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Ocho apellidos vascos and the comedy of minor differences

“Un andaluz en nada se parece a un vizcaíno; un catalán es totalmente distinto de un gallego”

-José Cadalso, *Cartas Marruecas*

By most measures, there is nothing remarkable about *Ocho apellidos vascos* (Emilio Martínez-Lázaro, 2014). It is the most conventional of romantic comedies: a tale of disguise, misunderstanding, and mismatched and feuding lovers, who, after a series of mishaps and telegraphed false endings, wind up in each others' arms. It is also one of the most successful films in the history of Spanish cinema, if not the most successful. Within a month of its release in March 2014 it had surpassed *El Orfanato* (Juan Antonio Bayona, 2007) as the most seen and most lucrative Spanish-language film screened in Spain (Belinchón n.p). By the end of April it had also exceeded, at 6.5 million spectators and €38 million, the box office figures in Spain for the Spanish-made *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) and *The Impossible* (Juan Antonio Bayona, 2012), both filmed in English (Belinchón, *El País*, April 21). In its sixth week of release, *Ocho apellidos vascos* held on to the top spot in Spain against *The Amazing Spider Man 2* (Marc Webb, 2014), and in the end it grossed over €55 million (Reviriego 76). The only film, regardless of origin, that has attracted more spectators inside Spain is *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009).

The Others, *The Impossible*, *Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006), *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006) and *Planet 51* (Jorge Blanco, 2009) all far outperformed *Ocho apellidos* when international audiences are taken into account. Nonetheless, in Spain, much was made of the film's achievement in the domestic *taquilla* (box office), especially since it burnished a figure that usually causes hand-wringing in the local film industry: the share of the Spanish box office taken by Spanish-made films. In 2014, thanks mainly to *Ocho apellidos*, that figure was 25.5%, up from 14% the previous year. It caused hand-wringing of another sort as well. Influential critic Carlos Heredero condescendingly wrote of it as a “fenómeno sociológico”, and warned against privileging numbers at the expense of “una verdadera cultura” (80). Santos Zunzunegui dismissed the film as the product of “la dinámica de la producción televisiva” (81), alluding to the fact that it was produced by Mediaset, the film division of the television channel Telecinco. Álvaro Augustín, Mediaset's pragmatic Director General, meanwhile admitted that “[s]omos todos conscientes de que no es una película excelsa. Pero hay que aceptar que es el tipo de película que quiere ver el público español” (Reviriego “Factores”, 78).

Translated literally, the film's title is *Eight Basque Surnames*. When releasing it in the English-speaking world, Mediaset opted for *A Spanish Affair*, a title which loses a

critical local reference, but which perhaps captures concisely the parochial stakes of a work that found fertile ground with its national audience, but which was unlikely to ever connect with an international one. The “sociological phenomenon”, as Heredero describes it, also extended into other media. In early 2015, the Teatro Marquina in Madrid staged *Más apellidos vascos*, by one of the film’s writers, Diego San José; and Antena 3 launched *Allí abajo*, a television series directly inspired by the feature film. The planned sequel, *Nueve apellidos vascos*, is due for release in 2016.

Ocho apellidos vascos clearly is a sociological phenomenon, but that by no means diminishes its significance, nor does it exclude consideration of its formal properties and its situatedness within a wider field of cultural production. In this article, we consider the ways in which the film makes use of comic conventions in order to broach problems of difference and conflict. The conflict in question is the one between ETA and the Spanish state, a conflict which until recently has resolutely resisted comic treatment in Spanish film. However, as we will demonstrate, *Ocho apellidos vascos* has not emerged in a vacuum, but is in fact in dialogue with comic traditions that run from Berlanga to contemporary Basque television and the current trend of “post-humor” in Spanish and Catalan popular culture, particularly as disseminated on the internet. If *Ocho apellidos* has reached and satisfied such a wide audience in Spain, it is because it articulates a key message about regionalist and nationalist identifications in a post-ETA landscape. Drawing on psychoanalytical and other theories of humor and comedy, we show how the film is a careful work of compromise, eliding conflicts and dressing up minor differences as major ones.

