

# 1

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is essentially twofold, although one element will appear more immediate than the other. It is in the first place to consider the work of a contemporary Spanish film director, Daniel Calparsoro, and to do so arguably in auteurist terms. The reasons for doing so are theorised more explicitly below, although anyone picking up this book might assume the approach to be already implied by taking a single director as a focus of study. That this study does not take auteurism for granted is suggested by the second element of its overall purpose, to relate the work of one director to his (in this case) specific context, the Spanish industry within which he makes his films. And in doing this it is not a question of simply enlarging the auteurist frame to take in more of the background – the auteur as dominant voice in a chorus, rather than as solo singer. It is to suggest the director as a nexus, a crossing point, of interrelated threads that go to make up the contemporary Spanish cinema scene. In this light, a study of Calparsoro should tell us something not only about Calparsoro's films but also about Spanish cinema of today and the ways in which it is studied, written about and presented. The present study aims to make explicit some of the ways in which certain films and production processes are implicitly deemed more desirable, more worthy of attention by academics, critics and audiences (with the recognition that these groups are not always distinct from each other: they may find themselves embodied in the selfsame individual). It does so first by studying Calparsoro within his industrial context. Part I of this book offers an overall presentation of Calparsoro and his total corpus of work to date in relation to trends and traditions within Spanish cinema, serving to problematise these. Thus Calparsoro is discussed against the background of specific developments in

Spanish cinema since 1995, how both the film industry and critics perceived these developments, and how perceptions changed (or not) after Spanish cinema arguably fell into crisis from 2002. It also considers Calparsoro as part of ongoing efforts on the part of some scholars to distinguish a specifically Basque cinema from Spanish cinema more generally, and within this the director's oeuvre as part of a more particular debate linking Basque cinema to the representation of violence as an example of the complexities of attempting to determine a Basque national cinema. Part I continues with a consideration of the overlap that can occur between director/auteur and another element of film industry and culture that has risen to prominence more recently in film studies, the star, and how the star can impinge on our perception of the director (and vice versa). The argument here is then placed within a wider framework, that of Calparsoro's use of female characters in his films in relation to trends of the depiction of women more generally in Spanish cinema. Following this overview of Calparsoro's interaction with the cinematic context around him, the study then proceeds in Part II to a more detailed discussion of Calparsoro's individual films with the intention of teasing out still further the interrelation of director and industrial/cultural context.

The overall twofold purpose of this study – the dialogue between auteurism and film industry and culture, and in particular the way in which film is critiqued – makes Calparsoro a particularly apt choice for the simple reason that, as I will argue, his specific styles and themes are at present at odds with preferred forms of filmmaking, and ways of interpreting filmmaking, so that his own films seem anachronistic in contemporary Spanish cinema. In fact, as I hope to demonstrate, Calparsoro's films suggest greater continuity with some aspects of Spanish film today than such a notion implies. Nonetheless, I would claim that the overall perception of Calparsoro at the moment is very much one of a director against the grain, and this perception tells us as much if not perhaps more about prevailing values within the Spanish film scene as about Calparsoro himself or his own films. Calparsoro formed part of a new vanguard of directors that appeared in the mid-1990s. This resurgence is widely thought to have derived to a great extent from the slicker commercial values synonymous with Hollywood cinema, induced not only by a growing difficulty in obtaining government funding for films (in contrast to government support in the 1980s) but also by a new generation of Spanish directors who had grown up not only without the impulse to

resist the ideologies of the dictatorship of 1939–75 but with the desire to make films like the ones they themselves enjoyed, which tended to be the Hollywood ones. Such an interpretation of the contemporary Spanish scene is of course reductive; earlier directors were not all necessarily interested in resistance to dictatorship and some were indeed looking for box-office success (mostly through comedy, a trend that persists today), nor have directors today necessarily dispensed with the desire to critique ideologies and values simply in order to churn out Hollywood imitations. In addition, the perception of the resurgence in terms of Hollywood carries the danger of neglecting the nuances that pertain in the Hollywood industry itself, which does not consist simply of box-office blockbusters. Nonetheless, the sense of a creeping Hollywoodisation haunts discussion of contemporary Spanish cinema, a perception that Spanish cinema is more closely aligned to commercial and high production values commonly associated with Hollywood.

In contrast to a simplistic assumption that Spanish directors today are moulded by US production values, Calparsoro has struck out on his own individual path ever since his debut feature film of 1995, *Salto al vacío* (Jump into the Void). In the process he has demonstrated the intricacies, conflicts and ambiguities that link a debatable national cinema (Spanish, Basque), the values of other cinemas both Hollywood and European, and also auteur style. Calparsoro's corpus of work, particularly the early films, is reminiscent of the older style of Spanish auteur with links to the *cine social* that recurs not only within Spain but European cinema more generally; but his style and themes suggest a contemporary figuration of auteurist cinema that includes his recent move in the direction of the war film with *Guerreros* (Warriors, 2002) and the growing corpus of contemporary Spanish horror with *Ausentes* (The Absent, 2005), thus suggesting that the director is neither totally divorced from current filmmaking trends nor confined to older forms of Spanish filmmaking. It is for these reasons that Calparsoro merits a more detailed and systematic study than he has hitherto received in either Spanish or Anglo-American scholarship. While he might not have the national and international status of other Spanish directors, his work garnering less attention than the commercial big hitters of Spanish cinema such as Pedro Almodóvar and, more recently, Alejandro Amenábar, he is nonetheless an important exemplar of Spanish cinema from and beyond the upsurge of 1995. Calparsoro can arguably be claimed as one of the

