Spanish Spaces

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Spanish cinema has for many decades maintained a vein of film-making known as *cine social*, films that attempt to deal with social problems in a realist style; and this vein persists today even in an era when scholars and critics of Spanish film acknowledge a move towards more commercially orientated film-making that emphasises narrative and spectacle. Indeed, some filmmakers have combined the two, with Benito Zambrano’s *Solas* (Alone, 2000), for instance, blending a sentimental tale of family and quasi-family relationships with a study of alcoholism and domestic abuse; or Alejandro Amenábar’s *Mar adentro* (The Sea Inside, 2004), a biopic cashing in on the director’s previous commercial successes that nonetheless raises the question of assisted euthanasia and a person’s right to die. Similar phenomena occur when it comes to depicting the question of immigration. As Isabel Santaolalla has observed in her book *Los ‘otros’* (Santaolalla 2005: chap. 1), race and ethnicity have been underlying preoccupations of some areas of Spanish film-making for many decades: nonetheless, depictions of immigration in particular have become prominent in the last two decades. This responds to wider concerns in contemporary Spanish society about immigration, particularly from the African coast, a concern exacerbated recently by the increasing influx of people trying to get to Spain from Africa and media coverage of both the human cost of this influx and the political conflicts engendered by the phenomenon within the Spanish communities most affected. Most commentators on these films foreground race and immigration as their primary point of interest. My approach here is slightly different, since, in keeping with the overall tenor of this book, I am incorporating questions of landscape, space and place into the equation: I am looking at the ways in which questions of national and ethnic identity come to interact with notions of Spanishness related to space. What I will argue is that the spatial interaction of Spaniards with North African immigrants not only problematises the claim of Spaniards to the territory but also the very filmic representation of the landscape and more particularly of the immigrant. Yet the very contestation over territory invokes a call to care on the part both of the
Spaniard and of the immigrant: both desire to associate with an idea of ‘Spain’. In the case of the films I wish to discuss here, the relationship of Spaniards to their national territory only becomes overt once other people appear on it who appear to transgress. Yet the outcome in each of the films I will look at is the disappearance from the screen of the immigrant. Thus the spectacle that occurs within these films is precisely the rendering invisible of the immigrant in films that purport to be about immigration. This call to care involves eradicating others from space and place.

One way in which films such as these serve to problematise the binary between Spanish self and immigrant other is by raising the possibility of the Spanish themselves as other, regardless of immigrant influx. Isolina Ballesteros remarks, ‘One common pattern found in immigration films is the parallel filmmakers establish between the different marginal (or undesirable) positions that constitute otherness in their given society: foreignness, race and ethnicity go along with (working) class, age, gender and sexuality’ (Ballesteros 2006: 170). But more particularly the proximity of North Africa suggests the potential for blurring of different identities that becomes a matter for fear, as María Rosa de Madariaga suggests:

The Spaniard recognises himself too much in the other – the Moor – and this irritates him, makes him uncomfortable, leads him, in order to differentiate himself, to affirm himself, to react violently against him. He needs to demonstrate to other Europeans that the Spaniard is superior, that Africa does not start at the Pyrenees. He must insist on the distinction between the Spanish/European and the Moorish/African/Asian. (de Madariaga, quoted in Santaolalla 2007: 74)

Talal Asad reminds us of the historical background to this fear, in that ‘although Spain is now defined geographically as part of Europe, Arab Spain from the seventh to the fourteenth century is seen as being outside “Europe”’ (Asad 2000: 16). He goes on to note that this notion is in spite of the fact that there were strong connections between Muslims, Christians and Jews in this period (ibid.: 16). But, indeed, it may be this very historical intermingling, the traces of which can still be seen on the Spanish landscape and heard in the Spanish language, which gives rise to a need to mark a distinction between Spanish/European and North African. Asad then observes, ‘But while one aspect of the identity of Islamic civilisation is that it represents an early attempt to destroy Europe’s civilisation from outside, another is that it signifies the corrupting moral environment which Europe must continuously struggle to overcome from within’ (ibid.: 17).

Spain, of course, knew this tendency to ‘destruction’ better than most, given that it was actually invaded and occupied by Arab forces. Nonetheless, the traces of Arab culture in Andalusia have been co-opted as typically Spanish tourist sites that draw thousands of visitors, hinting at both a celebration and a denial of Spain’s connections to North Africa. José Colmeiro notes
the particular double bind of Spanish culture due to its experience of orientalism from both sides: as a European Christian culture that has repressed a constitutive element of its historical identity and sees the oriental as its cultural and political other, and as a mirror of oriental culture constructed by other Europeans. (Colmeiro 2002: 129)

He goes on to note that contact with Arabic and Jewish cultures have left their trace (ibid.). This is underscored by Théophile Gautier’s seminal *Voyage en Espagne*:

L’Espagne, qui touche à l’Afrique comme la Grèce à l’Asie, n’est pas faite pour les mœurs européennes. Le génie de l’Orient y perce sous toutes les formes, et il est fâcheux peut-être qu’elle ne soit pas restée moresque ou mahométane. … La Sierra-Morena franchie, l’aspect du pays change totalement; c’est comme si l’on passait tout à coup de l’Europe à l’Afrique. (Gautier 1981: 236–7)

Spain, which borders Africa as Greece borders Asia, is not designed for European ways. The spirit of the Orient penetrates it in all its forms, and it is perhaps annoying that Spain has not remained Moorish or Mohammedan. … once past the Sierra Morena, the nature of the country changes completely: it is as if one were passing suddenly from Europe to Africa.

This suggests that much of the concern for Spanish culture to mark distinctions between itself and the other derives from this awareness of how other Europeans might see Spain, an issue particularly acute at a time when concern over immigration from Africa is Europe-wide and Spain is sometimes seen as a first, porous frontier which fails to hold back the immigrant other. This somewhat schizophrenic stance plays itself out to some degree in the films I will discuss below.

