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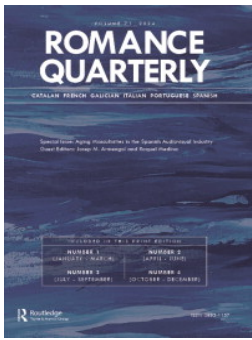
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Aging, Masculinity, and Ecology: Celso Bugallo's Multiple Insurgencies in *Cenizas del cielo*

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ABSTRACT

Environmental drama film *Cenizas del cielo* (2008), set in a polluted area of the otherwise idyllic North-western region of Asturias, was internationally saluted as Spain's first explicitly ecologist film. While most studies have focused on its environmentalist theme, the film presents additional thematic complexities, such as the progressive depopulation of fast-aging rural Spain, the challenges of growing old as a lonesome man in a traditional, patriarchal community, and generational frictions between older peasants and younger environmental activists. In *Cenizas del cielo*, Galician-born actor Celso Bugallo embodies the complex intersections between aging, masculinity, and ecology. He plays the combative character of Federico, a local farmer in his sixties who lost his wife to the pollutants of a nearby power plant. In his determination to see the plant closed, this rebellious character clashes with numerous opponents, such as workers of the power plant, local authorities and even some of his own small-village neighbors. A living metaphor of an aging but defiant *España vaciada*, Bugallo's character is studied in this paper as the site of multiple insurgencies.

KEYWORDS

Spanish cinema; aging; masculinity; environmental cinema

Aging, Masculinity, and Ecology in Spanish Cinema

During the Transition years, Spanish fiction cinema underwent a significant transformation in its representation of the human body, resulting in an unprecedented emphasis on the spectacularization of the female body. In the 1990s, the cinematic landscape shifted once again, this time placing a renewed focus on the portrayal of the male body. A young generation of male actors, including renowned figures such as Javier Bardem, Eduardo Noriega, Jordi Mollà, and Jorge Sanz, emerged during this period. These actors effectively embodied the profound shifts taking place in masculinity and gender relations within Spanish society. As feminism and LGBTIQ+ topics gained prominence in social and political discussions, these actors became symbols of the changing cultural landscape, bringing to life the evolving dynamics of gender in their performances. As examined in monographic studies such as Perriam (2003) and Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito (2007), male characters in the 1990s introduced new avenues of cinematic representation that had been previously rarely explored or predominantly associated with female characters. These studies shed light on the groundbreaking nature of male portrayals during this period, demonstrating the expansion of cinematic possibilities and challenging traditional gender roles in Spanish fiction cinema. New male characters in the 1990s ventured into a diverse range of relatively unconventional themes, including, among others, the portrayal of the nude male body, homosexuality, gendered migration, and disability.

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This trend of broadening the thematic scope and adopting innovative representational approaches, initiated in the 1990s, persisted into the early years of the 21st century. It mirrored the growing societal interest in transformative gender and sexuality issues. A society grappling with a profound crisis, marked by the traumatic realization of the repercussions of the new world order in the aftermath of the 11 March 2004 Madrid bomb attacks, and subsequently enduring a more severe economic and financial recession compared to other European countries from 2008 onwards, engendered novel modes of representing the male body. These representations not only reflected a crisis of masculinity but also raised fundamental questions regarding the underlying assumptions that had previously supported prevailing notions of masculinity. Throughout the prolonged crisis that encompassed the second decade of the century, a notable overarching trend in Spanish cinema was the emergence of greater diversity in the portrayal of male bodies and the modes of their representation on screen. This shift moved away from perpetuating stereotypes traditionally associated with the healthy, young, and virile man as the default model, as well as the idiosyncratic models embodied in previous decades by Alfredo Landa, José Luis López Vázquez or Arturo Fernández. Undoubtedly, contemporary Spanish cinema has witnessed a substantial evolution in the understanding of masculinity, encompassing a broader spectrum of representations that challenge and transcend the conventional notion of aggressive and dominant masculinity. Instead, non-hegemonic, subaltern, and alternative forms of masculinity have found their place within audiovisual industries, contributing to a more complex and multifaceted exploration of gender identity. Influenced by wider trends in social media and reality TV, received images such as the muscular man continue to hold their position within Spanish cinema, as exemplified by the sensationalized portrayal of Mario Casas and his well-built physique in films such as *Tres metros sobre el cielo* (Molina 2010) or *Toro* (Maíllo 2016). Yet, alongside these conventional representations of the male body, which often serve as pointers of hegemonic masculinity, there has been a notable emergence of alternative bodies in films that delve into the visual repositories of the transitioning body (Almodóvar 2011), the aging body (Ferrerías 2011), or a wide range of non-conforming bodies (Casanova 2017).

