

# ***Spanish Lessons: Cinema and Television in Contemporary Spain***

**Paul Julian Smith**

reseñado por

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*Spanish Lessons: Cinema and Television in Contemporary Spain* inspects the Iberian television and film production that characterized the Spanish art scene from the 1980s to present. Specifically, the author, Paul Julian Smith, examines how, with their respective aesthetic and narrative characteristics, cinema and television fictions reproduce the social issues that affect Spanish society. Smith had already covered some of these arguments; *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* (1994), and, above all, *Spanish Visual Culture: Cinema, Television, Internet* (2007) traced the path to a multifunctional study that *Spanish Lessons* continues and expands upon with greater emphasis and sagacity. Such previous experiences have earned the author the reputation of being one of the major experts in the field.

*Spanish Lessons* is divided into three sections: “Film,” “Television,” and “(Re)Turn to Transmedia,” each consisting of three chapters. Throughout the book, Smith advocates for the implementation of a research approach that should extend “beyond the limits of Spanish cinema studies,” which seems to be too narrowly focused on a limited number of authors who “are by no means representative of the field as a whole” (1). Despite this exciting premise, the book dedicates the entire third chapter, “Almodóvar’s Self-Fashioning,” to the critical analysis and self-representation of the well-known Iberian film director. In this context, Smith analyzes *Los abrazos rotos* (2009) as a possible deconstructive autobiography of the filmmaker that “can be read in part as a series of reflections on current conditions for industry and authorship” (46). The resulting text becomes a launching pad for examining a Spanish cinematographic environment that reflects the state of a nation in disarray (2–3).

According to Smith, the multiple films and TV shows that he scrutinizes in the first two sections (chapters 1, 4, 5, and 6) have been mostly snubbed by critics. This the case of *Brumal* (1986) directed by Cristina Andreu, *Días de humol/Ke arteko egunak* (1990) by

Antxon Ezeiza, Juan Sebastián Bollaín's *Las dos orillas*, and *Caso cerrado* (1985) directed by Juan Caño Arecha. Chapters 4 to 6 pay particular attention to television and focus on three Catalan LGBT TV dramas, *Caricies* (1998), *Ventdelpla* (2005–10), and *Cites* (2015). These three series influenced the significance of subsequent queer narratives (85) in that they introduced spectators to the depiction of LGBT characters who had been absent or underrepresented in TV productions (76). The author points out that the same occurs in audiovisual representations of the construction boom and bust, which have affected Spain in recent decades. This last aspect is also explored in the sixth chapter, "Televisual Properties," through the analysis of three additional TV series, *Crematorio* (2011), *Con el culo al aire* (2012–14), and *Vive cantando* (2013–14), which explore how people interact with and within the urban space during the "brick fever" that challenged Iberian welfare.

The third section of the book emphasizes the interconnectedness between cinema and television since the 1950s (chapter 7, "Toward Transmedia: Past and Present of Cinema and Television in Spain") to the present (chapter 8, "A New Paradigm for the Spanish Audiovisual Sector? Popular Cinema / Quality Television"). Smith concludes that both media "can no longer be considered in isolation from one another" (110); instead, they both co-exist and reveal their full potential in the field of *transmedia* (chapter 9, "Crisis Fictions: Novel, Cinema, TV"). The author defines *transmedia* as the "coexistence of multiple media in a single text or institution" (5); according to this point of view, Iberian cinema and television of the 1980s are seen as two entities that feed each other through a symbiotic exchange, which, in turn, highlights the interdependence of one media with respect to the other. This polyphonic rendering of human narratives is an act of inclusion that testifies to a simple yet revealing concept: there are different ways to tell a story and they all contribute to its shaping. This is the common thread with which Smith's book explores how economic, and cultural studies intertwine with the entertainment industry, how the latter represents social issues, and how it proposes to solve them. In this regard, the author advises that the narrative style and content of television drama outperforms those of both cinema and literature "in its artistic ambition and social reach" (135), and consequently succeeds in challenging the status quo of cultural representations.

In summary, *Spanish Lessons: Cinema and Television in Contemporary Spain* offers considerable insights into a cinema that has become more appreciated abroad than nationally as people identify themselves and their daily problems with TV fiction (119) rather than big-screen productions. Accordingly, television fills the gap that traditional cinema has left open as it offers a more intimate view on current and demanding topics such as gender prejudice, precarious labor market, and housing crises. For these reasons, *Spanish Lessons* is particularly recommended to scholars of media who are interested in exploring the representation of contemporary Spanish society through different formats and for a multiplicity of audiences.