1995-plus generation (at the risk of saddling Spanish culture with another generational label to match those that pertain in literature): this generational conceptualisation is highly implicit in the two major works by Carlos Heredero, whose writings on the new generation of directors are now, according to Núria Triana-Toribio (2003: 147), generally accepted by Spanish academics and critics. Francisco María Benavent (2000: 12) is less enamoured of the notion of a generation, since he believes that the new directors might share the same age but not the same interests). Heredero's *20 nuevos directores* (1999) showcases the work of those directors who are comparatively new to Spanish cinema but whose films suggest the potential for prominence on the Spanish scene. Heredero's hefty *Espejo de miradas* (1997) provides lengthy interviews with these and other directors. Calparsoro is included in both volumes, which has done something to maintain a continued scholarly interest in his work. More will be said about this notion of the new generation of film directors in a more detailed discussion of the Spanish cinema scene below; at the moment it is sufficient to note the importance of the concept in discussion of contemporary film. Now that just over a decade has passed since that upsurge it is time to begin to look in more detail at what has endured into the new century; and looking at the corpus of work of a director such as Calparsoro is one contribution to this process.

This becomes more timely as the original impetus that heralded 1995 fades away and attitudes towards the upsurge – and the directors involved in it – change with the benefit of a certain amount of hindsight (in particular the failure in promise of some of the newer directors) and, as we shall see in Calparsoro's case in particular, a certain amount of exasperation that some members of the new generation could not settle down to either commercial success or a smooth transition to arthouse cinema. While Calparsoro's first film was hailed as evidence of raw talent, enthusiasm gradually gave way to impatience from some critics and reviewers with his style. Although academics have not been quite so quick to criticise, they have nonetheless devoted their attention to the very early work of Calparsoro while neglecting the latter (see, for example, Ballesteros (2001), Rodríguez (2002a)). The present volume will draw on these earlier insights, but will expand on them – in conjunction with my own ideas on Calparsoro's early work – to cover the later work as well, and trace the development of a contemporary director in the contemporary Spanish scene.

The stress I have placed hitherto on Calparsoro's positioning within contemporary cinema should not, however, obscure his links – whether intentional or not – to other, more established trends in filmmaking in Spain and Europe more generally. I have in mind here the strand of filmmaking that deliberately addresses local social realities – known as *cine social* in the Spanish context. A particular subgenre of the *cine social* has become prevalent in Spanish and European filmmaking, what I term the 'marginalised urban youth' genre. This involves films that revolve around the frustrations of young people in deprived urban settings with the lack of resources and opportunities in their environment. Calparsoro's first four films exemplify this genre, but what makes him unusual in this group is his emphasis on female protagonists and female subjectivity, as opposed to the sense of woman as other, as just one more unattainable and incomprehensible thing in a sphere of general frustration. Very few other directors in Spanish *cine social* do this. This offers another and very urgent reason for the study of Calparsoro's work.

The resurgence of Spanish cinema at the end of the twentieth century should not obscure the continuities with earlier forms of Spanish cinema more generally, of which *cine social* is one vital part. Although the marginalised urban youth genre may have become prevalent in contemporary *cine social*, it was not new. Carlos Saura made a notable contribution to the genre with his early film *Los golfos* (Hooligans, 1962) and later *Deprisa deprisa* (Hurry, Hurry, 1981), while Luis Buñuel provided perhaps the classic example with his Mexican film *Los olvidados* (The Young and Damned, 1950). It is significant that these are major directors in Spanish film history; previously *cine social* coincided with the height of auteurism in Spain, facilitating a distinction between cinema as high art – or at the very least social comment – and cinema as entertainment. This dichotomy between the two forms of cinema can be condemned as oversimplistic, not least because it frequently led to a devalorisation of popular and commercial vehicles. But the recent swing in Spanish film scholarship towards popular cinema, welcome as it is, should not blind us to the fact that this division is still with us and that we have not left behind the desire to make difficult cinema. The challenges to interpretation of arthouse cinema mean that academics, despite the turn towards the popular, are unlikely to leave arthouse alone for long. The disadvantage for now is that those directors deemed less accessible to audiences get less of the attention lovingly devoted to earlier directors who offered similar

problems. Currently, directors who do not fit the popular or populist model run the risk of neglect due to a dismissal of older models of film critique. Calparsoro's style of filmmaking does not approach the surrealism of Buñuel (though there are still some continuities, as we shall see in the discussion of his second film *Pasajes* (Passages, 1996)); nonetheless, his early films are not so slick or easily digestible as the works of other directors. Entertainment has filtered into contemporary *cine social* with films that offer heart-warming stories alongside a dissection of specific social issues; notable examples include *Solas* (Alone, Benito Zambrano, 1999) and *Flores de otro mundo* (Flowers from Another World, Iciar Bollaín, 1999). Calparsoro does not seek to entertain. His stories are not tied up with neat bows at the end: the early films – *Pasajes* above all – end rather abruptly. The sheer noise of some of the films, the incomprehensible dialogue, the sense of bleak annihilation and despair; all these are not easy to absorb.

