CLASSICISM AND EROTICISM IN SPAIN, 1956:
FEDRA BY M. MUR OTI

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El origen clásico elimina algunas dificultades morales del tema.
Actitud reprendible que en todo momento se condena. El
vestuario de la protagonista resulta inadecuado, inconveniente y
excesivamente provocativo ... Mayores con reparos.¹
M. Marías, Manuel Mur Oti ..., 117.

Within the complicated Spanish cinematographic scene in the 1950s
there appears the figure of Manuel Mur Oti, a Galician director difficult to
classify according to the main tendencies that defined the film production of
this period². A significant series of films was devoted to promote, in a more
or less overt way, certain values related to the prevailing Francoist ideology
and was characterized by a strong nationalist and religious strain. The
second group statistically speaking is formed by those films we could label as
conformist because they tried to escape from a harsh reality by means of
non-committal and evasive subjects. A considerable number of them
included popular folk music topics as the background for the star appearance
of one of the famous singers in those days. Finally, some particular films
stand out from the rest in their attempt to break Spain’s international
isolation thanks to the courage of young directors like L. Garcia Berlanga or
J. A. Bardem, whose works showed the unquestionable legacy of Italian
neorealism.

Our director does not easily fit into any of these three tendencies,
which only serves to stress the singularity of his personal career and the
exceptional significance of his work. As a result, both aspects have been
increasingly acknowledged, and this recognition has repaired the undeserved

¹ "Its classical origin eliminates some of the moral difficulties of the theme, an understandable attitude
that is condemned all the time. The protagonist's clothes are inadequate, inconvenient, and excessively
provocative -Adults only, with some reservations."

² The major movements in film production that could be identified at that time are defined in Monterde
José Enrique, “Continismo y disidencia (1951-1962), in Gubern, Román et al, Historia del cine español,
Madrid, Signo e Imagen, 2000, 181-239.
oblivion he suffered in his late years. A brief portrait would show us a man with wide intellectual and creative interests although with just a few tangible results despite his intense activity in all disciplines, especially as regards his literary production. He published poems and articles in Spain and Spanish America, staged several theater plays, and became a finalist for the Nadal Award with his only novel to date, Destino negro. Being already immersed in his creative pursuit he got in contact with the cinematographic medium when he started to work as a scriptwriter, which was the springboard for his subsequent work as a director. In his early stage he enjoyed an absolute success and his films’ premières became great events surrounded by the same expectancy that also preceded his participation in film festivals and press interviews. Such acknowledgment was symbolized by the epithet attached to his name, Mur Oti the Genius. The peak of his career was precisely marked by the opening of his film Fedra, which became the greatest box-office sensation in 1956. However, his trajectory as a film director began to decline, and he fell back into the second rank of the Spanish cinematographic scene. Nonetheless, we can keep track of his productions until the mid-1970s, when he combined his filmic work with frequent collaborations in the Spanish Television, an activity that came to be his sole occupation.

Not many films have dealt with the myth of Phaedra and, curiously enough, the best achievement in this regard from my point of view was achieved in Spain when the moral and political guidelines of Francoism were probably not the most suitable background for the screening and acclamation of a story about a woman in love with her husband’s son, a passion that was inescapably doomed to a foregone final tragedy. Among the classical

3 The director is portrayed in Marías, Miguel, “Mur Oti, Manuel”, in Borau, José Luis (dir.), Diccionario del cine español, Academia de las Artes y la Ciencias Cinematográficas de España, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1998, 614-615.

4 This appears in the book published after a film season in his honor organized by the Portuguese Cinemateca in May 1992 and by the Spanish Filmoteca two months later. Marías, Miguel, Manuel Mur Oti. Las raíces del drama, Lisboa, Edición de la Cinemateca Portuguesa y de la Filmoteca Española, 1992, 9-42.

sources available for gathering material, Mur Otis’s preferred inspiration was the philosopher and writer Seneca, born in Cordoba - one of the most important cities in Roman Hispania. This is not a trivial circumstance in any way since it ensured the execution of his enterprise by validating an uncomfortable story in the eyes of censorship and of the prevailing postulates.  