While older male characters have always had a presence in Spanish cinema, a notable trend that has become more apparent in the 21st century is the specific attention given to aging and ageism as thematic elements. This trend involves the exploration of the so-called *tercera edad* in Spanish cinema, as well as the examination of gendered experiences of aging. Influential and award-winning films such as *El abuelo* (García 1998), *Solas* (Zambrano 1999), or *Amic/amat* (Pons 1999) paved the way for this exploration in more recent films such as *La vida empieza hoy* (Mañá 2010), *Mientras dure la guerra* (Amenábar 2019), or *Viejos* (Cerezo and Gómez 2022). With a renewed interest in non-hegemonic masculinities and gender representations that defy stereotypes, older male characters have gained more visibility in a cinema focused on crises and post-crisis narratives, which delve into themes of vulnerability and diversity. However, it has been observed that the cinematic presence of older people is “scarce and not representative of Spanish society”, with a “greater emphasis on elderly men than women”, and often consigned to “secondary or background roles, with hardly any narrative weight” (Martín García, Ramos and González de Garay 2022: 358).

Josep Armengol and Raquel Medina argue that the study of aging masculinities in Spain has received less attention compared to the critical analysis dedicated to female aging characters, particularly in works of fiction authored by women. While there are substantial reasons that could explain this disparity, such as the historical emphasis on women’s reproductive capabilities and sexual aptitude, Armengol and Medina point out that “ageing experiences are neither a lesser concern for men nor can they simply be pitted against those of their female counterparts” (Armengol and Medina 2022: 571). To better understand the critical potential inherent in the portrayal of the aging male body in cinema, it could be valuable to examine the dual narrative of ‘successful aging’ versus ‘aging as decline.’ Spanish cinema often depicts aging men following

these stereotypical narratives, presenting characters who are either healthy and active or sick and deteriorated. However, Armengol and Medina argue that reducing aging stories to these two narratives would create “distorted images” of men’s life experiences (571). These narratives have faced considerable criticism from multiple perspectives due to their tendency to associate successful aging exclusively with male characters, represented as autonomous and productive, while decline narratives are more commonly associated with female aging. In an effort to transcend the relative limitations of this binary, Linn Sandberg put forward the concept of ‘affirmative aging,’ which offers a more nuanced and complex understanding of aging characters. Importantly, Sandberg’s framework seeks to eliminate the gender bias inherent in the successful-versus-decline narratives: “affirmative old age [is] a concept which goes beyond the dialectics of negation, and which affirms the specificities of ageing bodies and highlights the capacities of becoming in ageing bodies and subjectivities” (Sandberg 2013: 33). The notion of ‘affirmative aging’ serves as a valuable critical tool to explore systemic issues that significantly impact the quality of life for the elderly, including physical fitness, healthy aging, financial independence, protection against abuse and ageism, social connections, sense of purpose, and self-esteem.

Environmentalism represents an emerging and yet understudied perspective within discussions on aging. Ecofeminist thinkers such as Carolyn Merchant (1980) and Maria Mies (1986) have long established a connection between patriarchy and environmental degradation. This connection becomes even more obvious in the light of later concepts such as ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), which revolves around the idea that dominant alpha males exert control over other men, women, and the natural environment. The assumption that hegemonic masculinity and environmental degradation are related to each other influences fundamental principles of economic development, such as the relentless exploitation of natural resources and the imperative to dominate, control, and capitalize on nature. According to this paradigm, hegemonic masculinity promotes an anthropocentric view of nature and the environment, reducing them to mere resources and disregarding their intrinsic value and interconnectedness with other species and ecosystems. Consequently, hegemonic masculinity can be convincingly theorized as a contributing factor to environmental degradation, pollution, and species extinction.