For the above reasons, then – all of which will be elaborated further in the course of this book – a study of Calparsoro's films can tell us not only about the work on an individual director and the potential for auteurism in Spanish cinema today but also something about the wider national industry and culture and the ways in which they are perceived and interpreted, indicating that the auteur is neither a thing apart from a more pervasive cinema culture and industry nor subordinate to it or absorbed by it. I hope in the course of this study to explore in depth the intricacies of Calparsoro's films but in so doing to say something not just about him but about his context.

### **Calparsoro, theories of auteurism and the Spanish context**

Why discuss Calparsoro in auteur terms at all? Mark Allinson notes that Hispanists have preferred to use an auteurist approach to film, while critics in Spain have preferred a historical approach, both of which ignore the transformation of the Spanish film industry by the market and by an increasing preference for genre (Allinson, 2003: 143–4). Yet he also observes that this does not in fact mean the death of the auteur but reformulations of the notion: 'Young, hip Spanish directors are keen to exploit constructions as auteurs commercially while creating increasingly genre-based films' (151). This description of the contemporary Spanish director fits Calparsoro neatly as he moves from social realist film to the war and horror genres. It is reflected in the critique of his work which, as I shall discuss in

the following chapters, insists on assessing him in quasi-auteurist terms (in slight contradiction of the historical perspective perceived by Allinson). But while Calparsoro has recognisable links with the generation of 'young, hip directors' within which he is customarily included, his works have elements that either distinguish him from or problematise prevailing trends in Spanish cinema. In particular, the fact that since approximately 2002 and the putative new crisis in Spanish cinema (of which more below) he appears to be at odds with the main contemporary strand of Spanish film scholarship and critique allows us to consider the value of discussing the work of an individual director in terms of the cultural and industrial context. It is interesting, although probably coincidental, that the upsurge of Spanish cinema came towards the end of a revival of auteurist theory within film studies, which earlier fell out of favour because of its separation of the director from the collaborative production context within which he (and it nearly always was he) worked. The concept of the auteur has, however, proved a little too useful or convenient to disappear completely, and the 1990s saw a revamped concept of the auteur proposed, one that included crew, production, industry and socio-historical context as part of the field of study, but recognising that a director is not necessarily simply subordinate to these concerns. In particular, the auteur was allowed to claim both commercial and artistic success. Calparsoro himself has argued that the denigration of the concept of the auteur is a fear of, a way to ensure control over, the young director (Hereadero, 1997: 260): the revival of the concept has neatly coincided with Hereadero's figuring of contemporary Spanish cinema through the figure of the director, giving it – and giving the directors of the contemporary Spanish scene – continued critical power.

Timothy Corrigan argues for the contemporary auteur as 'a commercial performance of *the business of being an auteur*' (Corrigan, 1991: 104; italics in original) and goes on to comment:

In the cinema, auteurism as agency thus becomes a place for encountering not so much a transcending meaning (of first-order desires) but the different conditions through which expressive meaning is made by an auteur and constructed by an audience, conditions that involve historical and cultural motivations and rationalizations [...] the commercial status of that presence [of the auteur] now necessarily becomes part of an agency that culturally and socially monitors identification and critical reception. (Corrigan, 1991: 105)

Corrigan is writing primarily about US cinema, and there the word 'commercial' as applied to cinema has a different resonance from the European context. How does Corrigan's notion of the contemporary auteur fit in the Spanish context where very few directors have the commercial success of the Almodóvars and the Amenábars? In a cinema where commerce does not have quite the same power as in the USA – where funding comes primarily from coproductions, government cultural bodies and the like – how applicable is Corrigan's analysis for the Spanish context? Calparsoro may not have the financial clout of his fellow generation member Amenábar, yet he nonetheless obtains money to make his films, and thus has in the last decade succeeded in establishing a reasonable corpus of films (larger than Amenábar's in fact). The number of films in a resumé may depend on other factors as well as finance, but we can posit that Calparsoro is 'commercial' enough to continue making films. In any case, within Spain as elsewhere, the division between auteurism and commercial cinema is increasingly blurred. Peter Evans (1999: 2–3) observes that in Spain successful cinema of the last two decades of the twentieth century has tended to be associated with recognised auteurs. He also observes (3) an increasing convergence of auteurist or arthouse cinema with popular cinema, drawing on audience awareness of the codes of the latter. Thus Spanish auteurist films 'incorporate elements of the popular in texts that transcend postmodernist abolition of aesthetic boundaries in their pursuit of more thorough treatment of subjects that in popular cinema often proved for various reasons – say, commercial or ideological – too difficult' (4).