Colores especiales

Ocho apellidos may not have been designed to travel beyond Spain’s borders, but like many “fish out of water” comedies, it hinges on a travelling protagonist. The trajectory of this travel is from the south of Spain to the north, from Andalusia to the Basque country, and back again. The traveller is Rafa (Dani Rovira), a seviliano, who first insults and then falls for Amaia (Clara Lago), a Basque woman visiting Seville. After a drunken, but chaste, night, Amaia leaves her purse behind in Rafa’s apartment, giving him the pretext to pursue her to Euskadi, against the warnings of his seviliano friends, who fear for his safety in the land of ETA. The intrepid Rafa makes the journey into the heart of Gipuzkoa, armed only with his *El Euskera sin miedo* phrasebook, but receives on arrival a frosty reception from Amaia in her home village. As he prepares to return to Seville, he suddenly becomes useful to Amaia, whose fisherman father Koldo (Karra Elejalde) has returned from sea, in anticipation of Amaia’s marriage to an authentic Basque boy, Antxón. But Antxón has abandoned Amaia, and she needs a replacement to present to Koldo. She convinces the reluctant Rafa to play the part, he in the meantime having landed in jail, mistakenly arrested for involvement in *kale borroka* (urban guerilla action).

The rest of the film involves the increasingly absurd integration of Rafa, now dressed in *abertzale* garb, into the local life, including leading an independence demonstration, during which he chants the words “Euskadi tiene un color especial” to the tune of “Sevilla tiene un color especial”. His main challenge is to convince his supposed future father-in-law of his Basque authenticity. He fakes speaking Basque,

claims to play *la pelota vasca*, and drinks plenty of *txacoli*. The center-piece of this series of tests is when Koldo quizzes Rafa about his eight Basque surnames. Rafa manages to summon up seven genuine Basque names – those of celebrity chefs and other luminaries – but stumbles on the eighth. Casting about desperately, he spots a poster of Athletic Bilbao on the wall, and blurts out “Clemente,” the name of the onetime manager of Athletic, as well as of the national football team. Javier Clemente was known as the boy from Barakaldo, but his name of course is not authentically Basque.¹ Koldo, unimpressed, still lets it pass.

The deception is sustained with the assistance of Merche (Carmen Machi), a woman from Cáceres who poses as Rafa/Antxón’s mother and who develops a crush on Koldo. As the conventions of romantic comedy dictate, the feuding of Rafa and Amaia gradually transmutes into affection and attraction. And in spite of the many palpable holes in the imposture, the story holds together right up to the altar, at which point Rafa drops the disguise and retreats to Seville. Some time later, Amaia returns to Seville, and falls into Rafa’s arms, to the accompaniment of Los del Río diegetically singing ‘Sevilla tiene un color especial’.

The film makes much of the “color especial” of each region and its inhabitants, as well as the prejudices each holds about the other. So, Rafa styles his hair with *gomina*, is chauvinistically chivalrous (saying “mi arma” instead of “mi alma”), and belongs to a *Semana Santa* fraternity. Amaia embodies a “solemnidad abertzale,” (El País, March 21) with straight fringe, and markedly asexual clothing, in contrast to the highly feminized stereotype of the Andalusian woman, in whose “costume” she appears in the opening scene. Koldo, meanwhile, fulfills a whole host of Basque stereotypes: he is emotionally reticent, approaches eating with great machismo, and is of course a tuna fisherman (*arrantzale*), or as Rob Stone and María del Pilar Rodríguez put it, “wilfully hermetic, proudly hedonistic, vain and prone to any argument or scrap.” (2015: 202). The most abusive stereotypes are expressed by Andalusian characters about Basques and vice-versa: that all Basques are cold, potential terrorists, and live in “las Vascongadas”; that Andalusians are lazy, *hortera* (tacky), and braggarts in matters of romance.

In Henri Bergson’s well-known formulation, comic characters are marked by a mechanical rigidity, an inflexibility and automatism in their actions (2005, 13-25). As comic types, the protagonists of *Ocho apellidos* fit well the Bergsonian model in their rigid attachments to their respective regions. The point is driven home by a further series of stereotypical identifications, or “channeling of diverse thoughts and feelings through one overriding principle” that is typical of comic characters (Stott 42). Rafa supports Real Betis, the authentically working-class *sevillano* football club, he wears a medallion of the Virgen de la Macarena, patron saint of Seville, and his cellphone ringtone plays the ever-present “Sevilla tiene un color especial.” Amaia’s cellphone is decorated in the colors of the *ikurriña* (Basque flag), and plays *txalaparta*, Basque folkloric music. And Koldo’s boat is named *Sabino III*, in honor, presumably, of the coiner of the word *abertzale*, designer of the *ikurriña*, and founder of Basque nationalism, Sabino Arana.

Arana is the ideologue responsible for the rule about the eight surnames: that perfect shorthand for the supposed obsession in the *País Vasco* with cultural and racial purity (see Kurlansky, 167-170). During the nineteenth-century industrial revolution in Iberia, Arana was concerned that immigrants to the Basque country would dilute Basque blood and faith. Following the rule of eight surnames is a form of endogamic isolationism: the test of a marriage's validity is that both sides can point to a pedigree going back three generations. "In its first years," Jeremy MacClancy tells us, "the Basque Nationalist Party would not admit anyone whose first sixteen surnames...were not all Basque." (2007, 107) Arana was also responsible for distilling from various Basque dialects a single regularized Basque language, a process that also took in the regularization of names, and so established which ones count as genuinely Basque. In the key scene in which the name Clemente is found to be not-Basque-enough, the absurdity of the rigid rule is exposed, since Javier Clemente was not just Basque-born, but widely admired as a Basque footballing hero.