One of the strategies for transforming a theatrical tragedy onto the screen is setting the action at a point in time closer to the moment of its filming. This is what the Galician director did, with the aim of bringing the myth nearer to the audience without refusing to underline its classical origin and the atemporal dimension that he wanted to achieve with his production.  

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6 In order to understand this contradictory situation it is very enlightening to have a look at the commentary that evaluates the film on the title page of this essay.

7 At the beginning of the film the camera shows a still shot of the sea while a voice-over recites the following lines as a kind of foreword: Esta tragedia es tan vieja como el Mar Latino. Hija del mito, rueda por el mundo desde que Eolo movió el primer grano de arena, o azuzó los caballos de una nube sin hermana en el cielo. Todas las caracolas la cantan incansables en su rumor sin pausa. Para aquellos que no entiendan la palabra eterna del mar, nos asomaremos a una playa cualquiera del Levante español. Los hombres y las cosas han cambiado, pero el amor, el deseo, el pecado y la muerte siguen teniendo el prestigio dramático y bello de los siglos de Ulises. Como el mar y el viento, como el sol y el cielo, como lo eterno (Trans.: “This tragedy is as old as the Roman sea. Daughter of the myth, she goes round the world since Aeolus moved the first grain of sand, or incited the horses of a sisterless cloud in the sky. All conches sing of her in their unceasing murmur. For those who do not understand the eternal words of the
Yet, in his modernization of the classical tragedy, he did not change much of the original storyline, its key characters, or the chorus’s covert though recurrent incursions. In spite of respecting the tragedy’s general contours, some of its elements had to be necessarily adapted to the specific context in which the action took place, a fictitious small seaboard town at the Mediterranean seaside named Aldor, whose inhabitants take on the role of a new chorus that constantly interacts with the protagonists. More concretely, the siblings Vicente and Rosa are the chorus’s members that, for various reasons, participate in a more active way in the development of the events.

The names and portrayals of the characters that configure the love triangle are different from those used by the Cordovan playwright. Thus, the hero Theseus becomes a shipmaster of Northern origin called Juan. Phaedra is Estrella, an innocent girl full of strength and personality who lives with her father and remains physically and emotionally isolated from the rest of the people. Finally, Hippolytus turns into Fernando, an attractive youth forced by circumstances to stay with his progenitor although he longs for the opportunity to leave town. These latter two characters will turn out to be the main agents in the unfolding of the plot, and they will generate a number of amorous situations -all of them perfectly handled by Mur Oti- whose daring

*sea, we will have a look at any beach in the Spanish East. Men and things have changed, but love, desire, sin, and death still retain the beautiful dramatic prestige they had in Ulysses’s time. Just like the sea and the wind, the sun and the sky, like eternal things do.* :)

presentation within their Spanish context constitutes the basis for the following considerations.

In the backdrop of one of the many villages that abound along the Spanish Mediterranean coastline, Estrella-Phaedra clearly stands out amid men devoted to the sailors’ chores and women who take care of fishing equipment. This beautiful girl lives on a nearby promontory looking after her blind father, and every time she goes to town men unashamedly overwhelm her with all kinds of offers. Especially Vicente, the wealthiest man in town, tries to persuade her by promising her every sort of presents and vows, and he does not hesitate to use his advantageous financial status in order to subjugate Estrella’s unyielding, resolute will. Everybody in town thinks she is arrogant and supercilious because she does not yield to the proposals of any of her many suitors. Paradoxically, it is the women who are especially aggressive with one of their kind who become noticeable by reason of her clothes and her different behaviors, like stringing necklaces of seashells or swimming freely in the sea. They envy the girl’s behavior and attitude and regard them as a latent danger for her family situation. On the other hand, Estrella’s position towards this manifest hostility is that of feigning her unconcern, so that she just yearns for a remote place where she could flee with her father and find a future more promising than the one that awaits her in such a claustrophobic environment. This character can be clearly distinguished against the background of the other women not only because her daily activities and her attitude contravene the rules of expected behavior but also because, as we can see from the first images of the film, her physical appearance is already special. The majority of the women lives and dresses in accordance with the occupation of their husbands or other male relatives —like in the case of Rosa, Vicente’s sister. Their bodies are concealed under loose clothes, mostly black except for the sporadic note of color of some apron. Likewise, their hair is hidden by a scarf and sometimes they also wear a broad-brimmed hat that protects them from the merciless sun of the Mediterranean coast. In contrast, Estrella’s attire does not match this standard outfit whatsoever. She walks barefoot and wears light dresses, colorful and patterned, that insinuate her youthful and exuberant feminine shape. Moreover, she does not abstain from walking along the shoreline with her hair down, a visible metaphor of her self-determination facing social conventions. She puts on her scarf only when she has to come into contact
with civilization, like when she goes to Vicente’s shop to try to sell her necklaces.

