



Article

Spanish Social Cinema: Analysis of Evolution and Implications for Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Abstract: Social cinema is a cinematographic expression used to denounce current and historical problems, as well as to identify social limits and promote the transformation of society itself. To this end, works included in social cinema depict aspects of reality to critically influence it. The objective of this study is to examine the evolution of social cinema, as well as its scientific, economic and political bases and its main consequences for the general population. Method: This study was conducted by the application of the technique of qualitative research thematic analysis as a procedure in the process of the execution of the scientific task, related to a historical trend study of the research object. The search was carried out in the databases of IMDB and the Culture Ministry of Spain. The end of the dictatorship and the beginning of democracy (1975) was placed as the historical cutting point in the analysis. Various psychosocial variables were used as categories of analysis, including poverty, work, substance use, crime, urban and rural contexts, violence, etc. Results: Spanish social cinema has evolved since its origins in the 1950s as a reflection of Spanish society. These developments, including both progressions and regressions, have been connected with social, political and economic factors. Conclusions: While the shape of Spanish social cinema has changed over time, its themes have remained similar since the origin: poverty, work and hopelessness. The evolution has not been continuous, as it has fluctuated in response to the claims and requests from the context. The Spanish social cinema has reflected topics and images from Spanish society, even when the sociopolitical context avoided them. Finally, the legitimacy of Spanish social cinema is based on its cultural strength and social/political commitment.



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1. Introduction

1.1. What Is Social Cinema

Every audiovisual narrative aims to seduce the viewer and appeal to their emotions (Moreno Martín et al. 2022). Cinematographic language is composed by each of the tools the creator uses to tell their story, serving this purpose and fostering the viewer's identification with what they are seeing (Furió Alarcón 2024). Throughout history, many governments and institutions have realized the value of cinema to influence and have used it, either directly, by producing or supporting films aligned with their ideology, or by controlling what was produced to prevent unwanted messages from being distributed

to the population (Furió Alarcón 2024). These are some examples of the use of cinema for political or ideological purposes in the past, although today, some politicians are still tempted to direct culture from public powers (Barrios and Navarro 2023). Some examples of this can be found in Leni Riefenstahl's and rest of the German cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, which was completely imbued with Nazi ideology (Da Costa 2014), or as in the 1950s in the United States, when Senator Joseph McCarthy exercised strict control over potential progressive messages in all media outlets and severely over the film industry (Schwartz 2025). To establish a national cinema that could function as a "political canvas with persuasive content by showing stories that connected revolutionary ideals, the new national project, with what the new revolutionary government wanted to achieve socially and politically" was the aim of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, which was established in the 1960s, following the Cuban Revolution (Muñoz 2022).

Social cinema (which includes both documentary cinema and fiction film) is the cinematographic expression used to denounce current and historical problems (García Escudero 1958). Though not traditionally recognized as a classic cinematographic genre, aside from political intentions, it is possible to find multiple examples of social cinema, which refers to films that seek to highlight a problem or situation and raise awareness in order to generate change in a society (Furió Alarcón 2024), as well as to favor the identification of limits and promote the transformation of society itself, with the belief about the cinema as a function of narrative experience, perceived realism and transportability (Bilandzic and Busselle 2011). To this end, since the origin of movie making, works included in social cinema show aspects of reality (Arnheim [1932] 1957) to critically influence it (Moreno Martín 2014a). The majority of directors who make social cinema consider it a means to achieve this social transformation rather than as an end in itself (García de Vicuña 2020). In the words of screenwriter Ángeles González-Sinde, who was the Minister of Culture of Spain, "We must consider how cinema addresses gender equality, racism, economic injustice, or whether an unreal society is presented in which there are few or no immigrants or no female police officers or judges".

The concept of "Social Cinema" can be explained by the following definition: social cinema refers to a cinematographic genre that uses cinema as a means for criticizing and denouncing social problems. The works that it groups together are those that seek social intervention and transformation, which includes both documentary films and works of fiction. The term has been identified with movie making in several countries, originally in Italy, France, Belgium and Spain (Sánchez Noriega 2023), and in recent years, it has been more popular in Latin America (Nascimento 2019). It has been studied in Sociology, Anthropology and social Psychology fundamentally (Nascimento 2019). In all cases, these are cinematographic works that are fed by reality and aim to critically influence it (Sedeño Valdellós 2012). This leads us, almost unintentionally, to one of the first ideological pillars of this paper: the notion that social cinema and commitment form an indissoluble binomial (something, on the other hand, very widespread). In this regard, we recall the words of maestro Buñuel when he was asked for the reasons for his dedication to cinema, which align closely with our ideology: "(...) I direct films because I would like to make even the most ordinary viewer feel that they are not living in the best of all possible worlds" (Buñuel 1982, p. 16). In this paper, humbly, we go beyond the guidance of the Aragonese master by affirming that what social cinema does is simply "to show the reality" (Sánchez Noriega 2023). It can lead to action or not, in the same way that it can or cannot achieve it. What it does is show if these images (sometimes shown as "malgré tout", as we will see later) lead to the intervention or mobilization of the spectator or of the institutions (Pardo 2001).