If it is true that "comedy has an ingrained antagonism to rules" (Cordner, Holland and Kerrigan, 1994: 2), then the rule about surnames is surely the central butt of the film. What is more, the rule must also stand for any and all forms of uncompromising identification with region or nation. *Ocho apellidos vascos* counts on its audience immediately recognizing and enjoying the spectacle of such rigid regional attachments, and of the stereotypes that set up an absolute and non-negotiable difference between the romantic leads. The trick of the film, as of any romantic comedy, is to bridge in the end this difference and to mock the rigid identifications of characters who incarnate for each other and for the audience the (internal) "funny foreigner".

According to Alenka Zupančič, the funny foreigner in comedy allows an audience to experience its own foreignness. Extrapolating from the Bergsonian model, she claims that "We immediately perceive in these 'foreigners' what we fail to perceive in ourselves and in our fellow creatures, and what comic imitation reminds us of: the inherent rigidity of our own 'living personality'" (117). Zupančič turns on its head the usual assumption that the funny foreigner is an object of sublimated aggression. She might almost be claiming that the foreigner in comedy performs an enlightening function for an audience were it not that the self-knowledge engendered by this figure remains at an unconscious level. Nevertheless, Spanish critics who were otherwise disdainful concluded that *Ocho apellidos vascos* marked an overcoming of sectarianism, its success taken as evidence that Spanish audiences were able to laugh openly at subject matter that had previously been treated only with the utmost seriousness. Where it was previously taboo to send up *solemnidad abertzale*, here was a film that gave witness to the "desenfado" or "decompresión" of "el problema vasco." (Zunzunegui, 81). At last, many observed, Spain was able to laugh at the most significant historical trauma that it had endured in the post-Civil war era, and by all accounts Basque audiences laughed along with them (see Stone and Rodríguez, 204).²

"El problema vasco" refers of course to the bloody armed conflict between ETA and

the Spanish state that started in 1959 under Franco's regime, and continued after the end of the dictatorship. Running in parallel with the political demands of parties such as Herri Batasuna on the *abertzale* left, the conflict came to a formal end after peace talks in Donostia/San Sebastian in October 2011, after which ETA declared a complete cessation of armed action. This means that *Ocho apellidos vascos* appeared quite fresh on the heels of that historic agreement, and so was inevitably interpreted in its wake, indeed, taken to be a byproduct of the recent peace.

Shortly after the film's release Gregorio Belinchón noted in *El País* that although ETA had mainly proven sterile ground for comedy, it had generated upwards of forty fiction films, mainly political thrillers, by directors as diverse as Gillo Pontecorvo (*Operación Ogro*, 1979), Montxo Armendáriz (*27 horas*, 1986), Mario Camus (*Sombras en una batalla*, 1993), Helena Taberna (*Yoyes*, 2000), Emilio Martínez-Lázaro (*La voz de su amo*, 2001), and Jaime Rosales (*Bullet in the Head*, 2008). There have been many documentaries as well, most notably *La Pelota Vasca* (Julio Medem, 2003), which generated angry recriminations and political fallout for allowing space to voices from all sides of the conflict. In other words, far from a taboo against the representation of ETA, there were clear and accepted conventions for giving the group meaning through either the structures of suspense, or the framework of realism. In their comprehensive survey Stone and Rodríguez confirm that Basque cinema itself "can claim many things but the ability to laugh at itself is not yet one of them," citing the parodic *Baztán* (Iñaki Elizalde 2012) as a rare exception (2015 202), a title to which we should surely add the scabrous and ferocious *Airbag* (Juanma Bajo Ulloa, 1997), a predecessor to *Ocho apellidos vascos* as the most successful film in Spain.

Whether *Ocho apellidos vascos* is the film that changes the generic pattern and opens ETA and the Basque conflict to comedy is debatable. This is because ETA is not directly represented in the film and only appears in it at one remove. In the first instance it is no more than a fantasm, a product of misplaced Andalusian paranoia: after Amaia stays the night at Rafa's in Seville, Rafa's dim roommate Joaquín assumes she must be a terrorist and is planning to use their apartment as a "piso piloto" (Rafa corrects him; he means "piso franco"). And when Joaquín, Rafa, and another *sevillano* friend, Curro, examine the contents of Amaia's handbag, Joaquín imagines it to be booby-trapped. Once in the Basque country there are various jokes about "manifas" (political protests), and one scene of an actual protest, in which Rafa travesties pro-independence chants ("¡So-mos me-jores, que los Espa-ñoles!"), but nothing more substantial than street scuffles.