Critical ecofeminism has proposed that alternative masculinities can play a crucial role in facilitating societal change toward the environment (Salleh). Alternative masculinities are characterized by values of care, empathy, and collaboration with both society and the environment, which stand in stark contrast to notions of control and domination. The distinctions between hegemonic and alternative masculinities are also closely intertwined with concepts of social justice, environmental sustainability, and the recognition that the exploitation of natural resources disproportionately affects marginalized social groups. In line with other feminist theories, ecofeminism posits that all forms of oppression are interconnected, as elucidated by Black Feminism’s concept of the ‘matrix of oppression’ (Collins). According to the theory supporting this matrix, gender-based dominance and environmental exploitation stem from the same underlying principle of oppression that is also manifest in other dimensions such as race, class, or sexuality. Furthermore, it highlights the inseparable connection between social justice and ecological sustainability.

Spanish cinema has depicted the relationship between masculinity and the environment in various ways, ranging from narratives that prioritize physical strength and virility, portraying nature as a realm for male competition based on bravery and skill, to the adoption of alternative representation modes following the emergence of ecological movements in the 1990s. One early film that acknowledged this shift in perspective was *El bosque animado* (Cuerda 1987), where male characters were portrayed as protectors rather than exploiters of nature. Furthermore, in *Tierra* (Medem 1995), the protagonist is a farmer who develops a deepening connection with the land, transcending its economic value. Departing from previous modes of representation, these characters listen to and seek to comprehend their natural environment. Such empathetic male characters who forge increasingly intricate relationships with the environment have become more

prevalent in recent Spanish films, reflecting broader social concerns about the climate crisis and post-materialist values such as sustainability and environmental justice. Additionally, these alternative male characters are sometimes associated with national, regional and local branding agendas, which employ neoliberal marketing techniques to promote positive messages about harmonious relations among men, women, and nature.

While it has been argued that the definition of what precisely constitutes ecocinema is a matter of critical perspective, as “all films present productive ecocritical exploration and careful analysis can unearth engaging and intriguing perspectives on cinema’s various relationships with the world around us” (Rust, Monani and Cubitt 2012: 3), it would also be possible to understand environmental cinema as a cinematic practice that explores ecological themes and aims to raise environmental awareness. In the latter sense, it could be uncontroversially stated that environmental cinema has been gaining momentum in Spain since the early 2000s. This is evident through the establishment of renowned film festivals like the *Festival Internacional de Cine del Medio Ambiente* (FICMA, known as SUNCINE since 2019), and the *Festival Internacional de Cine Medioambiental de Canarias* (FICMEC). These initiatives have contributed to give visibility to environmental themes, often using natural locations as visually captivating backdrops for the main narrative. *La isla mínima* (Alberto Rodríguez 2014), a thriller set in Doñana National Park, would be an example of this approach. Recent Spanish films that primarily focus on ecology as a central subject include *El olivo* (Iciar Bollain 2016), *100 días de soledad* (José Díaz 2018), *O que arde* (Óliver Laxe 2019), and *As Bestas* (Rodrigo Sorogoyen 2022). A significant precursor to this growing body of environmental cinema is *Cenizas del cielo* (Quirós 2008), arguably the first Spanish film to critically address environmental themes and concerns.

Cenizas del cielo: Aging Men and the Environment

Cenizas del cielo provides a fascinating and rare perspective on the intersection of aging and masculinity with an environmentalist edge. It was saluted at the time of its release as Spain’s first unambiguously environmentalist film. In fact, the film’s concern with environmental justice revolves around a set of ecocritical issues, such as pollution and the role of mankind in environmental degradation, that are all but absent from other comparable films, such as Garcí’s *El abuelo*, in which background natural landscapes play a beautifying function (Martínez-Expósito 2015, *Cuestión de imagen*). The ecocritical stance in *Cenizas del cielo* would gain some traction in subsequent environmental films that also include older male characters. A case in point would be Bollain’s (2016) drama *El Olivo*, which shares with *Cenizas del cielo* a topical combination of aging, masculinity and environmentalism expressed through themes and metaphors such as the deep connection between an older man and a special tree (an olive tree in the former, a cherry tree in the latter), intergenerational (mis)understandings, and the centrality of an older, ailing male character (*El Olivo* was released as *El árbol del abuelo* in Mexico). A major difference between both films is the dramatic development of the older male character: the grandfather (Manuel Cucala) of *El Olivo* lives with Alzheimer and is portrayed as a physically decayed and morally defeated older man who has lost his life plot. In contrast, the widower (Celso Bugallo) of *Cenizas del cielo* is full of life, energy, and purpose. Part of *Cenizas del cielo*’s appeal with international audiences and success in festivals around the world was prompted by its topical ecologism and the universal significance of themes such as respect for nature, sustainable development, and the need for lifestyle changes to address climate change.