Spanish cinema has not confined itself to representing immigration purely in terms of North Africa – there is in particular a strong corpus of films that look at immigration in terms of Latin Americans returning to the former colonial power. Nonetheless, there is a special interest in North African cinematic immigration in spatial terms because of North Africa’s comparative proximity in geographical terms, and also because the sense of near/like us and yet far/unlike us is paramount. Moroccan immigrants are, as Daniela Flesler observes, those most directly implicated in Spain’s self-definition vis-à-vis Africa: they are a reminder of the Arabs who came from North Africa in 711 to conquer the Spanish peninsula, and still carry this trace of invasion. They function in this sense like historical ghosts (Flesler 2004: 104). Moroccan immigration predominates in the films we consider here, but the immigrants act like ghosts in another sense as well: in their virtual invisibility. They haunt the space in which they are seen as fleeting traces. They will be erased from that space, leaving the Spaniards to occupy the space and the film; and yet the plots of the films come about precisely because of their trace across the landscape. In many ways most
if not all films about immigration are not actually about immigrants. Very rarely do we see an African immigrant as subject of the film (Las cartas de Alou (Letters from Alou; Montxo Armendáriz, 1990) is a notable exception). Most of these films are in fact about Spaniards, so that the Africans only occupy a marginal amount of screen time: and they only appear in relation to Spaniards. And yet the ghost of the other appearing to occupy the same space as the Spaniard is enough to prompt an almost uncanny anxiety in which territory – and thus psyche – is reclaimed for Spain.

Within this phenomenon, the coastline plays a crucial role, being the point of entry for many of these immigrants and thus both a frontier and, for those who fear the influx, a frontline of conflict. It takes little stretching of the imagination to perceive the coastline as a demarcation of national territory but one that is porous, easily breached and thus vulnerable. I will argue that the coastline in these films functions not only as a border territory in which Spanish nationals must confront the subjectivity of the other, but also as a contradictory mechanism in which both national identity and the transnational are simultaneously confirmed and denied. Border crossings have been suggested in various ways throughout this book: the Spanish Civil War as viewed from both inside and outside in del Toro’s Spanish films; exile and invasion in La rosa de los vientos; the intrusion of international crime on to Spanish territory in La caja 507 (to say nothing of the apparent invasion of Spanish cinema by its Hollywood counterpart); the tourist industry and the entertainment of foreigners that is both welcomed and resented by the locals. In the case of immigration, however, borders are more acutely contested. Borders – real and imagined – suggest the desire to associate, to be on one side of the border rather than the other, at its height, and yet at the same time at its most problematised since the other side of the border is also a real and very close possibility. Joan Ramón Resina comments:

if ‘seeing’ the nation presupposes a political horizon of interpretation, it is equally true that this ideal ‘boundary’ attain concrete existence in the nation’s borders, from where we can both catch and lose sight of the nation. Borders may be the expression of political arbitration of conflict, but they are also scenarios of personal and collective dramas, which can be contained within political exegesis only at the cost of severe reduction ... Borders are the temporary crystallization of innumerable dramas, the thickening of a formerly fluid relation to the territory. (Resina 2005: 331)

If borders are a quintessential space in which the nation is both explicitly affirmed and implicitly questioned, they are also spaces where the political ‘fact’ of the nation can become imbricated with the ways in which individuals move through the border space: here André Gardies’ notion that there can be no spectacle (or, in Resina’s terms, drama) without space becomes more apparent,
as mentioned earlier in Chapter 4 (Gardies 1993: 10). Borders readily demonstrate the individual’s desire for association, and the resulting text that we look at arises from that individual desire to belong and how it interacts with other desires. The border becomes John Wylie’s landscape with which we see these desires in process. Resina further argues:

The state exists in space and time by virtue of the border, with the political subject in the role of transcendent subject. The border, then, is the nation’s horizon of possibility, the perspective from which that political reality can be observed. A virtual line created and sustained through the most strenuous and costly efforts, the border is constitutive of the perspective from which any object of experience is promoted to the status of a metonymic representation of the national. Yet … the political subject can overstep her ideal bubble and expose herself to a different regime of visibility. She can discover the gap between the state’s ideal border and the nation she actually spies from her dramatic standpoint. (Resina 2005: 331)

The border is thus a very real national space in that the nation presupposes borders; but it is a space that must constantly be maintained, protected (as we saw in the case of international crime in Chapter 5). But it still leaves open the question as to what form Spain, constantly remade at the border, will take in the perception of the person interacting with border space to express a desire for association. The gaps between what the state is supposed to be and what it actually is – and, a possibility not mentioned by Resina here, what it could be – become the points at which the desire of association can manifest itself through the landscape.

I will therefore first look at the ways in which the coastline is figured in two key recent films on immigration: Chus Gutiérrez’s Poniente (West) of 2002 and Imanol Uribe’s Bwana of 1996. The Mediterranean beach, the principal setting for both films, becomes the landscape in which these Spaniards of Spanish film cross the divide between self and other and move into otherness, thus raising the possibility of the other moving towards the self and in this way gaining subjectivity. The beach becomes the embodiment of the coexistence of binary opposites – here, beauty and squalor or death, as we shall see – and the ability to move between them, suggestive of the ability to move between self and other. But other spaces and places can produce similar effects: cities, too, function as a locus of both encounter and exclusion between immigrant and Spaniard. Although much immigration from North Africa has clearly had to do with the need for cheap agricultural labour in the south of Spain, cities are attractive partly because of a perception of them as a site of greater economic opportunity but also because diaspora communities already exist there, allowing a foothold and an induction into Spanish city life. Nonetheless, these city spaces do not act as melting pots: rather, we find demarcated communities that do not seamlessly mix with one another, in which city space serves to divide rather
than bring together. I will consider the significance of city space through a
discussion of Antonio Chavarrías’ *Susanna* (1996). Finally, I will examine coast
and city space in tandem in Ignacio Vilar’s *Illegal* (Illegal, 2003). In all four cases
I will demonstrate how, although space acts to foreground spectacle and bring
the story of the immigrant to the fore, it simultaneously and contradictorily
serves to render invisible the immigrant in favour of immigration as a story in
fact about Spaniards and their relation to the land. Desires for association and
belonging, in Mitch Rose’s terms, are at their most critical here, since territory/
place and personal identity are acutely bound together, yet simultaneously the
call to care must incorporate the awareness, conscious or not, that the position
as Spanish itself carries the potential towards otherness and thus proximity to
and affiliation with the other as African. In geographical terms, Spain is north
of Africa, but it has been perceived as North Africa itself. In this formulation, the
tension and conflict lie precisely in that small word, ‘of’.