Her suggestive feminine figure does not only become manifest when she calmly walks on the beach and just plays with the waves, but it acquires a greater importance when she openly interacts with the sea itself. One of the most erotic moments of the film visibly illustrates this affirmation. On one occasion, she is on a small boat and sees in the distance a fishing boat she does not recognize, so she decides to swim nearer out of curiosity. She accepts the captain’s invitation to come aboard and her appearance awakens a general admiration, especially on the captain’s part. While she is answering his questions, she climbs up the prow and there, as if she had become a figurehead, her seemingly innocent posture stirs the desire of all of those who witness the scene. Her body’s voluptuousness is accentuated by the wet clothes that tightly cling to her figure. Once her curiosity is satisfied after this brief excursion, the mermaid-like Estrella returns to sea and swims away from the strangers’ ship.

Just like Estrella does not quite conform to this village scenario, Fernando does not find his place in the small seaside town either. He is the son of Juan, a shipmaster returning from a long trip, who is forced to remain in Aldor for the time some damages in his boats are being repaired. Then Juan meets and falls in love with Estrella and consequently decides to stay there until she accedes to his proposal. That is the merely circumstantial
reason why Fernando ends up arriving at this place. Therefore, this character comes from a completely different environment to that of the little town, where he constantly feels uncomfortable and from which he unsuccessfully asks his father for permission to escape. A fundamental aspect of his personality coincides with the classical model: his disinterest towards women and, conversely, his generous devotion to his horses. One day when Estrella is strolling on the beach as usual, she sees Fernando with a group of horses and gets infatuated with that handsome boy who looks so unlike those other men who harass her. From this moment on, she will ineffectively try to catch his attention by all manner of means while regretting that he is devoted to his animals instead of to her. The climax of her emotional spiral comes when, after repeated failures to attract the youth, she decides to accept his father’s marriage proposal with the only aim of being closer to her beloved.

Within the Spanish context it was inconceivable to explicitly present the homosexuality of a character on the screen. The issue was also controversial in the rest of the world but for different reasons. Nonetheless, Mur Oti did not refrain from facing this challenge, nor did he deform the message excessively in order to overcome the objections and problems that he would undoubtedly encounter. With his great intelligence, he chose to obscure the compromising situation with some veils that the classical author himself had already suggested, yet still revealing at the same time Fernando’s lack of interest towards females. In addition, he had a most evident justification for the boy’s repeated opposition to Estrella’s invitations: the impossibility of any love contact since she is his father’s wife.

