority linked to the fact that he survived the corruption unscathed if more cynical: his high position suggests a capacity for judgement over the other characters he has encountered (Fig. 11). The background of Bilbao also connects him more firmly to city space. But his position on the bridge over water is rather like that of Pardo on his jetty at the end of La caja 507: a certain ambiguity is implied.

Again, Charli’s efforts to ensure the right thing is done leads to the restoration of order and the purging of unlawful elements from the land. The corrupt team of businessmen, once again exploiting the land to the detriment of the local people as in La caja 507, and supported by a corrupt police officer (Sacristán), has been broken up and all are now either dead or in exile. Unlike Pardo, Charli has had to go outside his home area of Bilbao in the search for answers, and he finds them deep within the ambiguity of the countryside, the locus of betrayal (the deceptions practised on him by Oliveira and later by Marta herself as she mis-identifies her father’s body, the corruption revealed by Oliveira as he shoots Sacristán dead, the betrayal of his business partners) and confusion (the winding route ETA compels him to take as he seeks a final rendezvous to talk with them). However, resolution occurs at home in Bilbao, as all the threads of the plot come together in the station shoot out. Charli is now secure in his rightful place in his Bilbao community. It is possible to interpret this call to care in terms of Castilian imperialism as posited by Richardson: Charli’s alignment with the city traces Spain across the landscape in terms of an equation of the law with a Spanish state often hostile to aspirations to Basque nationalism. This, however, neglects some of the ambiguities of Charli’s position. Unlike Pardo there is no sense that Charli has changed after his immersion into the dubious spaces of the countryside, and there is no sense of an imbrication of luxury space with cloacal space as in La caja 507. But Charli’s refusal to align himself with any side negates the binary of Basque nationalism/Spanish imperialism and instead suggests a call to care exercised locally. This concept, however, coincides with the comment of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that ‘The State is sovereignty. But sovereignty only reigns over what it is capable of internalizing, of appropriating locally’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1998: 360). Like Pardo, he acts locally: and these local actions come to constitute the restoration of the sovereign law even as such law remains disputed ground. Yet the very contestation of the law – by ETA, by corrupt business practices, by the very policemen supposed to uphold it – renders this local restoration precarious.

In all these examples, the tension between criminality and the defence against it does not map itself out in uniform ways, any more than national identities
express themselves in a monolithic manner. But, taken together, these examples suggest that the ambiguity of the relationship between the law and crime, as played through the crime drama, is literally mapped on to the landscape within which this ambiguity plays itself out. But I feel it suggests more than that. It indicates that the need for space in the spectacle of crime implicitly calls for the national to reintroduce itself as an always already problematised trace. If the law that is implied by these films is inevitably Spanish, then so is the territory in which the spectacle is played out. The tension in the landscape between the imaginary and the real in this Spanish landscape runs parallel to the illusion of the law in such films: posited only to be broken – but then recreated and reaffirmed. Spain as landscape – like Spain as embodied by the law – becomes a flickering trace in the corner of our eye, always problematised but always there. When Modesto Pardo in La caja 507 pauses to survey the landscape that is at the heart of the plot and the crime, he appears much like one of the observers gazing at the scenery to be found in Caspar David Friedrich’s landscape paintings: an observer separate from what he sees. But even at this point in the film we know this is not true: his tragic past is inherently bound up with this landscape and his observation is not neutral. The call to care for the landscape and what it means results in a blurring of the meanings of landscape, space and place which is crucial in the desire of association: these meanings cannot be neatly separated. In crime films, the landscape becomes once again the way by which we see this call to care for local spaces and places.

Barry Jordan remarks:

the dominant cinema that was and still is seen and patronized by mass Spanish audiences ... is American, or more exactly Hollywood ... In other words, the ways in which Spanish audiences imagined their nation from the films they saw drew not only on the myths and stereotypes of Spanish films but on those of the Hollywood ‘dream factory’ and a ‘whole way of life’ too. (Jordan 2004: 670)
As Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas’ earlier comment cited above suggests, Spanish audiences may also use Hollywood as a resource with which to visualise their own marginal behaviours, and thus the Hollywood thriller style may be used to figure and negotiate tensions over what is central to the Spanish nation and what is marginal, what comes within the law and what does not. In doing so, audiences may co-opt the thriller for Spain, but not in the sense of the national masquerade commented on before. For they also co-opt the sheer precariousness of national identity as figured through cinema and imply the national borders as always in danger of being breached and thus always policed. In the thriller, Spain may be not be sharply defined but remains always already as a flickering presence, which, like the law of the land, is always in question but always there to be questioned.