1.2. International Perspectives of Social Cinema

In Spain, social reality has been shown since the first films shot on national soil, from the very *Departure of the twelve o'clock mass from the Church of the Pilar de Zaragoza* (1897) by pioneer Eduardo Jimeno Correas, inspired in the first films of world cinema, Louis Lumière's work *La Sortie de L'Usine Lumière á Lyon* (1895xxS). In fact, cinema debuted with a subgenre called "views" that collected facts from everyday life, with no other intention than to capture reality with this new invention, before fiction cinema had made its appearance. These "views" constitute a priceless historical/social testimony of an era (Moradiellos 2001a) as they have managed to survive the technical vicissitudes.

About Hollywood movie production, even when its objective was not to create a real social cinema but to influence the masses, magnificent works such as *The Great Dictator* (Chaplin 1940), *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941) and *The Big Country* (Wyler 1958) are faithful reflections of topics such as the risk of extreme right governments and fascist regimes, ambition and ascending in American society and the fight between social classes and the origins of capitalism. It is significant that these topics are similar to 21st century movies, such as *The Experiment* (Hirschbiegel 2001) or *The Wave* (Gansel 2008) (Moreno Martín and Muiño 2003). The analytical and reflective role of cinema should be highlighted when it comes to presenting the social realities and problems of each context, sometimes sweetened, other times crude and realistic, showing different situations and conflicts, as well as various perspectives of themselves. While it is true that on many occasions the concept of "social cinema" has implied a well-intentioned but sometimes technically limited type of storytelling, many of the best films made fall into this category: Italian neorealism as a whole, particularly De Sica's masterpiece *Bicycle Thief* (1948), and the films of Frank Capra (especially his plea for the ordinary citizen in *Meet John Doe* (1954). This topic of citizenship against the system, with a more political perspective, can be clearly identified in more recent times in Ken Loach's crude representations of Thatcher's Britain and later films (Moreno Martín and Muiño 2003), the Russian cinema of Nikita Mikhalkov (despite the director's lack of commitment to groups such as the LGTBIQ+ community) and the films of Costa Gavras.

Probably, in nowhere else in the world has social cinema fulfilled its objectives of storytelling, exposing problems and analyzing realities as brilliantly as in Latin America, sometimes leaving gems of popular culture for posterity. In addition to Luis Buñuel's Mexican stage, which includes one of the greatest social films in history, *Los Olvidados* (1950), several remarkable films must be highlighted. In Colombia, the exceptional *La vendedora de rosas* (Gaviria 1998), which brought together cinema and reality. In Argentina, films such as *The Official History* (1985) or the impressive *The Secret in Their Eyes* (2015) addressed the dictatorship, while *A Place in the World* (1992) offered a broader portrayal of the country. And above all, Brazil has produced magnum opuses that show crime, delinquency, poverty, drug addiction, prostitution, hopelessness, etc., highlighting *Central Station of Brazil* (1998) and the impressive *City of God* (2002). One filmmaker who was able to show all social problems deserves a special mention: Héctor Babenco. He is well known for presenting child crime in the excellent and controversial *Pixote* (1980), which led to his passage to the United States of America and allowed him to film the exceptional *The Kiss of Spider Woman* (1985) that shows the life in prison of a political prisoner under the Brazilian dictatorship and a homosexual with extraordinary delicacy, taking as a reference the perfect novel written by Manuel Puig.

Two facts must be clarified. On the one hand, we should put "black on white" that in Spain, nothing had ever existed similar to what we can identify as "neorealism", which in similar countries like Italy, received such good results, especially at the cinema level (not commercially or in its own borders, especially in its origins). In these terms, the "Nuevo

Cine Español” of the 1950s and 1960s gives a graphic testimony of these sociological changes. Through these films, the Spanish cinema (besides the strong but quite prude censorship) appears as a witness of these sociological aspects to be taken into account for a better understanding of this important period of our history. All of the contradictions and struggle into the Spanish Society are clearly brought to the fore through this collection of frames. Clearly, we can open up a discussion because the strong censorship and the general sociological Francoism not only were not enough to fight this cinema, but also “encouraged” (despite itself) a group of exceptional creators (García Berlanga, Carlos Saura, José Antonio Bardem, Julio Diamante, Basilio Martín Patino, etc.) (Gustrán Loscos 2022).

On the other hand, what we refer to as “Social Cinema” is sometimes called “Realistic Cinema” (Jowett and Linton 1989) because of its aim to show reality with clear eyes. The limits between both concepts are diffuse and we would like to establish our position from this moment, which is that basically they are the same. If you use realism you can also move to action (even if it were only at the level of scandal or indoctrination), or you can simply put out and highlight a reality that you would never have seen otherwise (Jowett and Linton 1989). In this paper, the term “Social cinema” is used, in the sense of Sedeño Valdellós’s definition (Sedeño Valdellós 2012).