In all likelihood these themes resonated with the jury that awarded *Cenizas del cielo* the Earth Grand Prix at the 2008 Tokyo International Film Festival. The film was used to open the 15th edition of the *Festival Internacional de Cine de Medio Ambiente*, where it was awarded the Special Jury Prize. It received the Best Film award at the *Festival Internacional de Cine Medioambiental de Canarias* and the Jury’s Youth Award at the *Cinémascience International Film*

Festival in Bordeaux, organized by CNRS for films related to scientific research. According to production company Nacedón Films, it received a rare endorsement from Greenpeace and Ecologistas en Acción. In Spain, it received a nomination for the Goya Awards in the category of Best Original Screenplay.

Cenizas del cielo is set in Asturias, Quirós's homeland, where he had previously shot *Solas en la tierra* (Antonio Quirós 1998), a social documentary about dead coal miners' widows; *Gran Casal, me como el mundo* (Antonio Quirós 2004), a musical documentary about the late Asturian pop singer Tino Casal; and the successful social comedy *Pídele cuentas al rey* (Antonio Quirós 1999), about job precarity in post-industrial Asturias. Quirós's career as a film director has been inextricably linked to the social hurdles of his natal Asturias, an aging and impoverished region that experienced simultaneously deindustrialization, diaspora and high unemployment since the early 1980s. Despite the bitter experiences of many of his fellow Asturians, Quirós frequently adopts a comedy tone in his films, thus creating a contrast in tone that efficiently highlights the seriousness and unsuspected depth of some of his themes and plots. A similar contrasting technique allows Quirós to introduce, in films such as *Cenizas del cielo* and TV series such as *Aquí el Paraíso* (Antonio Quirós 2014) and *Aquí sin Paraíso* (Antonio Quirós 2017), the theme of Asturias brand image, which, somewhat paradoxically, has been "Asturias, Paraíso Natural" (Asturias, Nature's Paradise) since the mid-1980s. Pollution, infertility, unhealthy working and living conditions, and aging could not be farther from the heavenly Asturias of the official brand. The slogan "Asturias, Paraíso Natural", which the Asturian government has successfully used for decades to promote its image and tourist industry, is not only mentioned directly but also questioned and deconstructed in the film. In this way, *Cenizas del cielo* adds itself to a broad series of cultural practices that have been reshaping the image of Asturias around the Paradise metaphor, which is antithetical to the industrial and proletarian image of the region that had become popular in the national imaginary in previous decades (Martínez-Expósito 2021, "Ecologismo y edenismo" 242).

In *Cenizas del cielo*, Paul Ferguson (Gary Piquer) is a Scottish travel guidebook writer who arrives in the Asturian town of Soto de Ribera to prepare a manuscript about the region. Due to a breakdown in his campervan, he is forced to stay in the town while waiting for repairs. During his stay, he develops relationships with the locals, including Cristina (Clara Segura) and Federico (Celso Bugallo). Federico, a farmer in his sixties, is concerned about the environmental degradation in the area due to the opening forty years ago of a coal power plant. The plant's polluting fumes caused his wife's untimely death as well as the degradation of crops and infertility in animals. Federico protects his farm as best he can; for instance, he has built a huge canopy to protect his favorite cherry tree against acid rain. He has undertaken a personal campaign to demand the closure of the power plant and pins his hopes on the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, enforceable since 2007, the same year *Cenizas del cielo* was shot. The Protocol's unprecedented international commitment to the environment brings new hope to Federico, who optimistically gives the name of Kyoto to a newborn calf. Ferguson becomes increasingly interested in Federico's fight and supports him in his crusade.