Apart from a poster in a bar demanding the return of prisoners, perhaps the closest the film gets to direct mention of ETA violence is in a revelation at the end. After the failed wedding, a drunken Koldo seeks comfort from Merche, whom he takes to be as Basque as himself, only to wake up to find that her house is a shrine to all things Castilian, and particularly to her dead husband, who was a member of the *guardia civil*. The film does not pause on this revelation, but it contains a heavy hint. What would be the main reason for a member of the *guardia civil* to move from Cáceres to the Basque country? To fight on the frontlines of the pacification process. And

members of what group were the most likely to die at the hands of ETA? Again, the *guardia civil*. Even this does not stop Merche from intensely loving her adopted country, in a textbook case of comic unconsciousness. If anything then, ETA remains a distant memory at the very periphery of the film, a structuring absence, but not a menacing one. Karra Elejalde, the only Basque actor playing a central character in *Ocho apellidos*, said of the film, “Cuando tienes una patología, es sano y pedagógico, muy positivo y cauterizador, reírse de ese mal” (March 27, *El País*). The film’s unprecedented performance at the box office demonstrates a strong appetite across Spain for such a cauterization. As we see in the case of Merche, so effective was the operation that the wound is forgotten entirely.

It is also not the case that ETA never received a comical treatment in a Spanish feature film. In Basque director Álex de la Iglesia’s black comedy *Acción mutante* (1993), the eponymous band of disabled terrorists kidnap a wholefood heiress and make their escape to the planet Axturias. The allusions to ETA are not even thinly veiled: all of them have Basque surnames, and in the opening mugshots a voice-over declares one of them “presuntamente homosexual” in allusion to the convention in the 1970s and 1980s of declaring any suspects in attacks, “presunto miembro de ETA” (see Buse, Triana Toribio, Willis, 46). One of the terrorist band, “Manitas,” is in fact played by Karra Elajalde in an important early role in which he at one point impersonates a Basque fisherman in order to throw intergalactic police off the scent. In writing the clichéd role of fisherman Koldo for Elejalde, the scriptwriters of *Ocho apellidos vascos* alluded directly to this scene in *Acción mutante*.

Comic contexts

In the view of Santos Zunzunegui, *Ocho apellidos* is too much of a writers’ film, with the director reduced to packaging a product, and visual qualities subordinated to a sequence of gags under the implacable eye of a commercial producer. No doubt Martínez-Lázaro was an accomplished *metteur-en-scène* for this film, which was for him a *película de encargo* for Telecinco Cinema. But the presence of Borja Cobeaga and Diego San José as scriptwriters deserves closer attention. Audiences, especially in the Basque country, had been primed for a film like *Ocho apellidos* and its ironic recycling of provocative stereotypes of Basqueness, because they had been widely exposed to this mode in television comedy from the pens of these two writers, as well as others who share their irreverence for themes that until recently have only been spoken of in hushed tones, and with great sobriety.

Cobeaga and San José were key writers on the weekly comedy sketch series *Vaya semanita* (2003-) in its first two years broadcast on the Basque public channel, Euskal Telebista 2. The show combines recurring characters and scenarios with satirical commentary on current events. The actual Antxón may be absent from *Ocho apellidos*, but in *Vaya semanita*, every central male character has this name, with every female character called Maite (the name Rafa suggests for Merche to play his mother, although she prefers “Anne,” an in-joke meaning she shares it with TV presenter Anne Igartiburu, since Rafa has told Koldo his mother’s name was Igartiburu). *Vaya semanita* sketches ridicule the Basque rural ideal, as well as the Church, universities, and of course politicians. It regularly singles out for mockery the

abertzale look and attitude: in one sketch an *abertzale* Mary Poppins instructs children in how to recycle properly, as well as how to denounce to the authorities non-Basques who fail to recycle properly; in another a woman seeks the perfect hair cut and colors for an “anti-taurina-sindical-feminista-ecologista y pro saharauí” street demonstration, the hairdresser proudly displaying how her haircuts have adorned the front pages of many newspapers on the heads of arrested ETA members. And unlike in *Ocho apellidos*, in *Vaya semanita* ETA is directly represented. During peace talks there was a sketch of a delegation of PSOE negotiators serenading ETA members to the tune of the 1980s lovesong “Juntos,” performed to the original dance routine. ETA members are depicted on *Vaya semanita* with heads covered with white hoods, eyeholes cut out, including in “Reserva de etarras,” another sketch made during the peace process. In this one curious tourists on safari are allowed to observe nearly extinct *etarras* in their natural habitat, delivering long lists of demands to camera, or escaping to the French border.