**Coast**

Chus Gutiérrez’s *Poniente* deals with the coexistence of Spanish bosses and
migrant agricultural workers on the Mediterranean coast. The coexistence is
not a happy one: the workers suffer appalling living and working conditions
while the bosses resent the presence of the migrants even as they exploit them.
The tension between the two groups eventually results in violence, tragedy, and
the departure of the migrants. *Poniente* culminates in a confrontation between
the two groups: the victims of this violence include Curro (José Coronado), the
male lead character, a Spanish go-between for the two communities, who is
beaten unconscious. Santaolalla observes that *Poniente*

makes the Spanish spectator experience cross-cultural dialogues and/or conflicts
in three time frames simultaneously: the so-called cohabitation of Moors
and Christians following the invasion of the Peninsula in the 8th century, the
hardships endured by Spanish migrants to Europe in the 1960s and conflicts
between Spaniards and economic migrants in 21st century Spain. (Santaolalla
2007: 74)

Implied in this is the danger of an equation between the two groups: the
Spanish were once subservient to the Moors, and they themselves have also
carried out the same role – immigrant worker – as the Moroccans do now.
The film raises the possibility of the Spanish themselves as immigrant other
through Curro, son of an emigrant who went to Switzerland; and through the
footage he discovers of Spaniards leaving their homeland to find work. Much of
the tension and violence thus arise from the need of the Spaniards to elude this
African equation. This is essentially a tale about the Spanish; of Curro, trying to
keep both sides of the community happy and establish his own roots, and his
romance with Lucía (Cuca Escribano), who has also returned to her homeland from Madrid. The film nonetheless offers a variety of people from ‘outside’ – Spaniards as well as immigrants – attempting to put down roots in the local community, and the difficulties they have in doing so, which runs the risk of the dangerous equivalence of Spaniard and immigrant. This resulting tension is often represented in spatial terms, so that, in particular, the immigrants cannot get housing, or share the same bar as the Spanish bosses: the violence simmering among the immigrants derives in the first instance from a failed attempt by some young Moroccan workers to acquire better accommodation.

Both lead characters demonstrate an attraction to African otherness not shared by most of the Spanish community. Curro develops the closest links with the immigrants working the fields of peppers and tomatoes, and particularly with Adbembi (Farid Fatmi). Lucía returns from self-imposed exile in Madrid (thus offering an urban divide as well) to carry on her father’s work in agriculture despite opposition from her family, and works alongside her African employees. This duality is reflected in the use of landscape, as Verena Berger notes. She observes that the director often uses images of the horizon ‘para retratar filmicamente el límite hacia la otredad’ (to illustrate cinematically the border with otherness; Berger 2007: 194), but also as a possibility of opening up to the other. Gutiérrez often intercuts action scenes with long shots of landscape that act as a frontier: the beach, the mountains, the roads, the sheeting of the greenhouses. As Berger comments, ‘Siempre resaltan las líneas demarcadoras del paisaje, como si cualquier horizonte se convirtiera en símbolo de la frontera que existe como obstáculo, pero también para ser superada’ (The demarcating lines of the landscape always stand out, as if any horizon were to become a symbol of the border that exists as a barrier but also as something to be overcome; ibid.: 195). The horizon, the frontier, both divides and unites. Parvati Nair observes, ‘The borderline in lived practice asserts itself in the daily encounter with alterity: it demarcates the safe from the unsafe, the legal from the illegal, the rich from the poor’ (Nair 2004: 110). But the borderline also tells us that the other is there, within reach, and thus there is a pull towards it.

Poniente’s opening credits run against the background of what appears to be a slightly out of focus beach, but something about it looks fake: at the end of the credits the camera pulls away to show the scene as a mock-up. This opening posits the varied meanings of the Mediterranean beach – as pleasure playground above all – as simply false. This is not quite exact. The beach in both this film and, as we shall see, Bwana proves to have multiple meanings that suggest the Mediterranean as a locus of conflict and death and, of course, of racial hatred, but it is also a site of encounter between self and other to the extent that the binary may dissolve – and it is furthermore the site of the very pleasure the fake beach is supposed to induce in us. In blurring these meanings,
the Mediterranean functions not only as a border territory in which Spanish nationals must confront the subjectivity of the other, but also as a contradictory mechanism in which both national identity and the transnational are simultaneously confirmed and denied. The coastline does not act simply as a backdrop for these issues, but actively embodies them. The coastline itself acts both as a territorial boundary and also as a point of entry. Given the indeterminacy of meaning, it is perhaps unsurprising that the film ends with physical violence that in part results from an attempt to determine the meaning of the land and also to determine who has power over it (whoever has the power determines the meaning). Rob Shields, as we saw in the previous chapter, is one commentator who has noted the liminal status of the beach. The seashore possesses a ‘shifting nature between high and low tide, and as a consequence the absence of private property’, and this in turn suggests ‘the unterritorialised status of the beach, unincorporated into the system of controlled, civilised spaces. As a physical threshold, a limen, the beach has been difficult to dominate’ (Shields 1991: 84).