As Ferguson writes his travel guidebook, he learns more details about daily life in the village. He learns about the language of Asturias and comes to appreciate local produce, cider production, and the beautiful landscapes of the region. However, Federico becomes the most intriguing character to Ferguson due to his seemingly obsessive campaign against the power plant. Federico goes as far as traveling to the Asturian capital to meet with government officials and demand the closure of the power plant. His efforts, however, yield no results. Ferguson finds out that Federico has reported the power plant several times and has been fighting for its closure for years. It is also revealed that Federico is a republican and is tired of empty promises. In a moment of trust, Federico confesses to Ferguson that he is willing to resort to violence if necessary. Although most of the townspeople support the closure of the power plant, Mario (Fran

Sariego), a worker at the plant, opposes it. It is later revealed that Mario is Federico's biological son, but Federico never acknowledged him.

As Ferguson gets closer to Federico, he starts to understand his deep emotional connection to the land, his animals, and his trees. Federico incites a group of young environmentalists to protest in front of the power plant. During the altercation, Federico manages to enter the plant and climb one of its chimneys. The plant's management tries to persuade him to give up his action, but Federico refuses. Only Ferguson manages to convince him to come down from the chimney tower. Shortly after, it is announced on television that the government has agreed to make improvements to the power plant to reduce its pollution and invest in the region's social welfare. However, after a brief shutdown, the plant resumes operations, leaving Federico desperate.

In a cruel twist of fate, Federico is arrested for tearing out holly and is sent to jail for resisting authority. From his cell, Federico watches the rain fall and knows that his cherry tree will not survive without its canopy if he is not allowed to go and manually deploy it. Once freed, he realizes that the cherry tree will not survive. Sunk and defeated, Federico passes away under his tree. The film's final scene focuses on Kyoto, the calf whose difficult birth opened the film and whose hopeful trot now closes it.

Cenizas del cielo is a film about a region in crisis. In several ways, Asturias' ongoing and worsening decades-long crisis allowed Quirós to create a story that would resonate in other parts of Spain and Europe in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Themes such as unhealthy emissions, forced migration, and aged population that feature in *Cenizas del cielo*'s Asturias came to prominence in post-2008 Spain with environmentalism and the 'depopulated Spain' (*la España vaciada*) tagline everywhere.

Celso Bugallo's Embodiment of Multiple Insurgencies

The character of Federico in the film is played by Galician-born Celso Bugallo (Sanxenxo, 1947-), a respected and well-known theater actor for many years who achieved considerable success as a supporting actor in film later in life. He made his debut on the silver screen in his fifties as a supporting character in the film *La lengua de las mariposas* (Cuerda 1999) and attracted serious critical attention with *Los lunes al sol* (de Aranoa 2002), which cemented his reputation as one of Spain's most respected supporting actors or *secundarios*. Whilst theater enthusiasts were already familiar with Bugallo's extensive and distinguished stage career, moviegoers had limited knowledge of his previous achievements. Understandably, his arrival in the cinema industry later in life led to frequent casting in mature and elderly roles. Bugallo's exceptional performance in *Mar adentro* (Amenábar 2004) earned him a Goya Award for Best Supporting Actor. He further portrayed senior and elderly characters in *Para que no me olvides* (Ferreira 2005), *Pasos* (Luppi 2005), *Pudor* (Ulloa and Ulloa 2007), and *La isla interior* (Ayaso and Sabroso 2010), where he convincingly depicted a schizophrenic elderly father who tragically took his own life. Bugallo was 61 years old when he played the role of Federico in *Cenizas del cielo* (Quirós 2008), and he continued to captivate audiences at the age of 74 with his rendition of Fortuna in *El buen patrón* (de Aranoa and Blanco 2021).

The fact that there was no cinematic record of a younger Bugallo contributed to establish him as a readily recognizable presence in senior male roles. Casting directors find in Bugallo the perfect supporting actor who brings forth a distinct set of physical attributes to his characters. However, as vividly exemplified in *Cenizas del cielo*, he also proves to be a remarkable leading actor, skillfully employing a rich palette of expressive techniques. Many of his roles embody strong male characters that can be readily associated with notions of assertive or hegemonic masculinity. Through his facial expressions, skin tone, bodily movements, speech, and accent, Bugallo constructs imposing and commanding characters that engender tense relationships with other

characters, regardless of their age or gender. Even when portraying less dominant male roles, such as in *La isla interior*, he bestows his characters with an empowered dignity.