In other words, well before *Ocho apellidos* more timidly broached such issues, Basque television was spiritedly tackling them, and apparently without fear of repercussions. The difference between what is considered acceptable for regional television and what can be stomached by a national audience is made clear by Cobeaga’s failure to convince Telecinco to produce another project, *Fe de etarras*. In the script for this yet to be made comedy, an ETA commando in Madrid sets up a “piso franco” and becomes the head of the residents’ association. Álvaro Agustín turned the project down, saying that sensitive topics need to be carefully vetted, although he expected that it would eventually be made. (Belinchón, March 20) Another sort of vetting was applied to *Ocho apellidos*, which was billed as early as 2007 with Cobeaga as director, a role from which he was at some point removed. He did direct other projects both before and after *Ocho apellidos*, including a comedy about the negotiations between ETA and the PSOE government during the ceasefire of 2005 – *Negociador* (2014).

Comic treatment of all that Basques hold dear did not start with *Vaya semanita*. Cobeaga’s uncle, illustrator and cartoonist Juan Carlos Eguillor (1947-2011), had been doing it since the late 1960s. Working for national publications (*Nuevo Fotogramas*, *Mundo Joven*, *Triunfo*) as well as Basque ones (*El Correo Español-El Pueblo Vasco*, *Euskadi Sioux*, *El Diario Vasco*), Eguillor cast a playful and skeptical eye over (among other things) the foundational myths of Basque identity in a surrealist style. (See Unsain Azpiroz, pp. 10-18). His first main recurring character in *El Correo Español-El Pueblo Vasco* was “Mari Aguirre,” who appeared in satirical comics alongside other members of Bilbao’s hegemonic classes. Just as regional television in the 2000s was more hospitable to direct satire of ETA than a film destined for national projection, so caricature allows for more freedom in its targets, since as a form it is not dependent on large budgets or production controls. In a televised homage to Eguillor after his death, Borja Cobeaga was a contributor and acknowledged his influence.

In an interview in 2011 on the occasion of a retrospective of his own work, Cobeaga

did not mention his uncle, but did offer a telling myth of comic origins: at the age of five he was first exposed to Luis García Berlanga's *¡Bienvenido Mr Marshall!* (1953). The film was broadcast on television, and Cobeaga, in an adjoining room, was able to hear it but not see it, so imagined the images for himself. The darkly satirical *¡Bienvenido Mr Marshall!* exposes the backwardness and poverty of rural Spain under the Franco dictatorship, as the inhabitants of a small village compete to see who can be most obsequious in anticipation of the American largesse that will follow from a visit by Mr Marshall of the Marshall Plan. The film is taken to be one of the great triumphs of Spanish filmmaking under censorship, which it circumvented through allusion and indirect critique. It is generally assumed that this film, and others by Berlanga, such as *Plácido* (1961), *El verdugo* (1963), and *La escopeta nacional* (1977), are the seam from which the richest and most critical Spanish comedies have been subsequently mined (see Marsh, 2005, 113-28). Berlanga's presence may be only faintly detected in *Ocho apellidos vascos*, but it is much stronger in other work by Cobeaga and San José, and in the "post-humor" trend with which they are often associated.

In "post-humor" there are no sacred themes, no unnameable social phenomena that must be reverently discussed, tiptoeing around sacred cows, with a battery of disclaimers. It can be found in films such as Juan Cavestany's *Dispongo de barcos* (2010) and *Gente en sitios* (2013), in the television series *La hora Chanante* (Paramount Comedy Spain) and *Muchachada Nui* (La 2) and in online sketches by *Venga Monjas*, who speak for a generation disillusioned with formal politics and the democratic deficit. The term was introduced in the Spanish context by critic Jordi Costa to account for comic production that seeks to provoke discomfort rather than laughter, either through subject matter or style of presentation (See Iribar, n.p and Reviriego "Algo indescriptiblemente triste", n.p). In one of the most watched short films by Carlos Vermut featuring the Barcelona-based *Venga monjas*, the duo behind the show are recruited by a bereaved mother who asks them to make a tribute to her dead daughter, who was a fan of their work. The result is "Don Pepe Popi," a grotesque incarnation of a character originally created by the daughter. Presented in dead pan fashion, with no clear "butt" to the joke, except perhaps the mother who is unaware of the absurdity of the commission, the film offers no consolation for the loss that is its pretext.