He further comments, ‘Beaches had always been a “free zone” of sorts by virtue of their status as uncertain land, the surface contours of which might change with every tide’ (ibid.: 89). Shields’ remarks imply the problematic nature of the beach in terms of territory in that its national status is always open to question and always in need of active control, vulnerable to attack from outside, as Spain had in the past good reason to know. Yet Shields’ comment about the shifting nature of the beach and its status as a free zone also posit the beach as a locus wherein the self is contested in conjunction with the potential proximity of the other. In Poniente, the beach is a site of hybrid encounter between Moroccan and Spaniard, those Spaniards who already recognise themselves as potentially other. It is notable that those who do not explicitly recognise themselves to be on the margins of Spanish society are never to be found on the beach: only the Moroccans, Lucía, Curro and the stripper Perla (Mariola Fuentes) spend time there. Those who meet on the beach are all nomads of a sort, including Curro, with his Swiss roots, and Lucía, who left her home to live in the city and now cannot understand the ways of her home on her return. When she gets lost in the maze of plastic tunnels that cover the ground, she must be set on the correct way by the immigrants who live there: it is familiar territory to them – ironically, their home – but not to her, who perceives it as ‘the end of the world’. But if we can identify the beach with the expression of hybrid and fluid identities, this is nonetheless also the place where Adbembi assures Curro that they share the same roots as they stare at what Santaollala calls the ‘emblematic Mediterranean’ (Santaollala 2005: 144). Their desire to go into business together by taking over the beach café suggests this unity too. Thus, as symbol both of fluidity and hybridity, and of shared roots, the beach implies once again the equivalence of Spaniard and African (Fig. 18).
The dual meaning of the beach functions as both pleasure and death: a place of enjoyment and community celebration, but also of bereavement (the drowning of Lucia’s daughter years earlier), the fear of death (Curro’s near fatal beating) and of displacement. It suggests the belief in roots of Adbembi and Curro is not so secure; and the rubbish that floats about it implies the collapsing into each other of the natural and the manufactured and thus the literal dissolution of boundaries. The plastic sheeting pervasive in the landscape is not simply a sign of squalor but actively contributes to its picturesqueness, as a close-up focuses on the graceful curlicues of the plastic floating in the sky – apparently devoid of context. The camera dwells lovingly on the signs of rubbish and detritus that become a sight of beauty. Ballesteros is right to point out the emphasis the film gives on the contrast between the beauty and the squalor, so that sophisticated cinematography and camerawork forcefully highlight the beautiful coastal landscape of Almería and contrast it throughout the film with the miserable and subhuman environments where immigrants are forced to live. A poetic leitmotif is used to reinforce that disparity: the plastic bags immigrants use to cover both the greenhouses and the shacks they live in fly in the sky indiscriminately paired with clouds and fog; they are metaphors of misery, warning signs of their presence, reminders of their invisibility. (Ballesteros 2005: 11)

The beach later provides a backdrop for another imaginative use of the plastic, as Curro makes an elaborate kite from it and races across the beach with the kite, accompanied by some of the Moroccan children. It is notable that the rubbish in this film is always associated with the immigrant, but so are the beauty and the pleasure of it, suggesting that the other is not simply abject. The landscape
in which the immigrants are immersed thus embodies the ever-present danger that the alien other, the abject object, might become a thing of beauty, pleasure and desire. Curro at the very least has perceived the attraction.

Other Spaniards must perforce maintain their boundaries, so their interaction with the landscape is precisely about doing this. As Adbembi observes, the two groups have common cultural roots, but there is a contradictory impulse to both embrace and deny on the part of the Spaniards, as well as a desire to forget their own history as immigrants: hence only if they feel a pull towards the other – if they have been marginalised themselves in some way – are they found in the area the immigrants occupy. Lucía, for example, the outsider, is one of the few owners who work alongside their pickers. Spaniards reinforce their territory in concrete ways, such as denying young migrants the right to rent rooms. In a situation where both Spaniard and Moroccan are viewed from elsewhere in the world as simply the agricultural workers conveying our peppers and tomatoes to the local supermarket – so that both appear to us like the primitive, because agricultural, other – the need to demarcate space becomes more acute, so that only the Moroccans inhabit an agricultural space, while the Spaniards are more likely to be found in the local bar.

The film’s last scene reveals the immigrants with all their belongings walking across the beach, on the way to somewhere else – displaced, not rooted. At the end of this sorry line of people is Adbembi himself, forced to recognise that a supposition of sharing roots is not enough. This reflects a comment of Parvati Nair concerning the representation of Moroccans on films, ‘In the context of contemporary globalization ... the geographical proximity of Spain and

Figure 19 The disappearing immigrant: Adbembi in Poniente
Morocco ... underlines their close physical relation as well as the fact that in this blurred line of contact lies also the boundary that separates Europe from its economically disadvantaged “other” (Nair 2004: 110). The beach in *Poniente* illustrates this point neatly: as a boundary it brings together both the sense of proximity and the ever-present possibility of alienation and separation which becomes a reality by the end of the film. The Moroccans literally exit stage left, and no longer are visible in the Spanish landscape. However, their story is in any case submerged under the drama of Spaniards coming to terms with their own roots. The drama of what happens to the Moroccans is displaced in favour of the melodrama of what happens to the Spaniards. The fine line between tragedy and melodrama is trodden by the Spaniards, as agricultural boss Miguel (Antonio Dechent), partly responsible for the final conflict, sets a fire to destroy Lucía’s business that accidentally kills his son, while Lucía’s lament over Curro’s unconscious body resembles the pose of the *mater dolorosa*. Romance and melodrama more widely – indeed, any form of emotion – are reserved for the Spanish. When the camera pauses on Adbembi as he looks back at the deserted beach he is leaving behind, we might guess his thoughts but we are not privy to them; and the fact that the camera captures him in medium long shot rather than close-up, the preferred camera shot for revealing emotion, underscores the sense that what matters in this sequence is the shot of Adbembi disappearing from the screen (Fig. 19). As they did some 500 years before, the Spanish have managed once again to eject the North African from their soil. The film contains a crucial line of dialogue that underscores the question of visibility, when Adbembi says to his boss Miguel that what the latter would really like is for his immigrant workers to be invisible; and in the end the Spanish get their way, though at terrible cost to themselves as the son’s death and the destruction of Lucía’s business makes clear. This ending reminds us of Spain’s double bind towards Africa: it is impossible to harm the other without hurting oneself. Yet as the end credits roll over the now empty windswept beach (with a hard, cold sky that points up the contrast between the real beach and the fake one with which we started), we cannot but be aware that part of the spatial spectacle of which Gardies speaks, as mentioned above, is precisely that of the erasure of the immigrant.