Talking about social cinema and its relationship with the theme of this paper, the major topics of Social Psychology have been discussed in the cinema (Zacks 2013): motivations, emotions (Damasio 1994), human and group development, vital processes, belief systems, social influence, stereotypes, prejudices and attitudes, processes of socialization and social influence, obedience, authoritarianism, dehumanization, etc., (Tan 2018). It is possible to find several aspects that help us to understand the connection between these topics and cinema: (a) “Schools” of reference (such as Italian neorealism), (b) topics covered (poverty, crime, substance use, etc.), (c) psychosocial processes shown on screen and (d) allusion to successful films. In relation to the evolution of Spanish society and its cinema, three different moments can be identified: (1) the Franco dictatorship and its aftermaths, characterized by a lack of freedom and expression and strong moral issues about what is right or wrong, based in the fascist doctrine (Moradiellos 2001b); (2) the Transition and the Beginning of Democracy, with an opening to new identities and expressions, still with the ambivalence and the conflict between what was acceptable or not for the Spanish society (Sánchez Noriega 2021); and (3) the 21st century with the new social movements and lifestyles, the integration of identities and minorities, a bigger visibility of hidden problems and the clarification of the contradictions and conflicts within the social system.

The aim of this paper is to conduct a thematic analysis of Spanish social cinema objectified in a description of the problems addressed and how these problems have varied over time in response to the Spanish social, cultural and historical context in which the movies were produced (Prieto de Pedro 1995). This study will be structured using the previously mentioned temporal cuts as a parameter. A secondary aim is to analyze these contexts by reflecting on the words, actions or emotions of the characters that come off the screen, not as absolute facts, but as approximations to the reality.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodology

This study was conducted by the technique of qualitative research (Flick 2018), specifically related to a historical trend study of the research object. The thematic analysis was framed within three of the procedures used by the historical–logical method (Moradiellos 2001b), specifically the determination of the object of study, the chronological analysis and the determination of regularities and patterns. This study is qualitative and uses a descriptive phenomenological approach (Strauss 1987). The thematic analysis has been

carried out inspired by Grounded theory (Creswell and Creswell 2017) so that, in a first phase of Open Coding, the themes addressed in the films were described taking as reference the conceptual framework on social problems (Yela García 2013). This first coding, following the logic of the “heaps”, gave rise to a second phase of Axial Coding that related the themes with the three historical moments set as a reference. This historically contextualized thematic analysis gave rise to a type of theoretical coding (Theoretical Coding) that led us to the final conclusions of this study. This approach enabled the researchers to draw from a variety of viewpoints, providing a better understanding of the evolution of Spanish social cinema. The search was carried out in the databases of IMDB and the Culture Ministry of Spain.

After all, measurement by approximation, the triangulation of hypotheses and contents, is typical of the social sciences. To ensure rigor in the reporting and undertaking of the research, this study followed the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) (O’Brien et al. 2014) and the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) (Tong et al. 2007).

2.2. Sample

The sample was made up of 36 films, fiction or documentary, longer than 75 min, released between 1951 and 2015. These feature films shared a series of characteristics in terms of homogeneity in the quality of the films—all of them received a score greater than 6.0 on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) and they were coded within the “social cinema” genre. Using as a reference the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale (Wells et al. 2000), the researchers of AMF and MVG made a quality assessment of the movies using the following criteria: Marks in IMDB, Adequacy of Themes (synopsis), References in databases and National and/or International Awards. Ratings vary between 1 and 6, 1–2 being an indicator of low quality, 3–4 medium quality and 5–6 high quality.

Following these criteria, 12 films were identified by researchers for each temporal period. The selected titles were collected in a spreadsheet to facilitate the handling of data related to the title, the director and the year of release (see Table 1). Due to the interest in studying films distributed to the widest possible audience while remaining framed within Western cultural values, all the titles were selected from Spanish production companies.

Table 1. Sample.

1950–1975	1976–1995	1996–2024
<i>Surcos</i> (J. A. Nieves Conde 1951)	<i>Cría Cuervos</i> (Carlos Saura 1976)	<i>Taxi</i> (Carlos Saura 1996)
<i>Calle Mayor</i> (J. A. Bardem 1956)	<i>Camada Negra</i> (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón 1977)	<i>Pídele Cuentas al rey</i> (J. A. Quirós 1999)
<i>El Pisito</i> (Marco Ferreri 1958)	<i>Asignatura Pendiente</i> (Jose Luis Garci 1977)	<i>Los Lunes al Sol</i> (F. L. de Aranoa 2002)
<i>Nunca Pasa Nada</i> (J. A. Bardem 1963)	<i>La Escopeta Nacional</i> (Berlanga 1978)	<i>Princesas</i> (F. L. de Aranoa 2005)
<i>Nueve Cartas a Berta</i> (Martín Patino 1960)	<i>El Pico</i> (De la Iglesia 1980)	<i>Metros cuadrados</i> (Max Lemcke 2010)
<i>El Mundo Sigue</i> (Fernán Gómez 1965)	<i>Deprisa, Deprisa</i> (Carlos Saura 1981)	<i>Techo y comida</i> (Juan Miguel del Castillo 2015)
<i>Mi Querida Señorita</i> (Jaime de Armiñán 1972)	<i>Los Santos Inocentes</i> (Mario Camus 1984)	<i>En los márgenes</i> (Juan Diego Botto 2022)
<i>Furtivos</i> (J. L. Borau 1975)	<i>¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?</i> (Pedro Almodóvar 1984)	<i>Carmen y Lola</i> (Arantxa Echevarría 2023)

The feature films were seen in Spanish and those data related to dialogues or monologues of the characters were collected in the corresponding language, with the intention to be as faithful as possible to what was shown in the film. The end of the dictatorship and the beginning of 21st century were placed as the historical cutting points for both the selection and the analysis of the movies (Gustrán Loscos 2022).