Ocho apellidos flirts with the post-humor approach by circling round "el problema vasco," a subject that has caused discomfort and unease in Spain for decades. Its strategy, however, is to smooth over any potential discomfort and put its audience at ease with the difficult material that it broaches. One of the ways that it does this is by connecting its story to comic traditions with which the national audience was likely to be familiar. Casting, for example, was very important. Carmen Machi is one of the best-known television actors in Spain, starring for many years in sitcoms *Siete vidas* (Telecinco, 2000-2006) and *Aída* (Telecinco, 2005-2014), the latter the longest-running Spanish TV comedy, in which she played the titular role. Dani Rovira is also a television actor, prominent from appearances in the stand-up show *El club de comedia* (2011-2014). The film plays heavily on the trepidation of Rovira's character in the face of a frightening and unknown *País Vasco*. The presence of his face and

Machi's ensures the security of any audience that might suffer from similar trepidation.

The security of the producer is equally at stake in such casting decisions. In 1999 the Spanish government passed legislation obliging television companies to reinvest 5% of all profits in cinema production, 6% in the case of public television (see Triana-Toribio, 2013). Rather than simply write off this obligation by producing social realism or art cinema to satisfy the *Academia* (Spanish Film Academy) or ICAA (Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales), the production arms of television companies, such as Telecinco Cinema, have put filmmaking on an equal commercial footing with their small screen businesses. Telecinco Cinema will usually make about eight films a year, and expect two of them to achieve major success at the box office (Reviriego, 2015: 77). Since Carmen Machi is part of the Telecinco stable, it was natural that the filmmaking wing would draw on her to improve the chances of *Ocho apellidos vascos* at the box office. Such industrial determinations are just as important as current trends in Spanish comedy when analyzing the aesthetic sources of the blockbuster of 2014.

Humor, nation, and (self)-love

The term "post-humor" is of limited usefulness in the absence of a clear definition of humor itself. In his short essay on the subject, Sigmund Freud provides one that is directly relevant to *Ocho apellidos vascos*. For Freud, humor triumphs over suffering by replacing suffering with pleasure, or even translating suffering into pleasure. The humorist starts from a position of pain, but makes light of that pain, and in doing so asserts the "ego's invulnerability" ("Humor" 429). Freud gives the example of a condemned man heading for the scaffold, who comments, "Well, the week's beginning nicely," a statement that flies in the face of the painful reality (427). In earlier observations on the subject in his *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*, Freud argued that "humor is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it" (Freud, 1905, 293). Humor, then, comes to be where an affect once was, draining the affect of its force and substance. No great friend of affect, Freud considers humor a significant cultural achievement, just as he admires jokes for their linguistic economy and psychical efficacy. Approached from this angle, post-humor is "post-" in one of two ways. It either *remains* humor precisely because it takes as its subject matter painful subjects, but renders them amusing; *or* it treats these painful subjects humorously, but in such an ambiguous manner that laughter is not encouraged, as in the case of "Don Pepi Popi." Either way, it is certainly the case that Spanish post-humor prides itself on confronting "distressing affects" head on.

Freud had a low opinion of the powerful affect at the heart of *Ocho apellidos vascos*: nationalism. It would probably be more precise to say, in psychoanalytic terms, that nationalism is an *identification* that engenders strong affects. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud described with condescension nations' attempts to assert their unique qualities as "the narcissism of minor differences". Strikingly, two of the examples he gives are of "nations within nations":

It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love,

so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness. I once discussed the phenomenon that is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other - like the Spaniards and Portuguese, for instance, the North Germans and South Germans, the English and Scotch, and so on. I gave this phenomenon the name of "the narcissism of minor differences" (*der Narzißmus der kleinen Differenzen*), a name which does not do much to explain it. We can now see that it is a convenient and relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression, by means of which cohesion between the members of the community is made easier. In this respect the Jewish people, scattered everywhere, have rendered most useful services to the civilizations of the countries that have been their hosts. (Freud, 1985: 305).

Freud's dry remark about the "usefulness" of the Jewish people as representatives of difference and therefore internal objects of aggression reminds us that Sabino Arana's obsession with the *pureza de sangre* of the Basques was in fact an adaptation of an already existing obsession on the Iberian peninsula with assuring, from a dogmatic Catholic perspective, the *pureza de sangre* of the Castilian in the face of the Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of the peninsula (see Kurlansky 170-1). Freud also notes that some of the most passionately felt differences exist between those who share borders, a fact that he turns around, suggesting that the border is not a marker of an absolute divide, but simply one among many things that supposedly different nations hold in common.