If *Poniente* erases the immigrant through displacement, *Bwana* suggests other, more vicious methods of erasure. *Bwana* suggests the doubleness of the foreign, as a Spanish family, stranded by the coast after their car breaks down, encounter an African on the beach and spend the night in his company, only to abandon him to attack and death by passing German neo-Nazis the next morning. In *Bwana* the fragmentation of the Spanish self is easy enough to detect: Uribe positions a working-class Spanish family opposite a newly arrived immigrant called Ombasi (Emilio Buale), whom they encounter as they
go to a deserted beach to pick cockles. But from the very beginning this family is fractious: the husband and wife squabble, the son is scared of his father, the daughter is violently car sick (spoiling her mother’s dress in the process), and the family car breaks down. The family begins to fragment further when the wife, Dori (María Barranco), becomes attracted to Ombasi, and it is only brought together again through fear, the family fleeing as Ombasi is attacked by neo-Nazi thugs. Otherness thus develops along gendered as well as ethnic lines given Dori’s attraction to the African other. The Spanish are shown as rather reductively inadequate and ignoble, in comparison to Ombasi, who acquires a moral stature that positions him as superior to the Spanish family. Such a positioning is dangerous as it means that Ombasi must be brought low in order to restore a status quo in which the Spanish are superior; and yet the Spanish are unable even to achieve this much, leaving Ombasi’s destruction to foreign others. Uribe himself observes in retrospect of his own film: ‘No pasa de ser un cuento moral, con un mensaje social determinado. Con personajes miserables. Todos miserables, excepto el negro, que es al que se considera peligroso … Que es realmente el más digno de todos’ (It continues to be a moral story, with a fixed social message. With despicable characters. All despicable, except for the African, the one who is actually considered dangerous … Who is really the most noble of them all; Aguirresarobe 2004: 170: ellipsis in original). Not even the children escape Uribe’s condemnation (ibid.: 171).

The beach that forms the central space of *Bwana* is explicitly and sometimes problematically marked as a place of pleasure. It is on one level an extension of the spaces the family have used for leisure purposes and is more specifically a chance to indulge in cockle-picking. The beach also offers the opportunity to swim, although while both Ombasi and Dori enjoy their naked bathe together the latter’s family look on in horror. But it can also be a potentially hostile space in which basic functions such as urination prove uncomfortable and embarrassing. And from an early stage the beach is marked with death, long before the climactic scenes of violence. When the Spanish arrive Ombasi is on the beach watching over his dead friend, buried in the sand, who apparently drowned in the voyage to Spain that Ombasi himself has survived. This coincides with the link of the beach of *Poniente* with death: it was the place where Lucía’s daughter Angela drowned, an event that seemed to have compelled her flight from home to Madrid. In the latter film, a fiesta on the beach where Lucía and Curro eat and dance together with the Moroccans induces a mood of happiness. But at the end of this sequence we cut briefly to Said (Marouane Mribti), prevented from renting a home of his own because of his ethnic origin, and who is thought to be a troublemaker, and then immediately after this we cut to the beach bathed in a blood-red sunset, a clear clue to the violence and death to come. In *Bwana*, however, death is literally made a part of the beach as Ombasi buries his dead
friend in the sand, and later imagines the wind blowing the sand off to allow the friend to rise again and warn him in his dreams of the dangers of the white man.

The duality of the beach is thus clearly marked out in both positive and negative terms: it proves to be fluid in meaning. These signs of the ability to shift in meaning as well as physically relate to Parvati Nair’s comments concerning Moroccans in Spanish film: she argues that ‘while the immigrant engages in the hybrid act of reinventing the displaced self, he also simultaneously experiences the multiplicities of time and place that accompany the migratory experience, whereby the memory of a former located, gendered and defined self interferes with the fluid, mobile and unreliable present’ (Nair 2004: 108). Such a process is not immediately apparent in Bwana, where Ombasi is for the most part the object of the gaze and subjectivity is denied him; but the scene in which he imagines the sands of the beach shifting in order to uncover his dead friend, who then speaks to him, is suggestive of Nair’s point. The dead friend reminds him not to trust white people, going counter to his current attempts to make friendly contact in his new world. The beach plays a central role in this process, literally shifting to remind Ombasi of his former located self in a world where white people were not to be trusted, and suggesting the hybridity of a new territory in which he must set aside old suspicions – and yet, as events prove, the dead friend has a point. The beach is also fluid in gendered terms: Isabel Santaolalla describes the beach as ‘un entorno mítico’, or mythic surroundings full of female symbolism (the sea, the shells, the moon and the uterine hollows of the dunes) and male symbolism (the sun and the fire) – the latter associated exclusively with Ombasi (Santaolalla 2005: 161). It also suggests the immigrant as taking advantage of the Mediterranean as a scene of play and of enjoyment, reminding us of the common association of the beach with leisure and pleasure, and thus ironically of a place where foreigners are likely to come, one of the attractions of the Spanish terrain in the sight of others. But these are pleasures available to Spaniards too. The family arrive at the beach in the first place with a view to enjoying the pleasures of the seaside (cockle-picking); and it is Dori who makes the most of the opportunity in the end. Her pleasure is linked to sexual desire, rooted in her earlier dream that Ombasi approached her for sex, and now suggested in the two of them bathing naked together: the covert expression of sexual possibilities also forms part of the notion of the escape to the beach for pleasure. But this equation is, of course, unstable, since the neo-Nazis come to disturb this idyll for their own violent pleasure: the beach then converts itself to a setting reminiscent of the jungle – dry dunes with bushes to provide undergrowth (not, alas, enough for Ombasi to hide). The instability of the landscape’s meaning reflects its ambiguity as a border territory that defines national identity and hints at other possibilities, including both the pleasure and danger of identification with the other. There is a particular irony
in that, as Flesler notes, the skinheads of *Bwana* police the Spanish racial and sexual frontier, that is to say, the beach (Flesler 2004: 107): what Flesner does not observe is that the skinheads are themselves foreign, from Germany. The ambivalence of the Spanish towards the African other is such that they cannot adequately police their own border.