2.3. Procedure

After selecting the characteristics of the sample and defining the main objective of the study, it was necessary to determine the specific dimensions that would shape the subgoals that would later be addressed. The death of the dictator Franco, the Transition and the Beginning of Democracy and the 21st century were placed as the historical cut-off points in the analysis (Moradiellos 2001b). The procedure was a combination of two different models of analysis: inductive categorization (“boxes”) and deductive categorization (“blocks”) (Strauss 1987).

The analysis in “boxes” was completed using a pilot program of study, selecting two movies from every historical moment and making a previous identification of the themes included in them (see Table 2).

Table 2. Movies selected for pilot analysis.

1950–1978	1978–1995	2001–2024
<i>Calle Mayor</i> (J. A. Bardem 1956)	<i>Asignatura Pendiente</i> (Jose Luis Garcí 1977)	<i>Los Lunes al Sol</i> (F. L. de Aranoa 2002)
<i>El Mundo Sigue</i> (Fernán Gómez 1965)	<i>¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?</i> (Pedro Almodóvar 1984)	<i>Techo y comida</i> (Juan Miguel del Castillo 2015)

After the visioning of these movies, the researchers M.V. and A.J.M. detected several topics, which were subsequently integrated into categories. The criteria which followed to make this decision were based on the frequency with which a topic included in one of the chosen categories (family and social structure, poverty and work, crime and violence, social identity) appeared in the films (Gustrán Loscos 2022). These categories were considered as “boxes” that serve for the recategorization and later interpretation of the rest of the movies. Researcher F.M. was the mediator in case of doubts or hesitation in the feasibility and validity of these analyses.

After this separation, we moved on to compare the different results in order to identify and point out the differences, nuances and similarities between the groups, taking into account each of the blocks, as well as the different categories.

In addition to collecting the information corresponding to the selected categories, the analysis sheet had a section for free notes. The intentionality of this space was not to lose details of interest that had no place in any of the predefined blocks. Although these elements did not appear in a general way in the selected films, they provided interesting data regarding our objectives. After each viewing, a final comment was made as a global reflection on the film with the intention of collecting the sensations and general messages that the viewer could feel and interpret from each feature film. In this way, at the end of each screening, there was a document that clearly collected all the data of interest and ordered it by category, allowing simple and quick management of the information collection and subsequent analysis (Strauss 1987).

2.4. Data Analysis Plan

As we said previously, the coding process was iterated three times (Strauss and Corbin 2002). The coding and analysis process combined both a theory-driven and data-driven

approach. The incorporation of codes establishes the data-driven aspect of the analysis. The first step in the coding process was the assignment of predefined codes to the parts of the data that captured key ideas and concepts. This allowed a structured and theory-driven analysis of the data. These predefined codes were based on concepts linked to the concept “Social cinema”. As this study was undertaken in Spain and focused on a specific style of cinema, when concepts outside the predefined codes arose that were crucial for capturing the full range of insights from the data, they were adopted as new codes (Gustrán Loscos 2022). As primary codes, the researcher detected:

- Poverty and social exclusion.
- Social networks/friends.
- Crime and delinquency.
- Family and intergenerational conflict.
- Urban and rural contexts.
- Economic level.
- Work.
- Life quality/health.
- Violence.
- Couple and affective relations.
- Substance use and addiction.
- Political perspectives.

After the coding process, thematic analysis was used to analyze how recurring patterns or topics within the coded data emerged as key themes. The data analysis was carried out by a member of the research team (M.V.) who was closely involved in the data collection. At significant points in the analysis process, another member of the research team (A.J.M.) reviewed the codes and themes and met with M.V. to discuss them. This served as a check to ensure that the analysis was a reflection of the data. The final step involved organizing the themes into a logical framework which provides a complete understanding of the Spanish social cinema, its evolution and the main topics involved. Also, the researchers identified performances and several emotions (Damasio 1994) expressed by the main characters (Moreno Martín et al. 2022). The researchers’ ability to analyze and interpret the new codes within this theoretical framework was achieved by aligning the concepts with the model of “boxes” and “blocks” (Gustrán Loscos 2022). The following topics emerged after the analysis of the movies (Table 3).

Table 3. Codes and issues.

Codes	Expressed Emotions	Psychosocial Issues
Opportunism		
Betrayal	Nostalgia	
Forgetfulness	Frustration	
Moderation	Indifference	Stereotypes
Sordidness	Rage	Identities
Reinvention	Hate	Gender
Repression	Melancholia	Violence
Denounce	Helplessness	Poverty and Exclusion
Darkness	Catharsis	
Symbolism		
Censorship		

3. Results

The results are presented below and are grouped into categories (family and social structure, poverty and work, crime and violence, social identity), accompanied by various verbatim extracts from the movies, with the identification of the character and the movie. The extracts are the original in Spanish and the translation to English has been carried out by researchers.