Corrigan suggests that auteurs fall into two broad groups. He first posits the commercial auteur, with whom 'the celebrity of their agency produces and promotes texts that invariably exceed the movie itself, both before and after its release' (Corrigan, 1991: 107). In the Spanish context, Almodóvar is an obvious example of such an auteur: his name functions as a brand label (and his films carry his name as a label in precisely this way: the title credit is immediately followed by the caption 'an Almodóvar film'). Amenábar, too, functions in such a way: his name is key in promoting his work. This chimes with Corrigan's suggestion of the auteur as star:

auteurs have become increasingly situated along an extratextual path in which their commercial status as auteurs is their chief function as auteurs: the auteur-star is meaningful primarily as a promotion or



recovery of a movie or group of movies, frequently regardless of the filmic text itself. (Corrigan, 1991: 105)

It is tempting to place Calparsoro into this first group, since arguably his name functions as label for his particular style and he, too, uses his name as a label in the opening credits much as Almodóvar does. He is, however, an oddity alongside the auteurs that Corrigan cites in this first group (Spielberg, Lucas, Woody Allen, to offer but three examples: Almodóvar might, however, fit here). But in Corrigan's second category we have the auteur of commerce: a filmmaker who 'attempts to monitor or rework the institutional manipulations of the auteurist position within the commerce of the contemporary movie industry' (Corrigan, 1991: 107). Auteurism here works precisely to destabilise rather than offer coherence, but it is not necessarily separate from mainstream cinema, in line with the blurring of boundaries that Evans observed. The '95 generation, in one sense, functions to auteurise the upsurge in the Spanish film industry without taking away from its commercial success, such as it is. I would claim Calparsoro as an auteur in this second sense: he destabilises current conceptions of Spanish – and Basque – cinema, while insisting on his own particular cinematic ideas of style, plot and character. His position as auteur is, moreover, a tool for this very destabilisation process even as he works within the Spanish film industry. He is in fact the auteur that Carlos Losilla seeks and fails to find in his diatribe against contemporary Spanish cinema (1997a: 40), the ideological and aesthetic dissident committed to his own solitary war but doing so within rather than separate from the contemporary scene.

Corrigan has received some criticism for his theories, notably that of Dudley Andrew, who argues that Corrigan views the auteur 'not as an individual with a vision or even a program but as a dispersed, multi-masked, or empty name bearing a possibly bogus collateral in the international market of images, a market that increasingly trades in "futures"' (Andrew, 1993: 81). Andrew's comment might be valid for the US case; it is harder to see its validity in the Spanish case, where the industrial and cultural context is small enough for some meaning at least to attach to the actual person to whom the auteur name corresponds: even while Almodóvar's auteurist style is becoming more diffuse (and abroad problematically equated with Spanish cinema in its entirety), the importance of Almodóvar as an embodied individual functioning with the Spanish production circle cannot be denied.

Likewise with Calparsoro: a good part at least of the meaning of his name still attaches to himself as an individual artist.

James Naremore concludes his theorisation of authorship and auteurism with a brief summary of the contemporary tensions surrounding the concept: 'auteurism ... mounted an invigorating attack on convention, but it also formed canons and fixed the names of people we should study' (Naremore, 1990: 21). Naremore then goes on to observe:

these tensions are inescapable, if only because writing about individual careers is necessary to any proper sociology of culture. Such writing helps us to understand the complicated, dynamic relation between institutions and artists, and it makes us aware of performance, theatricality, and celebrity. (Naremore, 1990: 21)

Hopefully, this study of Calparsoro will go at least some way to teasing out the intricacies of the relationships between the different component parts of the Spanish film culture and industry, and shedding some light on the dynamic between its own institutions and artists.

How does the process of auteur as destabilisation work? It is now time to consider that by looking in depth at Calparsoro's context and his films. But first there is one further introduction to be made, and that is to Calparsoro himself. We need to know who it is we are analysing and of his resumé to date – the raw data, as it were, of the forthcoming analysis.

## Background

Daniel Calparsoro López-Tapia was born in 1968 in Barcelona, of Basque parentage. He grew up in San Sebastián in a comfortable and artistic environment: his mother was an artist, while his father was a schoolfriend of Iván Zulueta, best known for his film *Arrebato* (Rapture, 1980), an exploration of the world and of the filmmaking process as seen through heroin use – a film which subsequently gained a cult following. A school dropout, Calparsoro got involved in gangs and even one or two hold-ups, and was expelled from four schools. In his interview with Carlos Heredero (1997: 25) he talks of having survived a period in his life at a time when some of his contemporaries were falling by the wayside, from drugs, AIDS or crime. His parents, appearing to despair somewhat of their errant son, eventually persuaded him to study politics, drawing and filmmaking in Madrid. After working on the production of *Ander eta Yul* (Ander and Yul,

Ana Díez, 1988), he went to New York and began to study film more seriously. While in the USA he worked on the New York set of *Sublet* (Chus Gutiérrez, 1992) and began to make video shorts, including *W.C.* which he brought back to Spain to exhibit. On his return to Spain he began to seek funding for his first feature-length film. The eventual result, *Salto al vacío*, was released in 1995 and had a great impact in that key year, including exhibition at the Berlin Film Festival. The international film festival circuit was also open to Calparsoro's next two films, *Pasajes* at Cannes and *A ciegas* (Blindly, 1997) at Venice. These three films all have the Basque Country as their setting and thus function as a form of Basque trilogy. Of the three films, *Salto al vacío* remains the most critically acclaimed, but the trilogy as a whole earned Calparsoro notice as part of the burgeoning cinema scene of the mid- to late 1990s, to say nothing of his inclusion in Heredero's clutch of new hopefuls. From his next film, *Asfalto* (Asphalt, 2000), we see a move away from the Basque Country to a more heterogeneous sense of setting and style, which continued with *Guerreros*, a virtually unique example of the contemporary war film in Spanish cinema, and set in Kosovo; and *Ausentes*, a horror film set in a Madrid suburb. *Guerreros* and *Ausentes* also suggest a move towards genre film – the war film and horror and away from the emphasis on urban youth that characterised the first four films.