Again, this border landscape provides the space for the spectacle of the erasure of the immigrant; though in a further twist we do not see this elimination. The film ends as the family drive away into the distance, refusing to help: the camera focuses on them in close-up while in the distance the neo-Nazis surround Ombasi. Thus it erases not only the immigrant but the process whereby he is eliminated, as this is left to our imagination. The territory is only tentatively recovered for the Spanish since they themselves hurriedly vacate it to be policed by foreigners against foreigners. But this is still a story about Spaniards, their inadequacy, their incomprehension, their dual fear and desire, while Ombasi remains an object of otherness, desired and feared but never comprehended, his life ending on the landscape where his friend is buried. Rose’s desire for association, then, is also ambiguously suggested through the presentation of the landscape, as the beach comes to indicate the desire and fear bound up in the association with Africa.

**City**

If the beach offers us a border landscape that both divides and unites, attracts and repels, a similar process can happen in a city such as Barcelona, the setting for *Susanna*, a film about an adulterous affair between Alex (Alex Casanova), a married man, and a young woman called Susanna (Eva Santolaria). Out of sight of Alex, but not of us, Susanna is romantically involved with Said (Said Amel), a Moroccan butcher, becoming engaged to him during the course of the film. The film rapidly takes on noirish overtones as Alex is overtaken by an *amour fou*, so *fou* in fact that he is reduced to murdering Susanna. Said takes the rap for the crime, being found with the woman’s blood on his hands, even though he is innocent and distraught at her death. Alex, however, is free to return to his so-called normal life with his wife and newborn child.

Susanna acts as a bridge between the Spanish community and the Moroccan community through her involvement with one man from each. The two communities, however, reveal more similarities than a shared desire of a woman’s body. In particular, we see two celebratory parties held in the same bar, one Spanish, one Moroccan, yet the similarity of the music that is sung suggests a common link. This is an example where the two communities appear to occupy the same space, but not at the same time. The way in which Barcelona is shot, and the fact that the Spanish and Moroccan communities never appear together on screen
(until the very end), suggest a warren of city streets in which people are able to maintain separate identities, a warren that becomes almost a clichéd symbolisation of the protagonist’s confused mind and desires. The two communities never impinge on each other – until Alex murders Susanna. This reminds us of Michel Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia. As Nathan Richardson has said, ‘heterotopias are not merely where other spaces and their meanings simply are remembered, or cohabit, or even fuse. Heterotopias are locations where multiple spaces actually coexist and, without fusing, interact with, contradict, and invert one another’ (Richardson 2002: 129). Linked to Colmeiro’s remarks I quoted earlier, this suggests that the heterotopia of these films is precisely those spaces – concrete spaces – in which the Spanish work out their own double bind towards immigration. The notion of heterotopic space as one of interaction combined with contradiction and inversion suggests Susanna’s movement through a Barcelona in which two different communities coexist within the streets, bars and houses of the city but who do not actually share this space. Only Susanna herself is able to cross from one heterotopic space to another.

This working out of the double-bind that the Spanish feel towards North Africans occurs in the film through the use of melodrama. The mixture of noir and cine social does not disguise the melodramatic thread that traces itself through the film. In Poniente and Ilegal (which I discuss below) the reality of immigration is intertwined with a love story of some sort, usually between Spaniards, but nonetheless Spaniards who have associations with the immigrants; but the melodramatic spectacle serves to keep hidden the possibility of miscegenation.

![Figure 20](Susanna and Said on the outskirts of Barcelona in *Susanna*)
Nonetheless, the possibility is broached in *Bwana* while *Susanna* takes things to a more explicit level through the engagement of Susanna and Said; and Alex participates in this miscegenation at one remove, given his sexual relationship with Susanna. The concerns over miscegenation are expressed in the use of space and place. There are graphic sexual scenes between Alex and Susanna that contrast with the chastity which is insisted on by Said (as he talks to Susanna on the outskirts of Barcelona) (Fig. 20) and policed by his female relatives (who grill Susanna about her past affairs). It is notable that Said’s one gesture towards sex, when he begins to make more intimate sexual moves towards Susanna but then draws back – hinting at the possibility of the ultimate blurring of bodily boundaries – can only occur on the outskirts of Barcelona, while the affair with Alex takes place within the city. In addition, the separate space which Said’s female relatives occupy suggests a rigid demarcation of Moroccan space (from which the men are banished) that contrasts with the interstitial spaces in which Alex and Susanna conduct their affair. Flesler suggests that the scene where the women interrogate Susana is set up to suggest the oriental backdrop and sexist ideas of the women, so that the audience judges these women and not Susanna (Flesler 2004: 111), and this is true to some extent, although we must know from Susanna’s behaviour that they are right to be suspicious. It is also clear, however, that Susanna is intruding into this space, a space demarcated as not Spanish. Flesler further observes that *Susanna* offers a contrast between the progressiveness and sexual freedom of contemporary Spanish women and the conservative ideas of Muslim men: while Susanna is attracted to a Moroccan man the film makes it clear that this is not a natural relationship, since it would involve a rejection of the woman’s ‘true’ identity. But it is also clear that Susanna’s relationship with a Spanish man makes her unhappy, suggesting perhaps that she would prefer a return to traditional gender roles and the benign patriarchal care of a man with traditional values (ibid.: 112). And perhaps there is a desire, too, for demarcated space rather than the border spaces of her relationships: not only the outskirts of Barcelona with Said but the back alleys, among the dustbins, with Alex.