3.1. Family and Social Structure

The evolution of the Spanish society has been clearly presented in the movies, from the traditional Spanish family (such as *El pisito* or *Esa pareja Feliz*) to the new family structures and styles (and the difficulties involved in these new structures, such as in *Techo y comida* or *5 metros cuadrados*), with the interlude of the acceptance of multiple choices of family, as happens in *Asignatura Pendiente* or *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*. Originally, the concept of tradition was integrated into the idea of family, but also with poverty and union when facing difficulties.

“Que somos una familia pobre? Pues viviremos como si lo fuéramos!!!/Are we a poor family? Well, then we’ll live like one!”. (Raimunda Mom, *Volver*)

“No hemos nacido para ricos y cuando no se nace para rico se queda uno para siempre en su pobreza/We weren’t born to be rich and when you aren’t born to be rich you stay forever in your poverty”. (Eloísa to husband *El Mundo Sigue*)

“Hay que ganar dinero como sea, porque aquello del pueblo en un jornal, es para morirse”/We need to earn money at all cost because the daily wage at the village is barely enough to survive”. (Pepe at his family, *Surcos*)

Family and intergenerational conflict is a constant element in the movies. The differences of perception about life, love, relations, affections, lifestyles, social rules, etc., are clear and usually exposed in the films, in every moment of the analysis.

“O se tiene pasta o le dan a uno de lado/Either you have money, or you’re worth nothing”. (Pili, in *Surcos*)

“La deshonra es como el aceite, que se extiende y acaba ensuciando todo lo que está cerca/Dishonor is like oil, that spreads and ends up dirtying everything around”. (Eloísa, *El Mundo Sigue*)

The tradition can be transferred to superstition in rural areas as a way to show the different perspectives about life and death in cities and small villages. But sometimes, the perception of this superstition (or of religion as an element of union between the families) is not purely negative, it seems to be more naïve and utilitarian, serving the structure of the family as a primary socialization structure.

“Es lo bueno de estos pueblos tan supersticiosos. Para mí ha sido más fácil seguirles la corriente que contar la verdad. Yo pensé que un día me llevarían presa, no podía imaginar que nadie investigaría ni me castigaría, aunque todo este tiempo te juro que he estado viviendo en un auténtico purgatorio./That’s the good thing about these superstitious villages. It has been easier for me to go along with them than to tell the truth. I thought that one day they would take me prisoner; I could not imagine that no one would investigate or punish me, although all this time I swear that I have been living in a true purgatory”. (Abuela a Raimunda, *Volver*)

“Casarse en España no se casa una mas que una vez. Esto no es Hollywood/In Spain you just get married once. This is not Hollywood”. (Luisita, *El Mundo Sigue*)

3.2. Poverty and Work

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, films showed clearly the rise of a new Spanish Society, including the youth's aim for a better life (*Los Golfos* (Carlos Saura 1960), *Los Chicos* (Marco Ferreri 1959) and *Llegar a Más* (Fernández Santos 1963) are good examples) or the increased conflict between the moral framework of the regime and the new generations, with such different points of view regarding their love relationships (*Nunca Pasa Nada* (A. Bardem 1960), *Tiempo de Amor* 1962 or *El Arte de Vivir* (Julio Diamante 1964) and *Nueve Cartas a Berta* (Martín Patino 1966), for instance).

“Trabajar, Trabajar, trabajar. Qué tendrá que ver el salario con la vivienda? Aquí, el que no corre, vuela/Work, work, work. What will salary have to do with housing? Here if you don't run, you fly”. (Boss, *El Pisito*)

“Aquí o se gana dinero o le pisan a uno y el que tiene aspiraciones lo busca donde lo hay/Here you have money or you are left behind and if you have ambition, you go where the money is”. (Pili in *Surcos*)

The neoliberalism fantasy of property, especially housing ownership, has remained a continuous theme in Spanish social cinema. From the 1950s, with the exodus from rural areas to big cities (especially Madrid and Barcelona), to the 21st century, with the social problem of eviction and the social movements fighting for justice and a fair price for housing in Spain, all these expectations and perspectives have been usual in Spanish social movies. The stereotype of the urban lifestyle as a synonym of social success was consolidated before the death of Franco, reinforced at the end of the 20th century and has emerged as a social problem in the 21st century, especially from the groups with fewer chances.

“Un piso en Madrid vale más que mil mujeres/A flat in Madrid is worth more than a thousand women”. (*El Pisito*)

“Mire usted que la vieja no llega al invierno y el cuarto es muy hermoso/Look, the old woman won't last the winter, and the room is very nice”. (*El Pisito*)

“Qué te impide ser feliz?/what prevents you from being happy?”. (Constructor, *5 Metros Cuadrados*)

In these cases, this is used to talk about the evolution of Spanish society, such as the movies of *Camada negra* and José Luis Garcí's *Asignatura pendiente*. The movie making of Basilio Martín Patino, one of the greatest documentary directors in Spanish cinema, deserves its own mention, as he reflected the reality of the Transition and the forgiveness for the torturers in this era in the documentary movie *Queridísimos verdugos*, probably regarding the outlawed minstrel Renaissance and decline of the Spanish documentary.