This last aspect, though useful for the director’s intention to mask a problematic reality, could lead to misunderstanding for that part of the audience that ignored the authentic issue underlying the outward show.\(^8\) However, the careful spectator can shed his doubts if he pays attention to

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\(^8\) Besides observing these tricks to suggest Fernando-Hypopolitus’s condition as they appear in the film, we can read how the director explicitly mentions them in the interviews collected in the book Torres, Augusto M., Cineastas insólitos. Conversaciones con directores, productores y guionistas españoles, Madrid, Nuer Ediciones, 2000, 126: El señor Séneca, el señor Sófocles y el señor Eurípides dijeron, y quien no lo dijo lo dio a entender, que no había sacrificado a Venus. Y yo me limité a seguir lo que estos señores habían escrito. Todo el mundo conoce la condición humana de Hipólito. Yo, para afeminar más al personaje, para subrayar su condición femenina tuve que teñirle el pelo de un rubio casi claro, casi oro.
the way Fernando dresses all through the film. On first meeting Estrella on the beach, he wears a pair of jeans, an unusual garment for that setting, but maybe only an allusion to the youth’s urban origins. What is most conspicuous and unambiguous from the beginning is the actor Vicente Parra’s golden dyed hair, a change that foreign audiences may not realize, but that Spanish viewers who had known the actor for years would not fail to notice. In front of the church after the wedding ceremony, Fernando’s white suit makes him the most eye-catching attendee. And the most unarguable and eloquent example is the scene when, after the breaking of the storm that announces the impending tragedy, Fernando arrives at the docks to welcome his father’s boat. He has a wide and visible scarf round his neck that the storm’s wind waves in an insistent, and even premonitory, way.

At a time when Spain had still to bear the consequences of its international isolation although it began to see the first signs of opening towards the rest of the world, Mur Oti’s creative trajectory as a film director does not belong with any of the dominant trends in Spanish film-making formerly mentioned. It was in 1956 when he completed this film, described by a critic as a brave project and, probably, the Galician director’s most well-balanced one.\(^9\) Besides the challenge of choosing such an unconventional theme as a story based on an ancient tragedy, his courage lies in the way

\(^9\) This is M. Marías’s opinion in the analysis he devotes to Mur Oti in the book edited after the film seasons in Lisboa and Madrid. Marías, Miguel, *Manuel Mur Oti ...*, 115.
the film becomes a transgressive work. This is a necessary qualification for Mur Oti’s decision not to approach the storyline from a doctrinaire or prudish perspective, but instead to take the script and its images to the threshold of what was tolerable in that historical context. The love scenes are charged with intense eroticism without being as explicit as other coetaneous foreign films or later pictures. An underlying shade of sensuality surfaces on numerous occasions, a sensuality that surrounds the main characters in the tragedy and that is particularly visible in the physical appearance of Estrella, played by the recently deceased actress Emma Penella.

The camera continually lingers upon the close-ups of Estrella and Fernando in order to allow the viewer to realize the attractive potential both of them possess, even in tense situations. For example, we can see it in the scene when a resolute Estrella decides to take her chance, asking Fernando to elope with her wherever he wants; whereas he, blinded by rage, starts to whip her with his riding crop. Another highly erotic moment takes place...

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10 In an interview the director talked about his casting this actress for the role of Estrella: “Emma está más bella que nunca, más hermosa que nunca, mejor retratada que nunca y más en su papel que cualquier otra actriz. Entonces Emma era muy joven, tenía una asombrosa belleza virginal ...”. Torres, Augusto M., Cineastas insólitos ..., 126.

11 A recent essay selects this scene as a very significant illustration of Mur Oti’s personality, with the following words: “... siempre a los límites de lo decible, Mur Oti era capaz de colar a la censura un producto de exacerbado erotismo como Fedra (1956), en la que un homosexualizado Vicente Parra...”
when the father puts to sea after the short period of cohabitation that follows the wedding, and Estrella and Fernando are left alone at home for the first time. Her incipient though insistent insinuations during that stifling night made them go outside, in what represents Fernando’s attempt to flee. At the seaside, where Estrella feels she can do as she pleases, heat and moisture cause their bodies to sweat so that she invites him to swim. He refuses, and meanwhile we can perceive the background notes of a flamenco song that verbalizes the claustrophobic situation both characters are experiencing.  