Andalusia and the Basque country of course do not share a border: all of Castile separates them from each other. Nevertheless, there are many indications in *Ocho apellidos vascos* to suggest that the local narcissisms articulated in it are within the scope of what Freud called minor differences. One of the clearest cases in the film of dubious self-love is the running joke based on the song "Sevilla tiene un color especial", and its transposition by Rafa to a Basque context. The main refrain, and title of the song, are openly narcissistic, claiming a privileged difference for the city being extolled. After improvising through a megaphone "Euskadi tiene un color especial" at the demonstration, Rafa exposes the real thought behind such statements with his next chant: "¡Somos mejores que los Españoles!" The easy transposition of the song to a new context reveals the universality of its narcissistic message. As for "color especial," taken in its literal sense, the film also shows this to be a moveable feast. When Amaia arrives in a horse-drawn carriage at the film's conclusion in Seville, she is dressed all in green, a seeming concession to her Andalusian lover, since it is the color of the Andalusian flag, as well as Rafa's football team, Real Betis. But green is also the color of the Basque country, figuring prominently in the *ikurriña*. Far from being "especial" then, the "colores" of Andalusia and *País Vasco* are more or less identical.

The final scene of the film plays out a fantasy of extravagant Andalusian romance that Rafa articulates two thirds of the way through the plot when he attempts to reassert his origins over the Basque identity that he has assumed. At the time Amaia

takes this as proof of how tacky (*hortera*) Andalusians can be, and her enactment of the fantasy at the end is apparently evidence that she has embraced her lover's difference, and that the cultural divide between them can be sentimentally bridged. It could be argued, however, that the bridge has already been built in the film's first scenes. In a shot that is clearly presented as a fantasy from the perspective of eye-widening Rafa (change of lighting, fireworks in the background, careful framing by doorway and window), Amaia embodies a sexualized ideal of *Andalusian* femininity as she steps out of her polka-dot flamenco-style dress, back to Rafa, removing the clichéd carnation as she falls into bed, but keeping in her *hortera* earrings. Basque she may be, but what Rafa falls for is her masquerade of the Andalusian. The rest of the film sets out to show that with the right costume and props, Basqueness can be faked just as well, even by someone wholly lacking the wherewithal to do so. Each region may have its "color especial," but subject positions within those regions are nonetheless interchangeable.

Since at least Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* it has been commonplace to assert that identity is not natural or given, but must be performed, a theoretical insight that *Ocho apellidos vascos* fully subscribes to. But the key question in the film is, *for whom* is this performance? Whom does Rafa seek to convince of his *abertzale* authenticity, if Amaia knows perfectly well that he is not Basque and that the ruse is precarious at best? He first adopts the persona on the bus into Amaia's village, and then again when he is thrown into jail, on both occasions out of fear that he will be attacked or persecuted as non-Basque. For the majority of the film, however, the performance is primarily for the benefit of one character: Koldo, Amaia's father. But for Koldo, Amaia would have sent the sevillano on his way back south, and she shares Rafa's conviction that exposure of his inauthenticity would incur Koldo's wrath.

It is a fear, however, that is not borne out by the film. For one thing, for someone supposedly so obsessed with Basque purity, Koldo is suspiciously obtuse when it comes to detecting a cuckoo in the nest. He may interrogate Rafa on his eight surnames, but Koldo does not cry fraud at Rafa's many gaps in knowledge about the Basque country or his patent inability to speak *euskera*. We might take this as evidence of the blindness of the fanatic who sees only what he wants to see, except that the film makes clear that Koldo is no fanatic. On the contrary, after the independence demonstration, he chastises Rafa for the extent of his commitment to the cause, noting that the time for such passion is past. And in a key scene at the end of the film, when we hear Koldo's cellphone for the first time, it is a pointedly neutral ringtone, unlike those of Rafa and Amaia, which declare their regional allegiances. As befits his paternal position, then, Koldo acts as a sort of Lacanian big Other for the two lovers: a stern guarantor of national identity who is assumed by them to be making demands, but who in reality is doing no such thing and in fact lacks any consistency beyond their own hallucinations. If there is anything humorous about *Ocho apellidos vascos*, it is that the Other of Basqueness does not exist...