Within the aforementioned selection of films, the portrayal of characters embodied by Celso Bugallo relies on a consistently executed visual approach to the actor's body and physique. Frequently framed in isolation from other characters, his body is seldom presented in a state of undress or subjected to a sexualized gaze. The construction of his characters primarily hinges upon three key elements of his performance: facial expressions (often captured in close-up shots, even in supporting roles), gait, and speech. While these films do not employ his physicality to convey notions of illness, fragility, or deterioration, Bugallo's characters often imply an unsettling process of aging. The amalgamation of dominant masculinity and the effects of aging results in characters that may appear older than their actual age. In certain instances, this amalgamation contributes to a sense of detachment between the characters and the viewer, as it positions gender and age in an oppositional perspective, eschewing more coveted qualities such as youth and eroticism. In the film, the body of Federico, played by Bugallo, is occasionally surrounded by younger male bodies that are sexualized and eroticized in various ways. Ferguson's body, for instance, is thematically sexualized and visually erotized through his romantic involvement with Cristina. Similarly, Mario is displayed fully naked in a sex scene with his wife, with the additional transgressive element of taking place in a public space at night. Other younger male characters in the film convey varying degrees of erotization, in contrast with older men. Young men may undress for the camera, yet the older Federico remains consistently clothed. While there is no hint of homoerotic tension between Federico, Ferguson, and Mario, the visual dichotomy young/old serves as a powerful descriptor of Federico's character.

As a self-proclaimed adherent of the Stanislavsky method, Bugallo imbues his characters not only with the physicality of his own body (a quality adept directors know how to effectively capture on camera), but also with the psychological depth conveyed through his gaze. Despite primarily playing supporting roles, Bugallo's mastery of the gaze and other facial expressions is remarkably potent, making his on-screen presence undeniably captivating. This becomes even more pronounced in his leading roles, such as in *Cenizas del cielo*, where his portrayal of the conflicted and defiant Federico exemplifies a multifaceted amalgamation of a steadfast farmer who becomes the object of a foreigner's gaze, while simultaneously asserting his own agency and being capable of returning the gaze. An in-depth analysis of Bugallo's performance in *Cenizas del cielo* would yield a more nuanced comprehension of his portrayal of aging male characters in other films, revealing how his seemingly alpha-male roles often stem from utopian, insurgent, or rebellious ideals that paradoxically position his characters in oppositional or disadvantaged dynamics.

A poetics of social and political resistance against hegemonic powers permeates Quirós's cinematic trajectory. In *Cenizas del cielo*, this resistance manifests in opposition to unsustainable industrialization, the commodification of nature, and the willful disregard for the deliberate degradation of human well-being and the natural environment. These acts of resistance rely on and are made possible by the multiple insurgencies embodied by the character of Federico, who serves as a living metaphor for an aging yet resolute Asturias, encapsulating various forms of insurgency. Federico is not just a quixotic figure battling against a series of disconnected enemies. The essence of Federico's character lies in his ability to unite all his passions and concerns into a cohesive whole. This includes his environmental activism, his understanding of the impact of aging, his grief over his wife's death due to pollution, his love for nature, his paternal responsibilities toward his family, and his stance on politics and politicians. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that the character of Federico was inspired by a real person named Ernesto Fernández, a resident of the central Asturias village of Soto de Ribera who consistently denounced the local power plant that features in the film. Fernández was 31 years old when the construction of the plant concluded in 1962, and he was 77 when *Cenizas del cielo*, where he appears as an anonymous villager, was released in 2008.

In his on-screen representation of real-life Fernández, Federico employs various strategies of resistance and insurgency, some of which entail a physical utilization of his own body. His body serves not only as a vehicle for expression but also, as exemplified in several pivotal scenes, as an instrument of opposition, a weapon, and ultimately, as a means to merge and become one with the land.