Although the director intended to convey to the audience the bodily appeal of both performers -two of the most well-known of the decade-, his tactics are not completely similar in each case. Estrella’s beauty derives from the spontaneous voluptuousness of her movements, like someone who does not realize her physical attributes and shows them without much modesty. She is a girl endowed by nature, permanently interacting with her natural surroundings with the only intermeddling of her light clothes. This clothing represents an indispensable minimal concession to prudence, but it does not hinder Estrella’s dialogue with nature nor does it resemble the oppressive social conventions that the rest of the women have entirely complied with. Fernando’s attractiveness is of a different kind. The beauty of his face complements his manners of a refined man, unlike the predominant rural conduct in Aldor that homogenizes all its inhabitants. His refinement is obvious through his way of dressing and behaving and through his lack of affinity with that place he is hoping to leave, a desire that he shares with Estrella although her obsessive longing has different roots. Also significant is his utter indifference towards the girl, who then feels even more interested and desirous.

12 This renowned song says: Ni contigo ni sin ti tienen mis males remedio, contigo porque me matas, sin ti porque yo me muero.
We have to give Mur Oti due credit for his ability to successfully circumvent the tortuous obstacles of censorship thanks to the halo of classicism that the inspirational tragedy provided. Otherwise, we would not have this excellent film today. At any rate, the film had to pay a small price to the contextual circumstances of its age. In a recent interview the director explains that his only contact with censorship took place when, after finishing this film, they asked him to eliminate the final scene where Estrella commits suicide. He remembers how he insisted upon the fact that in every classical version, Phaedra ends up committing suicide and that he could not amend the work of ancient playwrights; and he describes how a priest, whom he qualifies as intelligent, just replied that he trusted the director and counted on the rectification of his decision about this issue. As a result, he had no other choice but to substitute the suicide attempt with an accidental and unexpected fall down a sea cliff near the lighthouse, when a terrified Estrella is moving backwards to escape from the persecution of the angry village women. Despite all this, there was still a post-censorship inspection that

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13 Film critic M. Marias explains this film’s values in the following praising terms: Fedra demuestra que, a condición de saber algo acerca de la cuestión y tener alguna idea de cómo expresarlo cinematográficamente, además de ser capaz de dirigir en ese sentido a los actores, era posible hacer una película auténticamente cargada de erotismo y fundada en el deseo, con censura y todo. Marias, Miguel, Manuel Mur Oti ..., 121.

14 Mur Oti interviewed in the abovementioned book Torres, Augusto M., Cineastas insólitos ..., 125.
intervened on certain occasions. The film was released with a different ending, because in the earliest version Estrella raised the boy’s head for a second, kissed him in the mouth before his father’s eyes, and then ultimately drowned with him into the depths of the sea.

It may seem paradoxical, but after the transposition of the storyline to a contemporaneous setting, Mur Otis’s film is still faithful to the classical work that was its inspiration. The director’s purpose was precisely to underline its timelessness by emphasizing some of the themes that Seneca had already presented. On the one hand, we find the power of human passion as the driving force behind the events, and its everlasting vigor through the ups and downs of history. On the other hand, we should bear in mind the possible existence of fate and predestination as the conditioning influences on individual life that seem to inevitably lead to the final tragedy. Finally, the film also captures the significance and determination of those feminine feelings that are able to provoke unexpected consequences. Yet, we should never forget that all this discourse and the strategies Mur Oti employed to depict it were framed by the Spanish context of 1956 and involved a great boldness on the director’s part. He, a man of restless personality, knew of all the hindrances he would face when embarking on this project but, nonetheless, he overcame every stumbling block and elaborated a masterpiece that can compete in artistic value with the work of the artist with whom Mur Oti most identified himself, a poet.

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15 The director also mentions this issue: Creo que en los años de su estreno, los obispados tenían derecho a efectuar lo que podría llamarse una poscensura, de acuerdo con lo que ellos creían conveniente, conociendo la altura cultural o la correcta preparación moral de sus feligreses. Y es posible que de este modo cayera el final de Fedra ... Es una cosa breve, pero importante, que se ha perdido, pero espero que aparezca. Torres, Augusto M., Cineastas insólitos ..., 125.
Bibliography