“Llevo cuarenta y dos años pensando que lo que vivía no era importante, que lo que llegaría más adelante sería mi vida, mi verdadera vida, estudiando y trabajando como un negro, y ahora que esa vida ha llegado, no me gusta/I spent the last forty two years thinking that my life wasn't important, because I was just waiting for my real one. Studying and working so hard. Now that finally this life has arrived, I don't like it”. (Jose to his wife—*Las Verdes Praderas*)

3.3. Crime and Violence

Since the origins of Spanish social cinema, especially with the films of Nieves Conde, it is possible to detect a clear construction of a “right social identity” close to the doctrine. This director, a renowned Falangist member of the Dictator Franco's party, was the pioneer in reflecting in his films the difficulties of the social reintegration of people after spending time in prison because of the “socially deviated behavior” of the characters in his movies.

“Pienso que ojalá hagan lo mismo con mi madre, esté donde esté. . . ¿Ves qué moderna era? La única hippie del pueblo. Mira las joyas de plástico. ¡Un plástico buenísimo! Cada vez que me hago un porro me acuerdo de ella/I think I hope they do the same with my mother, wherever she is. . . Do you see how modern she was? The only hippie in town. Look at the plastic jewelry. A very good plastic! Every time I roll a joint I remember her”. (Agustina, *Volver*)

The evolution of violence also has been significant in Spanish cinema, since the “normality” of several styles of violence, such as gender violence, family violence, violence against children or mobbing, has developed into the actual visibility of all these types of violence, as a way of controlling and limiting people with fewer chances or opportunities. We can detect a change in the visibility of the problem, especially with gender violence in the 21st century.

“No man no. What I wanted was a topical scene, of topical sadism, elegant and sophisticated, like those seen in French films”. (Mom, *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*)

“Qué pena esa chica. Me acuerdo de que tenía un niño y se lo quitó la Junta de Andalucía/What a pity that girl. I remember that she had a child and the Junta de Andalucía took him away from her”. (Neighbor, *Techo y Comida*)

“Grita, esta vida no es vida, si pa’ acabar el día tengo que pelear. Lucha, porque tu voz se escucha y sonará potente si es en comunidad. Siente que el alma está valiente y siempre va de frente con fuerza y dignidad”. (Rozalén, *En los márgenes*)

Substance use also has been a regular topic in the Spanish cinema, with a change in its perception. Especially in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, the injected use of heroine was fully identified with the urban delinquency, being the core element in movies such as *El pico*, *Deprisa, deprisa* or *Colegas*. During the 21st century, the visibility of several substances has been less aggressive, especially the use of cannabis and its derivatives.

“- So with hard drugs, and heroin, nothing less.

- There’s nothing like this, man. Not weed, not speed, not tripe, nothing.

- What’s wrong, it gives you a very strong high, doesn’t it?

- More than that, it gives you peace.

- Peace?.

- Yes, peace. . .”. (Son, *El pico*)

“Mire, señora. Vaya usted al médico. Dígale que es drogadicta y que le extienda una receta/Look, lady: go to the doctor, tell him you’re a drug addict and ask him to write you a prescription”. (Pharmacist, *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*)

3.4. Social Identity

Originally, identity was strongly linked to tradition and was considered “the right way to do the things”. So, there was one “good Spanish identity” and several “deviated identities”. The creation and consolidation of this Spanish identity was one of the aims of Spanish cinema during the dictatorship, so Spanish social cinema had to be very creative and ironic to solve the problem of censorship.

“Todo el mundo sabe que me quedaré soltera/Everyone knows that I will stay single forever”. (Isabel, *Calle Mayor*)

“Llevo dieciocho años esperando/I ‘d been waiting for 18 years”. (Isabel, *Calle Mayor*)

“Yo también he renunciado a muchas cosas/I have also given up many things”.
(Conchi to her husband *Las Verdes Praderas*)

“¿Pero tu sabes la edad que tienes?”

-Si, treinta y Cinco

-Y de hombres ná, “mocita” como dice tu madre. Pues espábilate, que si no te vas a poner como la mojama”/But, do you know your age? Yes thirty five—And any men around! “Mocita” like your mum says, you better hurry up, otherwise you ‘ll get wizened and dry”. (Obdulia to Isabel *Calle Mayor*)

The opening up to different nominal and social identities created a new way of expression, releasing movie language from several taboos. So, it was possible to talk in the movies about the transgender population, homosexuality, menstruation and other terms impossible to find in the beginning of Spanish social cinema.

“- Mom, is it true that Agustina is coming to fix her own grave?”

- Yes, it is customary here”. (Mom, *Volver*)

- “La vejez viene para todos, hasta para las mujeres hermosas/Old age comes for everyone, even for beautiful women”. (Eloisa, *Surcos*)

“- ¿Estás herida?”

- No, cosas de mujeres”. (Agustina, *Volver*)

Gender and women’s identity have been topics usually reflected in Spanish movies. In the first moment studied, the role of women was clearly secondary, creating the expectation that the real happiness for Spanish women was to become housewives, have a lot of children and take care of them and their husbands and siblings. Every situation different to these was considered as out of the social rule and it deserved the group’s rejection.