Although Calparsoro's films always gained a mixed reception, from *Guerreros* there is a noticeable disenchantment with the films on the part of critics, although Calparsoro continued to garner newspaper interviews at the time of release of each film, indicating that a new Calparsoro film was still something of an event, if not quite the major event implied by the release of other films by directors who by now had made it bigger than Calparsoro had.

Calparsoro's venture into horror, however, has sparked interest in the USA, and the website IMDb (Internet Movie Database) Pro records that the director is now in pre-production of his first American film, a horror offering currently titled *Incident at Sans Asylum*, and in addition is slated to direct two more horror films for 2009, a remake of his own *Ausentes* and another, set in Kansas, called *Anvil*. The success of these ventures remains to be seen, but Calparsoro has clearly embarked on a new phase of his career, joining an increasing number of foreign directors making English-language films and making films in the US film industry. His fortunes in the US industry may modify our perception of him as director and as auteur in the future. For now,

as the Spanish phase of his career is put on hold at the very least, the present study should act as a summary study of this phase.

### **The Spanish context**

What of the context within which Calparsoro has worked? We have already observed that the Spanish film industry is generally credited with a resurgence in terms of both box-office success and entertainment value in the mid-1990s, around the time that Calparsoro began making films (see, for instance, Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998: 4–5). The new resurgence, generally tagged as a drift towards the commercial (certainly by older generations of directors who felt sidelined: see Benavent, 2000: 12), followed a downturn at the beginning of the 1990s after the dissolution of the government cinema policy of the 1980s, under the supervision of Pilar Miró. Miró's policy was to support films with high production values that appealed to notions of high art, resulting in glossy costume dramas and literary adaptations that delighted the elite end of the cinema market but which lacked box-office clout. The increasing lack of available funds for such productions, exacerbated by high budgets and some squandering of government subsidies (including grants awarded to films that were then never released), led to a reversal of government policy in 1990 under the direction of Jorge Semprún and a further law under Carmen Alborch in 1994, both of which insisted on government subsidy only after the event, ensuring that subsidies went to films that were actually screened and that subsidies were linked to box-office takings. Such laws pushed film funding closer towards commercial values, and these policies were confirmed with the change of government from the left-wing PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) to the right-wing Partido Popular or PP (Popular Party) in 1996, who embraced neo-liberal attitudes to culture in that the latter must stand on its own two feet without government support. There is some indication that, with the return to power of the PSOE, the industry and the critics are looking to change the emphasis again, away from the overtly commercial and the 'bad taste' films of directors such as Alex de la Iglesia and Santiago Segura.<sup>1</sup>

The new emphasis under the PP on films succeeding or failing above all in terms of the box office was not by itself enough to guarantee the appearance of new directors or stars, or the emphasis on youth culture and stories for contemporary young people that duly emerged under

the new aegis. One reason to connect the two phenomena might be that the newer directors, unfamiliar with the systems of government subsidies and the old ways of working, were better able to adapt to the new requirements and thus more aggressive in seeking out funding. Another factor is that newer directors had on the whole not grown up under the Franco dictatorship and had no real memories of it; they therefore did not experience the same impulse to use film as a form of oblique resistance to Francoism. They did not have the same compulsion to revisit the past, a fact that has worried José Castro de Paz and Jostxo Cerdán, who lament this divorce from the past as an erroneous move (2003: 36); their opinion being perhaps an example of a possible backlash against the new cinema discernible amidst the later talk of a crisis in Spanish cinema (which I discuss below). In 1995 new filmmakers preferred to make films about contemporary problems and stories, and they hired the actors appropriate to the newer roles rather than more established actors. Hence we have the appearance of a new generation emerging at that time, and the resurgence of Spanish cinema has become virtually synonymous with it. The sense that Heredero gives in his books (1997, 1999) of a new generation (despite his protests that the new directors are too heterogeneous a group to be labelled so neatly: Heredero, 1999: 15) reflects to some extent the breath of fresh air provided to the industry from younger directors not hidebound by the traditions of older Spanish filmmaking. Heredero posits that the increasing ability of young directors to penetrate the Spanish film industry has given the latter renewed hope for the future, perhaps almost too much so (Heredero, 1999: 15). Their tradition, if they had one, was the Hollywood one, as Heredero notes:

Quizás la dimensión más interesante y novedosa de este proceso resida en la combinatoria que se ensaya entre algunos de los géneros habituales del cine americano ... y ciertos moldes o tradiciones de profundas raíces en el cine español [...] muchos de los nuevos cineastas confiesan que vuelven sus ojos hacia determinados cauces genéricos, que son habituales en la producción americana, como arsenal del cual extraer la vitalidad que echaban de menos en el cine español de la década anterior, y cuya ausencia – según ellos – tanto les alejaba de sus imágenes y sus propuestos. (Heredero, 1999: 23)

(Perhaps the most interesting and novel dimension to this process lies in the effort to combine some of the usual American genres ... and certain models and traditions of Spanish cinema [...] many of the

new filmmakers confess to turning their gaze towards specific genres, common in American film production, as a resource from which to obtain the vitality they found lacking in Spanish cinema of the previous decade, the absence of which – according to them – alienated them from their images and ideas.)