This desire for the reinstatement of conservative values brings us back to the question of melodrama, and its use as a technique whereby Spaniards negotiate the repulsion and desire towards the immigrant. Colmeiro quotes Simonde de Sismondi’s notes of 1813 on Spanish literature:

> Tandis que son essence est tirée de la chevalerie, ses ornements et son langage son empruntés des Asiatiques. Dans la contrée la plus orientale de notre Europe, elle nous fait entendre le langage fleurie et l’imagination fantastique de l’Orient ... alors nous nous trouverons heureux de pouvoir respirer, dans une langage apparenté à la nôtre, les parfums de l’Orient et l’encens de l’Arabie. (quoted in Colmeiro 2002: 131)
While its essential nature is drawn from chivalry, its embellishment and language are taken from Asia. In our Europe's most oriental land, it [Spanish literature] conveys to us the Oriental flowery language and imagination full of fantasy ... so we are happy to be able to breathe in the perfumes of the Orient and the incense of Arabia in a language similar to our own.

This feminised literature (Colmeiro's term) might seem somewhat removed from contemporary Spanish films about immigration, with the emphasis on *cine social*, but the impulse towards melodrama and the *crime passionnel* brings this dangerously back to the feminine again, the position occupied by both the woman and the immigrant. Thus the woman must die and the immigrant must pay, and the film ends with both erased from the picture and Alex reunited with his wife and newborn child, the quintessential Spanish family. Barcelona – itself an icon of coexistence between Catalan native and Spanish immigrant – here becomes a heterotopia in which communities can coexist but which is literally policed to ensure the erasure of the immigrant once again, whose own blurring of boundaries between subject and object, symbolised by sex, can only occur outside the city. At the end of the film Said finally strays into Spanish space, running into the street in his distress at Susanna's murder, and as soon as he does so he is attacked by the Spanish/Catalan community: his arrest and incarceration will ensure his disappearance from the streets of Barcelona. Although much of the film was shot in Catalan, there is no distinct emphasis on Catalan as opposed to Spanish identity, as both identities are opposed to that of North Africa. While Susanna desires the other in Said, and Alex desires Susanna as an alluring border crosser, able to occupy the spaces of the other and thus be figured as other herself, nonetheless they both also feel a pull towards ordered and demarcated spaces wherein they can be acceptable socially; but this fixity in a fluid city space like Barcelona can only be achieved through the death of the woman who leans so perilously towards the other.

**Coast and city**

My final example is *Illegal*, which once more presents the Spanish as subjects and the African immigrants as object, even though the revelation of illegal trafficking in immigrants into Galicia in Northern Spain is ostensibly the point of the story. Luis (Chisco Amado) is a reporter pursuing a story concerning the drowning of illegal immigrants, but in turn he is pursued by the criminal gang in charge of the trafficking of immigrants, who wish to obtain the photos of the immigrants in his possession, kill him and thus put an end to the story: thus Spaniard confronts Spaniard over the body of the immigrant – to be precise, that of the one immigrant who has survived, but who for much of the film remains hidden and thus invisible. Luis himself only survives by having recourse to the
immigrant community in Vigo, who retain the clue to the mystery but also offer shelter. And in that shelter Luis and Sofía (Lucía Jiménez) – a private detective who is tracking Luis but who comes to collaborate with him in solving the crime – encounter Moroccan culture in the form of a religious ceremony and later a Moroccan communal meal which the Moroccans invite the Spaniards to share. Sofía even perforce dresses in a Moroccan shirt when her own gets splattered by the blood of the lamb that was killed to make the meal, a form of ritual baptism into another culture for her.

_Ilegal_ offers a variety of landscapes, including the beach once more; but the first beach we see is a Moroccan beach that is policed by potential immigrants and where Luis is clearly trespassing and unwanted. The first shots of the film emphasise a beach where we see traces of immigrants but strangely enough a lack of their presence – the empty boat, the washed up clothes, but no people, no bodies (Fig. 21). Later, Luis visits the Moroccan beach to try to find out about the traffic in immigrants, and he finds a beach littered with both rubbish (rather like the beach of _Poniente_) and humans, so that once again we find that beaches are for Africans marginal spaces of detritus. The film ends by the sea as well, but now we are firmly on Galician soil, and gradually the Moroccans are edged out of the picture both literally and figuratively, as the surviving immigrant dies and the film in its climactic moments focuses on Spaniard against Spaniard once again. The two beaches of the film illustrate how melodrama displaces the immigrant: in the opening shots of the Moroccan beach we find Luis with his guide María (Vicenta N’Dongo), a Moroccan singer who nonetheless shows no signs of fixity (she sings in English and Portuguese, and in the car of the opening sequences she switches the radio channel from Arabic music, selected

![Figure 21](image_url)
by her lover Durán (Chete Lera), to Western pop). The scene initially suggests a romantic day by the sea for Luis and María, but no: this is strictly business, and the couple are colleagues and friends but no more. The melodrama is reserved for Galicia, as Luis and Sofía fight for the film of the immigrants on the beach, for it is this film that Sofía has been hired to recover. They tussle on the beach only to dissolve into kissing in the style of *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinneman, 1953) (Fig. 22). The romance, and not the fought-over film, is the focal point, the image of Spaniards and not Moroccans. The two beaches in tandem nonetheless make visible the ambivalent relationship of Spain to north Africa in that Luis is impelled to visit the Moroccan beach in the first place because the root of the story lies with the Africans and that is what attracts him. María’s presence as a potential sexual interest, even if this possibility is never taken up, traces the notion of sexual desire for the other across the beach as well. But if the Moroccan beach lays bare the attraction of the Spanish towards North Africa, the Galician beach – as far away from Africa as one could possibly get within Spain – covers over this attraction, re-figuring the beach as a site of sexual encounter only for Spaniards.