Throughout the film, Federico utilizes his own body as a tool of resistance in various instances. His physical presence is often dynamic and seemingly assertive: he speaks loudly, walks briskly, and engages in physical confrontations. However, his body is consistently depicted as wounded, prominently featuring a bandaged arm resulting from a violent altercation with neighbor Cristina (Clara Segura) early in the film. In cinema, the wounded male body has traditionally been employed as a visual symbol of heroism (both military and otherwise) and vulnerability (gay characters are often portrayed as sick or injured). This portrayal can encompass physical and psychological trauma, a character's struggle with their own masculinity, their search for purpose and identity, or the repression of emotions. Federico's defeat in his confrontation with Cristina is not the sole instance of a gendered defeat: in a separate scene, he appears powerless in the presence of a middle-aged female government official who remains stoic and offers no response to Federico's desperate plea to close down the power plant. This scene, constructed around visual oppositions, particularly emphasizes the dichotomy between Federico's body and the younger, urban, female body of the official. These moments, among others, unveil Federico's inability to triumph over female characters, either physically or verbally. His bandaged arm serves as a constant reminder to the viewer of his gendered vulnerability, thereby softening his alpha-male persona.

In the symbolic economy of the film, Federico occupies a middle ground between the younger Mario (his son) and the older Manolo (Txema Blasco), a mostly silent older neighbor who needs to always carry an oxygen bottle with him. Despite Blasco, born in 1941, being only six years older than Bugallo, his character in the film embodies the narrative of 'aging as decay,' portrayed as mentally and physically ill and reliant on his daughter. The visually contrasting opposition between Federico and Manolo serves to establish the former as more closely aligned with the narrative of 'successful aging.' However, the persistent visual presence of his bandaged arm serves as a reminder to the audience of his vulnerabilities.

The visual motif of the wounded body takes on an intriguing development when Federico brings Ferguson to visit his apple trees. In a scene filled with emotional intensity, underscored by a melancholic flute melody, Federico unveils that the apple trees are ailing. Mirroring the white bandage on Federico's arm, each tree bears a white ribbon or bandage, symbolizing an affliction that extends beyond the physical realm. To Ferguson's surprise, Federico invites him to embrace a tree, urging him to "hug them, they are very affectionate" ('abrácelos, que son muy mimosos'). The scene concludes with a hopeful wide shot of the meadow, capturing the two men walking optimistically up the gentle slope. The viewer is left to contemplate Federico's capacity for care and tenderness. In this poignant moment, Federico's vulnerable, wounded body rhymes with the wounded trees. Through visual and haptic means, the audience is reminded of the profound connection between the aging, aching body of the man and the fragility of his natural surroundings.

In one of the most iconic scenes in *Cenizas del cielo*, Federico harnesses his own body as a weapon, employing a well-known protest tactic popularized by Greenpeace activists in the 1970s. He ascends the towering refrigeration chimney of the power plant, aiming to capture the attention of authorities and the media and draw them to his cause. This instance is not the sole occasion in which Federico employs his body as a tool of resistance. Later in the film, when a bulldozer arrives at the village to remove unwanted albeit environmentally valuable vegetation, Federico boldly blocks its path, standing firmly with an expression of open defiance on his face. Scenes such as these reveal a fascinating reimagining of Federico's aging body, as he employs a body-centered tactic more commonly associated with younger activists. To emphasize this

contrast in age, the chimney scene is preceded by a march of younger activists, called upon by Federico, who gather at the gates of the power plant. These young protesters, reminiscent of alternative-left urban protest groups in real life, ultimately prove incapable of effecting any significant change. In contrast, Federico exploits the chaos they create, using it as an opportunity to circumvent the plant's security guards and gain access to the chimney tower. The visual juxtaposition between the youthful demonstrators and the solitary older farmer underscores the considerable ideological divide that separates them and highlights Federico's ecological struggle as a personal, urgent fight for survival.