According to this, Spanish strands of filmmaking were not entirely left behind; and the use that Heredero makes of the word ‘confiesan’ (confess) might suggest that somebody at least feels a little guilty about the turn towards Hollywood. We can perceive from Heredero’s comment an impulse both on his part and on that of the unidentified directors to retain some stamp of Spanishness on their work. If they maintained any Spanish roots it seemed that at least the political turn of earlier years had been abandoned: the new directors shunned filmmaking with overt political messages or attempts to change hearts and minds, but an ethical viewpoint was often still implicit, suggesting an ambivalent attitude (Heredero, 1999: 21). Núria Triana-Toribio (2003: 144–5) observes that the new generation as presented by Heredero facilitated a discourse about Spanish cinema as diverse, a notion that coincided with the policies of the government and of cultural institutions, but as she herself goes on to observe ‘not all the “cinemas” inside the tent of the national are equal or equally desired. The discourse on plurality, *prima facie*, disavows what is really at work within the articulation of the [Spanish] national cinema’ (147). Directors such as Calparsoro may thus function as an alibi for diversity in the discussion of contemporary Spanish cinema and thus be tolerated if denied access to the centre of the discourse.

Not everyone accepted the idea of a new generation with the same enthusiasm as Heredero. Carlos Losilla, in an article that implies Spanish cinematographers to be damned whatever they do, accuses Spanish cinema of lacking and being unable to create a true tradition (Losilla, 1997a: 36), being out of touch with reality (37) and obsessed with creating a US-style industry (40). One of the dangers of this last point is, he believes, precisely the danger of the disappearance of the dissident auteur:

la industria que se está creando, si es que así sucede, se basa en la desaparición de los autores, con todo lo que ello conlleva, entre otras cosas la eliminación del derecho a la disidencia estética e ideológica – que es, casi siempre, la más creativa, como demostraron incluso los mejores cineastas del Hollywood clásico – y la cada vez mayor imposibilidad de hacer la guerra en solitario. (Losilla, 1997a: 40)

(the industry being created, if it turns out this way, is based on the disappearance of the auteur, with all that that entails, among other things the elimination of the right to aesthetic and ideological dissidence – which is nearly always the most creative, as even the great classic Hollywood directors demonstrated – and the increasing impossibility of carrying out a solo war.)

Losilla's article is keener to find fault than to offer alternative suggestions but it does sketch out a notion of an auteur cinema based on a strong tradition and steeped in Spanish reality (although Losilla does not define what the latter might be). Although he readily dismisses Calparsoro (38) – who by this stage had made only two films – I believe that Calparsoro does coincide to some extent with what Losilla was looking for in 1997, a dissident auteur with links to a Spanish tradition of *cine social* but also rooted in contemporary Spanish realities, while not neglecting elements of Hollywood filmmaking. Losilla's critique is hardly fair to the '95 generation, who at this stage (1997) had hardly had sufficient time to establish a body of work sufficient to garner the label of auteur. Losilla is, however, indicative of some Spanish critics who seem never to be satisfied regardless of what their cinema produces; thus the auteurs they are looking for go unnoticed. In a similar move, Losilla accuses directors of being out of touch with reality, but, as we shall see in Part II, only certain realities qualify as 'real' and the poor *barrios* of the Basque Country in Calparsoro's films are dismissed by critics as simply a figment of Calparsoro's imagination. But, above all, Losilla demonstrates how debate about contemporary Spanish cinema revolves primarily around some concept of the auteur, a construct necessary in order to talk about Spanish cinema's new generation.

When singling out 1995 as a year of upsurge in Spanish cinema, the dual emphasis on a rapprochement with Hollywood and the new generation works to partly obscure the continuation and continuity with, in particular, the *cine social*. Many of the '95 generation have made films that could be described thus, and Calparsoro's work arguably belongs to this social-realist cinema which, Triana-Toribio argues, is still seen as the most legitimate form of filmmaking within the Spanish industry (Triana-Toribio, 2003: 155–6) and which reflects a Europe-wide belief that European cinema's *cine social* is the most effective counter to the fantasy worlds of Hollywood (156). As she goes on to observe, films prized by the Goya awards at the turn of the century include an emphasis on alcoholism and domestic abuse

(*Solas*), teenagers in deprived urban areas (*Barrio* (Neighbourhood), Fernando León de Aranoa, 1998), parental abuse (*El bola* (Pellet), Acheró Mañas, 2000). We could also note in this context the success of the gloomy *Lunes al sol* (Mondays in the Sun, Fernando León de Aranoa, 2002) about male unemployment, as well as the excellent film about domestic violence, *Te doy mis ojos* (Take My Eyes, Iciar Bollain, 2003). Amenábar, too, has drawn closer to this genre after his commercial successes with *Mar adentro* (The Sea Inside, 2004), a well-made if occasionally sentimental version of the story of real-life paraplegic Ramón Sampedro and his campaign for the right to die; although this was something of a departure for Amenábar after his previous three films in the thriller genre, his previous commercial and critical success was nonetheless a factor in *Mar adentro*'s own success (the film won an Oscar in 2005 for Best Foreign Film). Within *cine social* lies the more specific genre of marginalised urban youth films referred to above, and exemplified in *Barrio* and *El bola*, two critical successes in the genre. Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas (1998: 96–101) acknowledge juvenile delinquency and drug culture as a prevalent theme of filmmaking in Spain (and they cite Calparsoro's *Salto al vacío* as an example of this: 101). This coincides with what Carlos Losilla felt to be the easy way out for Spanish cinema of the 1990s: the avoidance of metaphorical filmmaking in favour of 'un cine pobre, humilde, desnudo, que indague en la trastienda moral de nuestro tiempo y saque a la luz sus miserias, sus sueños rotos' (a poor, humble, denuded cinema which investigates the moral underside of our time and exposes its miseries and broken dreams: Losilla, 1997a: 42). Jesús Palacios, however, found in Calparsoro's films the saving grace of an otherwise mediocre collection of Spanish offerings on urban youth:

Quizá el único joven director (o ya puestos, director a secas) que ha sido capaz de trazar una poética coherente y hasta fascinante de la juventud desesperada y rebelde o, mejor dicho, desesperada a secas, durante los años 90, haya sido Daniel Calparsoro. (Palacios, 2006: 378)

(Perhaps the only young director in the 1990s (or the only director, young or not) capable of delineating a coherent and even fascinating poetics of desperate and rebellious – or simply desperate – youth has been Daniel Calparsoro.)

Palacios sees in Calparsoro's first four films a mythical and poetic dimension lacking in most other urban youth films in which all too





1 *Salto al vacío* as cine social

often the juvenile delinquent is incorporated tamely into society. The only comparable film, in Palacios's opinion, is Ray Loriga's *La pistola de mi hermano* (My Brother's Gun, 1996), and this film as well as Calparsoro's work reveals a capacity for myth and poetry that distinguishes the true artist (379).

### **A cinema in crisis?**

With the hindsight of a decade or so, it seems clear that some but not all of the promise of the '95 generation has been fulfilled. Benavent (2000: 12) suggests that more people were going to see Spanish films in the latter half of the 1990s, but they were not necessarily going to see a wide variety of Spanish films; instead, they went for the top Spanish box-office successes. His comment reminds us that the mantle of resurgence is quite small and does not necessarily apply across the board. By 2002, according to Castro de Paz and Cerdán, Spanish film was in crisis with reduced production and distribution and calls for the return of protection measures (Castro de Paz and Cerdán, 2003: 28). Not everyone would agree with the crisis label: Pau Rausell (2003), for instance, argues that Spanish cinema's portion of the Spanish film market has never been that great. He acknowledges the years between 1994 and 2001 to have seen a rapid rise in feature film

production (up 140%), audiences (up 260%) and box-office takings (up 460%). All that has happened is that in 2002 figures dropped away from the dizzy heights of 2001, a year which accounted for the box-office success of Amenábar's *The Others* and Santiago Segura's *Torrente 2: misión en Marbella* (*Torrente 2: Mission in Marbella*). These two films were dominant in terms of 2001 box-office takings; the fact that no similar films appeared in 2002 accounted for much of the downslide. 2001 was thus simply an unusual year, and 2002 is no worse than can be expected. Or one might take the very extreme notion of Josep Lluís Fecé and Cristina Pujol that there is no crisis in Spanish cinema because Spanish cinema does not in fact exist, being simply a construct of the industry and the academics rather than of the cinema-going public (Fecé and Pujol, 2003: 164–5). At any rate, what does seem clear is that the notion of the '95 generation appeared to allow for a certain degree of consensus about Spanish cinema (which clusters around the figure of the director), and a positive one at that (albeit one that masks contradictions and neglect, as Triana-Toribio observes above). This consensus is now fragmenting as critics dispute whether or not Spanish cinema has fallen (back?) into crisis; and as the consensus crumbles, we can detect an element of backlash against the cinema of '95.

It is interesting to compare the sense of the '95 generation as critics saw it at the turn of the century, drawing on Heredero's work, and, for example, listings of the most lauded Spanish directors today, in lists such as that provided by the film magazine *Cinemanía* for October 2005. This film magazine offers two brief listings of successful Spanish directors under the categories 'fenómenos nacionales' (national phenomena) and 'generación española' (the Spanish generation). In the former category are what we might regard as the big, established names – so Almodóvar appears there but so does Amenábar, Fernando León de Aranoa and Santiago Segura, all of whom arguably come from the '95 generation and who have thus made a fairly rapid transition to the premier league. The 'generación española' might be considered to be those 'bubbling under' the big time, and covers many of the names from Heredero's earlier listings (including, rather curiously, Julio Medem, whose status by now should surely have taken him into the other category), but Calparsoro is absent, despite having made (and thus having been able to secure funding for) six films altogether (the most recent film, *Ausentes*, having been released shortly before). It is valuable to compare Calparsoro's case to that of one of the direc-

tors in the generations list, Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, whose resumé is very sparse but marked by international success. As the *Cinemanía* listing reminds us, he received an Oscar nomination for best short film with *Esposados* (Handcuffed, 1997), but also obtained cult international success with *Intacto* (Intact, 2001). Since this was Fresnadillo's only feature film to date at the time of the article (he has since directed *28 Weeks Later*, 2007), it would seem that *Cinemanía*'s list prioritises international recognition rather than a solid resumé that is nonetheless confined to the national sphere as is Calparsoro's work to date. Similar reasons might be deduced for the presence of Isabel Coixet, who makes films with predominantly American actors and in English, and of Iciar Bollaín, whose films also get an international release. Commercial success back home is nonetheless also valued; hence the presence in the list of Javier Fesser for his box-office success *La gran aventura de Mortadela y Filemón* (Mortadela and Filemón's Big Adventure, 2003) ('Directores: los que gritan "¡Acción!"', 2005: 204–5).