If Koldo is mistakenly assumed by Amaia and Rafa (and with them the audience) to

be a nationalist ogre, it is so that he can occupy a conventional role of romantic comedy: the representative of old age who puts obstacles in the way of the pleasures of youth. Generational antagonisms have been at the heart of domestic comedy since Greek New Comedy, with its repellent old patriarch standing in the way of the young, putting his decrepit desires before theirs (see Levin 94-7). The comic pattern, Wylie Sypher tells us, originates in a re-creational killing of an old king/father and his replacement by a new one that contributes to a cyclical ritual of rejuvenation (Sypher 216-17). In *Ocho apellidos vascos*, this formula falters, not least because of the film's significant modification of another convention of romantic comedy, the structuring role of deception. It is a fundamental rule of romantic comedy that one or both of the lovers, intentionally or unintentionally, deceives the other on some absolutely critical matter, often to do with their very identity. In *Twelfth Night* Viola swoons over Duke Orsino while disguised as his servant, in *The Shop Around the Corner* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940) Alfred Kralik and Klara Novak feud on the shop floor whilst unknowingly exchanging romantic letters, and in *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998) Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan swap letters for pseudonymous emails, the shop-floor for competing bookstores. The paradox of romantic comedy is that this deception, although it will cause a crisis when it is exposed, placing the romance in peril, is also the very foundation stone of the love relationship: love, according to romantic comedy, is *necessarily* built on lies, deceptions, or some form of subterfuge.

The convention of the necessary lie is the key method through which romantic comedy sustains, or at least admits, an element of alterity in the love relationship, when the main drive of the form is to unify the lovers, to have them "complete" each other. The element of deception in romantic comedy keeps alive what Zupančič calls "the funny ... side of the love encounter," that "lies precisely in the fact that the other ... is an answer to *none* of our prayers and dreams but rather, the bearer of an unexpected surplus-element that we might only get the chance to dream about in what follows." (136) In *Ocho apellidos vascos*, this surplus-element may manifest between the two lovers, but there is no conventional subterfuge: Amaia knows perfectly well where Rafa hails from, and makes no attempt to deceive him on any vital matter of identity. The necessary lie in this romantic comedy, the deception that makes the love relationship possible, is in fact of Koldo, of the father(land). Perhaps this is because the real love relationship at stake here is the one between the generations, and the alterity at issue is between the experience of a Basque, and indeed Spanish, generation that lived through a dictatorship and one that arrived after the regime, and the question the film asks is what use to make of that very real, and painful difference.

One might not expect to find common ground between the psychoanalytical Zupančič, and the schizoanalytical Félix Guattari, but on this matter they come close to coinciding. In an interview in 1981, Guattari said the following, in answer to his own question, "What is love?"

It is not at all the wish to possess partial objects, to take possession of a territory. It cannot be reduced to such a libidinal operation because it is first

and foremost the fact that in a closed universe, in two closed universes, things appear that previously seemed impossible. It's because of the fact that these two people, who both are individually encircled in themselves, in their families, in their egos, begin to see something else appear, some other possibility. Perhaps this possibility will be closed off again, recovered, or taken over by the form of the couple, by marriage, etc. But with love there is truly something *other* that is possible for me than the life I am leading. And it is precisely this, which drives sexuality, which drives the caresses, conflicts, jealousy, whatever you want. (2015 36)

Like Zupančič, Guattari thinks of love as an encounter that might produce something radically new, something that was not there before; and like Zupančič, who notes the unanticipated, and therefore “upsetting” dimension of love (135), Guattari observes that both caresses *and* conflicts can result. Love, to use a favored term of Deleuze and Guattari, is deterritorialising. Most romantic comedies at some point gesture towards this disturbing, deterritorialising effect of love, before putting the brakes on that *other* possibility, and returning to the safe ground of the same, usually by bringing the couple together as a “happy” unit. And so it is with *Ocho apellidos vascos*, which starts by threatening to wrench the protagonist wholesale from his territorial moorings and finishes by showing us how shattering the love encounter has been: after extended exposure to Amaia and the *País Vasco*, he has stopped wearing *gomina* in his hair. In between, carefully structured minor differences are safely negotiated, and resolved in a Church where the wedding may be abandoned, but a shared Spanish Christian heritage is silently affirmed. Is contemporary Spain this homogeneous place, unmarked by generations of immigration, not to mention the unresolved antagonisms of the Civil War? It is those differences - of religion, race, and politics – that remain out of view in *Ocho apellidos vascos*.

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¹ In addition to Clemente, Rafa summons up the following seven names: Gabilondo (Iñaki, journalist and TV presenter), Urdangarin (Iñaki, Duke of Palma, son-in-law of former King Juan Carlos), Zubizarreta (Andoni, football goalie), Arguiñano (Karlos, TV chef), Igartiburu (Anne, TV presenter), Erentxun (Mikel, musician), and Otegi (Arnaldo, ETA and Herri Batasuna member).

² The “decompression” of the Basque problem was also evident in the local elections in Spain in May 2015. In these elections, the Partido Popular candidate for the Town Hall of Madrid, Esperanza Aguirre, attempted to use the formerly reliable strategy of associating the opposing candidates on the left with ETA, but the strategy notably failed, and Aguirre ultimately lost the majority control that the PP had long enjoyed in Madrid.