“¿Cómo se te ocurre venir así? Dile a la mamá que te compre un sujetador”. (Nun, *Las niñas*)

After Franco’s death, the women in movies were usually working urban ladies, sophisticated and funny, with similar expectations than men. In the social cinema of the 21st century, women are more active, have more problems and, mostly, are at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than men, especially when they are isolated and have any specific characteristic, such as being a single mother, an immigrant or working as a sex worker.

“En el cole van diciendo que tu madre es una guarra, porque te tuvo muy joven, sin estar casada, y no se sabe quién es tu padre/“At school they say that your mother is a slut, because she had you very young, without being married, and they don’t know who your father is”. (Celia, *Las niñas*)

Regarding the LGTBQ+ collective, it is possible to find references in every moment of Spanish cinema, with differences in the presence of the characters. In addition, there are very respectful movies with this collective in every moment, but also it is possible to find stereotypes, prejudices and several types of disrespectful presentations in different moments.

“¿Qué me va usted a contar, señorita?/What are you going to tell me, milady?!”.
(Adela, *Mi querida señorita*)

Regarding social commitment and other types of social support, its vision has also evolved in social cinema, from traditional family support to extended support and the professional help of social psychologists and social services, prevalent in the movies of the 21st century.

“Hay un día, ya verás. Un día que es la hostia. Ese día todo es bueno. Ves a la gente que quieres ver, comes la comida que más te gusta y todo lo que te pasa ese día, es todo lo que tú quieres que te pase. Si pones la radio, la música que sale es tu canción favorita. Si vas a la tele ese día, por ejemplo a un concurso, lo ganas todo: el dinero, los viajes, todo. Pasa sólo una vez en la vida, por eso hay que estar muy atenta, no vaya a ser que se te pase. Es como un desvío. Como cuando vas por la carretera y hay un desvío hacia otro sitio pero a lo mejor vas hablando por el móvil o estás discutiendo o pensando en lo que sea y no te das cuenta y se te pasa, y te jodiste porque no puedes volver atrás. Pues ese día, es lo mismo: un desvío. Y es muy importante porque puedes elegir por dónde va a ir todo, por ese camino que es nuevo o no. Por eso tenemos que estar muy atentas Zule, muy atentas. Porque hay muy pocas cosas buenas y si encima se te pasan porque estás hablando por el móvil o pensando en otra cosa, sería una mierda. Una mierda completa”. (Caye, *Princesas*)

“Tú harías absolutamente, lo mismo. No lo harías si no lo ves, pero si lo ves no te quedan más huevos, estás involucrado. El problema es cuando te haces el loco para no mirar, qué es lo que hace la mayoría./You would absolutely do the same thing. You wouldn’t do it if you don’t see it, but if you see it you have no choice, you’re involved. The problem is when you act crazy to not look, which is what the majority do”. (Social lawyer, *En los márgenes*)

4. Discussion

The aim of this paper is to describe, regarding Spanish social cinema, the problems addressed and how these problems have varied over time in response to the Spanish social, cultural and historical context in which the movies were produced (Prieto de Pedro 1995) (see Table 4).

Table 4. Evolution of topics in Spanish social cinema.

Dictatorship (1950–1975)	Transition (1976–1995)	21st Century (1996–2024)
Poverty as consequence of the civil war	Poverty as a social condition	Poverty and housing problems
Family as value	Betrayal	Betrayal
Political censorship	Family as structure	New models of family
Sobriety lifestyle	Political exaltation	Political distance with citizenship
Repression	Funny lifestyle	Sad lifestyle
Darkness	Reinvention	Denouncement
Delinquency as deviation	Colors and light	Blue colors
Work as a value	Delinquency as lifestyle	Delinquency as a social response
Acceptance of situation	Money as a value	Poor workers
Exodus from rural to urban areas	Happiness for the new situation	Sadness with the situation
	Urban lifestyle as a privilege	Urban lifestyle as a problem

It is important to notice that during the 1940s decade, it is almost impossible to find any trace of what could be named as “Social Cinema”, not only due to the obvious censorship, which had already started when the war was going on, but also because most of the Republican directors, producers, actors and screenwriters had no option but to leave the country in exile. Another important point is the Spanish audience’s tendency to watch only international movies rather than the Spanish ones. Stories during this decade were based

generally on religion, drama, historical victories and folkloric comedy, trying to use the cinema as an important tool of propaganda. Regarding this period, it is necessary to point out *Raza* (Saenz de Heredia 1941), written by General Franco himself with the purpose of showing the features of “a good Spaniard”. This state of mind broke out from the early 1950s, when we can date the beginning of “Social Cinema in Spain”. Spain follows carefully the path of Italian Neorealism, without any of its technical characteristics (or only a few), but reaching so much (fighting against ironed censorship) for the same spirit. We can even consider that the audiences started “to see Spain” in this period, through the movies of Juan Antonio Bardem, Marco Ferreri (Italian, not by chance), Basilio Martín Patino or Jose Luis Berlanga, among others.