The dramatic composition of the chimney scene carries an additional layer of significance. While ecology revolves around environmental sustainability, Federico's aging body appears to symbolize the denial of bodily sustainability. Here, the film explicitly positions itself regarding the construction of age within an ecological context, going beyond the paradigm of success versus decay. As Federico hangs precariously from the chimney tower, he is visited by Mario, who, until this moment in the film, has been consistently referred to as Federico's nephew. In their brief and tense conversation, Mario unsuccessfully attempts to persuade Federico to abandon his protest. It is during this exchange that the revelation is made to the audience: Mario is actually Federico's illegitimate son, and both men are fully knowledgeable of this fact, as much as they both are aware that Mario is unable to procreate. These revelations bring forth infertility as one of the film's recurring themes. Mario's infertility unveils another dimension of Federico's ecological struggle, as the power plant's toxic emissions not only devastate the region's fauna and vegetation but also render humans sterile, thus endangering the future of local families. Federico's own family is non-existent, apart from his unrecognized son Mario and his late wife, who fell victim to the power plant's toxic emissions. Federico's realization of his own mortality, together with the impossibility of having grandchildren, prompts the viewer to recall the emotionally charged scenes in which Federico displays love and affection for the young calf Kyoto, his apple trees, and his cherry tree.

Federico's profound personal connection to the land and nature reaches its culmination in the scene of his own death under the cherry tree, which was unprotected during a heavy storm of acid rain. Mario, now revealed to be Federico's son, had made an unsuccessful attempt to shield the tree using the large canopy that Federico and Ferguson skillfully used earlier in the film, highlighting Mario's inability to provide proper care despite his best attempts. Defeated, Federico sits beneath the tree, leans against its trunk, removes his boots, and closes his eyes. Then, he dies. The tragic and somewhat unexpected conclusion to Federico's lifelong quest brings to the forefront the eco-feminist perspective that the patriarchal paradigm inherently hinders environmental sustainability. Federico's life and untimely death are closely intertwined with his trees, meadow, and the way of life in his valley, which have all been existentially threatened by the power plant. His lonely and oddly epic death poignantly encapsulates a solitary struggle for survival, resonating with social action agendas that promote collective responses to environmental concerns, in contrast to Federico's predominantly individual and somewhat quixotic actions throughout the film. Federico's journey invokes not only the quixotic master narrative of the idealistic quest for (environmental) justice but also readily recognizable archetypes such as the lone wolf and the grumpy old man.

It would be tempting to conclude these notes with a reflection on Quirós's dedication of the film to his own father, who loved and cared for the land ("A mi padre, que amó la tierra y cuidó de ella"), as if it were necessary to state once more that fatherhood and land-loving are inseparable in this film, which creates a powerful network of affects linking environmentalism, masculinity and aging. This is probably the reason why Federico's insurgency comes through as deeply authentic. For the film's ecocritical credibility, it is important that Federico's character be properly understood as ethical and genuine. The film's contrast between Federico's quixotic campaign and an uncaring surrounding world that seemingly pays him deaf ears is emphasized constantly

and in many different episodes during the film. Federico's authenticity receives an almost transcendental twist with his death under the cherry tree, which suggests a form of mystical union between man and tree. This topic reappears in more recent Spanish films, such as Bollaín's *El Olivo* and in Bigas Luna's posthumous documentary *Bigas x Bigas* (Garrido and Luna 2016); the latter offers interesting footage of the late director's unique relation with nature to the point that he declares his wish to reincarnate in a carob tree after his death (Fouz-Hernández 2020: 315–37). The contrast between authentic love for nature and constructed environmentalism runs deep in *Cenizas del cielo*. Some of the narrative metaphors employed in the film (such as the Kyoto calf/Protocol, the cherry tree as resistance, and the chimney as death) are expressed through visually impactful images, which can be taken as an index of the film's interest not only in aging and environmental themes but also in the role of cinema to give them expression. The unique combination of genres in *Cenizas del cielo* (the pastoral, ecocinema, social realism), as well as its use of strong visual metaphors and the nearly archetypal construction of the characters of Federico and Ferguson, contributes to emphasizing the film's textual artifice. The traps of travel guidebooks, ineffective politicians, and even trendy environmentalism, thematized in the film, transform rural Asturias as an improbable paradise tainted by progress into a site of multiple resistances: against unsustainable industrial practices, against the commodification of nature, against the perpetuation of ageism in rural, patriarchal communities, and ultimately against the deliberate and conscious decision not to see.

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