Death of a Cyclist (Muerte de un ciclista)

In Brief

Juan is an academic, his career stalled, teaching at the university because of his brother-in-law’s prestige. María José is a socialite, married to wealth, bored but attached to her comforts. The two are lovers. On an isolated country road, their car strikes a cyclist; fearing exposure, they leave him to die. Distracted, Juan unjustly fails a student. Rafa, a bitter savant in their social circle, hints that he knows something, and he threatens to expose them to María José’s husband, Miguel. Miguel’s pride may be the lovers’ best hope. Then Juan proposes a solution.

Spain | 1955 | 88 minutes

A bicyclist rides up an empty road in the evening. Just as he passes the horizon and disappears out of sight, there is a crash. A motorcar comes swerving into view and stops, its tires screeching. A man and a woman emerge and go to the downed biker. The man says the cyclist is still alive, but the woman, who was driving, urges him back into the car. They speed away, leaving the crash victim where he lay.

This is the opening of Juan Antonio Bardem’s entertaining, suspenseful 1955 film Death of a Cyclist. There is no fuss, we are right in it.

As it turns out, the woman, María José (Lucía Bose), is married, and not to the man in the car. Juan (Alberto Closas) was her sweetheart before the war, but she married a rich man (Otello Toso) before he could return. Now they are lovers in secret, and helping the man they ran down would expose the adultery. This may not be that big of a deal for Juan, because he has nothing. Even his job as an assistant professor at the university was secured for him by his brother-in-law. María José, on the other hand, has plenty to lose. She enjoys her high-society existence, and even dares to suggest that it’s her marriage that makes her affair with Juan possible. She doesn’t say it outright, but the implication is clear: there is no romance in poverty.

Bardem’s film is a little like a Spanish version of Renoir’s Rules of the Game. Juan and María José are part of a class system that allows them to leave a man of lesser standing to die on the pavement. It’s significant that the travelers are on the road going in two opposite directions, one in an expensive machine and the other on a simpler device. The bicyclist was likely returning home from work, and María was in a hurry so that she would not be late for her own dinner party. The division could not be more clear.

Really, the entire film is about divisions. Though the story is a rather standard murder plot, Bardem is using the pair’s act of callous disregard as an excuse to extend a larger social critique. Lines are drawn in multiple instances to show the gulf between the common people and Spain’s upper crust. The overcrowded tenement where the dead man lived is nothing like the large houses where his killers reside. Juan’s lack of success is in stark contrast to his brother-in-law and María José’s husband, Miguel. There is also a marked difference between the young and the old, between Juan and his students, particularly Matilde (Bruna Corrà). Matilde has the misfortune of giving her oral exam when Juan sees the report of the hit-and-run in the newspaper, and instead of acknowledging that her assignment was halted by his own panic and not anything she did wrong, he flunks her. Her quiet crusade to achieve some kind of redress ends up being the catalyst for Juan’s moral transformation. He is inspired not just by the passion Matilde evokes in her fellow students, but also by the compassion she shows him. Even though she is the one who has been wronged, she intimates that there is some kind of turmoil in Juan and would just as soon see it resolved as have her rightful grade restored.

From a filmmaking standpoint, Bardem and editor Margarita Ochoa show the criss-crossing interests...
camera would seem to be a local villager on the outskirts of the town. Implicitly, by breaking the magical invisibility of classic cinema, the would-be spectator is not invited to identify with this look but left rather in the uncomfortable position of an anticipating film viewer still awaiting the moment of suture. In light of this separation, it is significant that the spectator stands just beyond the town sign, explicitly a member of the community of Villar del Río, but implicitly empowered with an outsider’s awareness of that community as yet an object of the cinematic gaze. Hence, before the spectator meets Villar’s people and places-its signified—, she sees (literally) Villar’s sign post-or signifier—and thereby recognizes Villar as such...

Berlanga’s film, then, is not simply about a disappointing non-encounter, nor a film about changing concepts of respective nations, but ultimately, a film about the changing concept of the nation itself. The nation could not continue as before because the technologies through which it had once been imagined had changed. Berlanga’s film does not suggest that Spain would disappear, nor that it would become one homogenous Andalucía, nor another US colony. Change would appear more subtly but its effects would finally be more profound. After all, at the conclusion of the film Villar del Río returns to its farming roots, just as citizens of the global era so often flock to ethnic roots for security from “Marshall-izing” motorcades. Nevertheless, tapping back into those roots now costs the villagers, just as sustaining “authentic” identities against encroaching global cultural forces requires economic capital. And while, as the film’s fairy tale conclusion, “colorín colorado este cuento se ha acabado,” affirms the right of all to keep dreaming, the fact remains that Villar del Río still lacks a railroad—the means for the common citizens to move beyond their community and do more than imagine themselves in other possible communities. As in our own global work, while the villagers are stuck, foreign delegates at various levels blow in and out of town, raising and then dashing hope, promising prosperity but delivering only more—and now more self-consciously felt—poverty (see Friedman 112-42; Harvey 59-72 for contemporary comparisons). The debate over the film’s ending continues today. Is it hopeful? Is it terribly pessimistic? One might argue that Berlanga finally adopts a rather postmodernist or globalist position: resigned, if playfully so. As writers from David Harvey to Thomas Friedman have remarked, many of the processes of globalization simply cannot be reversed (Harvey 85; Friedman xxii). The community we inhabit can no longer be imagined as it once was. Moreover, the subject who imagines is each day less a citizen and more a consumer and spectator. Nevertheless, awareness of the nature of the spaces we inhabit and of the technologies that shape these spaces into imagined communities can facilitate discovery of possible strategies for remaking those spaces. For all its playfulness and, finally, resignation, ¡Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall!, at least produces a degree of awareness that combines with its playful critique to open the door to potential agency in the struggle to participate in the reshaping of a now postnational community. Perhaps in this empowering lays the remarkable staying power of Berlanga’s film.

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