Using the logic of this paper, there has been a clear evolution of studied topics, in their depth and shape. There are continuous references in the movies to several problems that we can consider as structural problems in Spanish society: housing, violence, stereotypes, prejudices, gender and sexual identity and orientation (Moreno Martín and Muiño 2003). These problems are not exclusive to Spain, as we can find them as topics in movies of Italian Neorealism (especially in De Sica’s movies), British social cinema (with Ken Loach as the main example) or movies by the Dardenne brothers (Moreno Martín and Muiño 2003). The sensitivity of the population to these topics has fundamentally been one of the greatest successes of social cinema in the mentioned European countries and in Latin America (Feenstra and Hermans 2008). The pedagogical power of movies has increased and this has increased the understanding and prevention of these psychosocial problems, creating the necessary social critical thinking to change the mentality of the people (Shepherd 2022). Aspects of the changes in the perception of national identity (Saavedra Llamas and Calle 2020), with all the stereotypes and prejudices related to the subject, can be also detected in the movies.

Topics of substance use have undergone a process in which most of the characteristics have been moved from the vice and deviated behaviors, passing through the “culture of drugs” and “Caño roto” in the 1980s to the normalization of cannabis and pills in actual Spanish society (Molina Fernández 2024). The normalization of these processes can be also analyzed as a double-way sequence: movies have been influenced by society and social changes have been shown in movies as advances of new realities (Molina Fernández 2024; Feenstra and Hermans 2008).

Additionally, this sequence of evolution is multifactorial and nonlinear. There are several factors involved in the movies (economy, politics, sociology, psychology, medicine, anthropology and law) and it is possible to identify evolutions and involutions in the messages (Moreno Martín 2016, 2021a). There are fewer differences in the housing perspectives in *El pisito, 5 metros cuadrados* and *Techo y Comida* than in the movies of the intermediate moment, between 1975 and 1995. It happens too with the presence of extreme right ideology, or with the phenomenon of “poor workers” (Tezanos 2001), where one of the characteristics of the exodus in the urban context (the Paradise of Work and lifestyle in 1950s and 1960s movies) is rebooted in the 21st century (Moreno Martín 2021b), with a harder and tougher image in the most recent movies (Tan 2018).

Regarding indoctrination in movies and the way films show the ideology of movie makers, there are different perspectives (Sánchez Noriega 2018). It is possible to identify ideologies in Spanish social movies, sometimes despite the real political ideas of the authors. It is a controversial debate if the ideology must be reflected or not in the movies. Our opinion after the analysis is that ideology is one part of Spanish social cinema, but the evolution of these movements has been carried out with an indirect connection with political parties, except in the decade of 1985–1995 (probably, that is the reason why there are no movies from that era in this sample) (Sánchez Noriega 2018). To avoid or decrease

this controversy, there are practices such as collaborative cinema without an author (a type of social cinema in which the participants themselves develop the film adventure) that allow the questioning of the classic idea of film authorship and the subversion of the sender/receiver relationship (Sedeño Valdellós 2012). Its methodology is based on the renunciation of the recognition and ownership of works as a weapon of political struggle, completely transforming the new panorama of cultural and social creation (Gerbner 1969). Perhaps these phenomena are nothing more than the current manifestation of what once was auteur cinema, or arthouse cinema, a cinema that created possible worlds, as Foucault defined, worlds in permanent creation and rehearsal for others that will come later (Foucault 1999).

Limitations of This Study

This study has several limitations and it is necessary to recognize them to increase the validity of this study. In the method, the combination of “boxes” and “blocks” introduces subjective aspects than can project the biases of the researchers. It is true that we have used an intersubjective perspective and included a third researcher (F.M.) to decrease these biases, but it is still useful to expose it.

The selection of films longer than 75 min can be a limitation. There are short films in Spanish cinema, such as *Nuestra vida como niños refugiados en Europa*, *En el Segundo izquierda* or *Las cosas como son*, which can reflect in a perfect way the actual situation of millions of Spaniards and people living in Spain. This is the same with the IMDB marks where there are probably significant movies with fewer marks, not because of their quality, but because the part of the reality they are talking about. They can be the core of future research, more focused on the topics and less on the movies.

Also, the lack of some kind of tool such as the “Bechdel Test” to detect when and why are we talking about social cinema is a clear limitation. In future studies, it should be an objective for the research group to elaborate and validate this test.

5. Conclusions

The evolution of Spanish social cinema is linked with the changes in Spanish society, from the dark dictatorship years to the actual European framework, with their lights and shadows. The Economy, Political Science, Sociology and, for sure, Social Psychology are useful and valid to analyze this evolution. The existence of a Spanish school of Social Cinema was not the aim of this paper, but we can confirm there has been a sequence of action over the last 75 years in which the reciprocity between the movies and the society has been quite clear. The main problem of the Spaniards has been shown in Spanish movies. Studies from Social Psychology can show the evolution in beliefs, thoughts and patterns of behavior. We hope the insights from this study will inform future filmmaking and/or social policy in Spain, in order to try and connect reality with movie making and integrate these real life problems with policy making, increasing the visibility, sensitivity and commitment of movies in the elaboration of policies. Future research can include the impact of digital media on social cinema and the role of streaming platforms. Another future area of research can be the intersection of social cinema with other art forms (e.g., literature, theater). Furthermore, the results suggest the need to implement several actions to include Spanish social cinema as having academic status and the need for further research to identify a corpus of study named “Spanish social cinema”.

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