The film also offers us cityscapes, shots of Santiago and Vigo and, like Barcelona, these are city spaces in which Africans are hardly visible: Luis and Sofía must go to hidden places within Vigo to locate the immigrant community. In the case of both cities the director includes a long shot of the city at night: Shields (1991: 220) quotes Andrew Higson’s argument that the long shot of the city suggests distance and thus authorship (in all senses), but the long shot disavows the distance by making the city a spectacle to be gazed at. What is useful for us to consider here is that these two spectacular shots (again, in all

![Figure 22](image-url)
Immigration

senses) contain hidden within them the mystery that links Spaniard to African. The shot of Santiago’s cathedral introduces us to the sequence in which Luis takes refuge, with his film of the immigrants, from his pursuers: a quintessential emblem of Spanish Catholicism becomes a site of shelter for the image of the African but also a way in which to conceal it. In the chase sequence around the cathedral between Luis and his pursuers for that image, the actual image is rendered invisible in favour of the sight/site of the cathedral. The nighttime long shot of Vigo, too, suggests distance in contrast to the passage of Luis and Sofía to the heart of Vigo and to its Moroccan community hidden on the margins of Vigo street life. The Vigo long shot comes immediately after the scenes in which Luis and Sofía kiss on the beach, which, as we have seen, show a landscape denuded of Africans: this double distancing allows a parallel distance from Africans even as the Spanish couple successfully conclude their search to find them. The distancing effect of the long shot is contrasted by the labyrinthine paths that Luis must take through both cities to discover what he needs to know: in Vigo, indeed, he and Sofía must go through its sewers in their quest to find the missing African. The combination of long shot and labyrinth offers the possibility of attraction towards – hunting for – the African and yet a move to distancing even as the couple home in on their goal.

Illegal revolves around a quest for images, the images of the immigrants aboard the boat that, if released, will expose the illegal traffic in immigrants. In the end, however, the closing credits roll as the tapes with their valuable footage, revealing the violence and exploitation of Spaniard against immigrant, sink to the bottom of the sea to embed themselves in the very depths of Spanish territory: once again the immigrant becomes invisible while touching Spanish soil. In contrast to Jaume Balagueró’s and Paco Plaza’s film REC (2007), in which the camera’s act of looking is all that survives at the end of the film, beyond the human, this film ironically asks us in the end to dispense with the need of looking. The recorded image of the Africans is not, ultimately, used to highlight the deaths of immigrants but ironically to preserve the life of a Spaniard: the film casing (and not the image) blocks the bullet intended for Sofía. And, not surprisingly, the image is in the hands of the Spanish, Luis and Sofía. However we may wish to perceive the Africans, they are always mediated by the Spanish – framed, in the dual meaning of the word.

The subtitle to this chapter, ‘north (of) Africa’, with its brackets, suggests, I like to think, the double bind of Spaniards highlighted by Colmeiro: a fear that it might itself be thought of as a continuation of Africa (rather than Africa being a continuation of Spain, as suggested in Spain’s retention of the Moroccan towns of Ceuta and Melilla). The word ‘of’ in brackets suggests the tension of trying to maintain a separate identity, controlling the land and the image, while
nonetheless drawing on North Africa in terms both of cultural roots and of an agricultural labour force. These films are the end films about Spaniards, and the immigrant is a fleeting trace on screen – a tension which the Spanish landscape embodies. But if these films are about Spaniards, they are about Spaniards trying to work out the problematic between self and other through space. Victor Burgin quotes Julia Kristeva, who says that ‘To live with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility … of being an other’ (Burgin 1996: 119). Burgin himself notes, following her comment, ‘to encounter the other in one’s own space is to confront one’s own alterity to that other’s space’ (ibid.). But if the beach acts as a form of Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space’, where people are neither outside nor inside but connected to both (see Crang 1998: 171), the city acts differently, wherein there are defined and demarcated spaces where immigrants can go – if only then to make themselves visible – but where the Spanish may roam freely. Or, as in Ilegal, it becomes an oscillation between entry into the labyrinthine heart and long shot distance which prefigures the oscillating attraction and denial of Spaniard towards African.

As Shields says,

Margins, then, while a position of exclusion, can also be a position of power and critique. They expose the relativity of the entrenched, universalising values of the centre, and expose the relativism of cultural identities which imply their shadow figures of every characteristic they have denied, rendered ‘anomalous’ or excluded. (Shields 1991: 277)

While these landscapes may serve to erase the immigrant from the screen, nonetheless they also suggest the ever present possibility of the immigrant’s return, the return of the Spanish other; and thus, like the shifting sands of the beach, expose the frailties of identities thought of as specifically Spanish. Such identities are always drawn back to the margin and risk shifting and collapsing, like the beach itself. Spain as a dream of presence always in the process of becoming is made manifest as the characters move through the different spaces and places in a reflection of the fluctuation between fear and desire of the other. The African other is constantly erased from the landscape, so only Spaniards can be seen, yet the Spanish remain haunted by the dangers and the possibilities of a close historical and geographical connection that opens them out to the erasure of their own Spanishness. This call to care is often expressed in very malign ways, yet its constant repetition suggests the ever present undoing of a secure Spanish identity on Spanish soil: thus the call to care is never ending. Its perpetual desire to ensure that Spain remains Spain in turn acknowledges the underlying reality that Spain is never fully and completely Spain.
Notes

1 Nair is talking about cities, but her point applies to the coast, particularly since the city she is primarily discussing, Barcelona, is itself coastal.

2 I am grateful to the audience of an earlier seminar paper I gave at University College London (which contributed to this chapter) for pointing this out to me.

3 Uribe notes that this scene was added simply to pad a film that was otherwise rather short (Aguirresarobe 2004: 173).