One should not, of course, read too much into these listings. But lists such as these may tell us something of the ways in which the industry – and the press that form a part of it – views which directors are 'in' and which are not. In this sense, by now, we can more than suspect that Calparsoro is no longer 'in'. On the other hand, it is worth noting that he is still able to make films in an era when, as Castro de Paz and Cerdán observe, a proportion of film professionals cannot find work (Castro de Paz and Cerdán, 2003: 30), suggesting in turn that Calparsoro's earlier cult success still counts for something when it comes to finding backers for his films. Unlike others who started making films in the mid-1990s but, because of lack of work, have not formed a reputation and thus still count as new (*ibid.*), Calparsoro has passed this stage and is himself now more established, without quite having the status to qualify as a 'national phenomenon'.

Heredero (1997: 247) describes Calparsoro's work in the following terms: 'Completamente ajeno a las tradiciones estéticas y narrativas del cine español, su obra bucea con pasión iconoclasta en la exploración de un universo desgarrado que esconde la herida de un romanticismo enfermizo' (Completely alien to Spanish cinema's aesthetic and narrative traditions, his work delves with iconoclastic passion into a world in tatters that hides the wound of a sickly romanticism). The key word here is 'iconoclastic', which I believe is a basis of Calparsoro's style much more than that of other directors, some of

which may have wished to break away from the styles and subjects of more established directors, but not necessarily with the purpose of being more challenging. Calparsoro's iconoclasm extends in a more attenuated form even to the later films where he appears to immerse himself in genres strongly linked to Hollywood; he breaks the taboo against tackling contemporary war films, and then pays due homage to horror while simultaneously breaking some of its tenets. As Heredero also posits, the iconoclasm hides a wounded romanticism which I believe to be a key element in Calparsoro's filmmaking and which I will discuss in terms of the melodramatic thread in his Basque trilogy, though I am less in agreement that Calparsoro totally eschews a Spanish tradition in terms of style and narrative, as his links to *cine social* attest. If Calparsoro seems at odds with prevailing trends in Spanish cinema of the last ten years, this is perhaps only to be expected from his comments to Heredero in an interview that Spanish cinema of the 1980s acted to make the spectator feel comfortable above all. He argues that younger directors want to convey ideas by making the viewer uncomfortable, generating more dynamic and nonconformist sensations (Heredero, 1997: 257). Calparsoro's comments apply well to himself, perhaps less so to the directors around him. The question of comfort or discomfort is especially problematic given trends towards the commercial, towards light comedy and towards sentimentality even in *cine social* (Amenábar's *Mar adentro* and Benito Zambrano's *Solas* exemplify this trend neatly). While Calparsoro incorporates a melodramatic thread into his Basque trilogy (as I discuss in the next chapter), his work has avoided simple sentimentality.

Calparsoro's style makes the critics uncomfortable, suggesting that, regardless of his own putative roots in an earlier Spanish cinema, his deviation from the increasing convergence of Spanish *cine social* and slick commercialism has irritated the critics, indicating in turn that their expectations, if not his, have changed. While rarely condemning his work out of hand, time and again they accuse him of poor scripts, mumbled dialogues and a sense of his work as rough and unfinished. Initially critics were prepared to put this down to youthful inexperience, but by the time of his later films there is now apparently less excuse. It is as if, since we are talking of a new generation of younger directors, that Calparsoro is the child that refuses to mature in the way his elders and betters would like, and his youthful failings that once were understandable and forgivable in his early days are not so acceptable now that he is no longer 'young'. Calparsoro's screenplays

come in for the worst criticism; and this, too, has its counterpart in discussion of the Spanish context more generally. Carmen Arocena's diatribe against the poor screenplays that, in her opinion, typify contemporary Spanish cinema appears to be aimed directly at Calparsoro himself, although he is never named in her article. She blames the scriptwriters for not writing the sort of films that audiences want to see and for not taking the audiences into account, and argues that reality does not simply consist of poverty, drugs and unemployment (Arocena, 2003: 92). Arocena also cites Juan J Gómez's interview with Fernando Méndez-Leite, in which the latter says that many films are implausible, inconsistent, badly made, noisy and interminable (cited in Arocena, 2003, p. 90). These two descriptions appear to have some relation to Calparsoro's work, though the comments of Arocena and Méndez-Leite in fact come across as caricatures of what is currently going on in some sectors of the Spanish cinema scene. They also indicate some of the expectations placed on Spanish directors today – for either works of art or slick, easily digestible films that do not provoke or disturb the audience. And if these criticisms seem directly aimed at Calparsoro, whether Arocena and Méndez-Leite intended it or not, this implies that Calparsoro is not readily going to fit into the critically desired panorama of contemporary Spanish film. But we must remind ourselves that it is what some sectors of the field *desire*; it does not automatically equate to what is actually going on – after all, despite these observations, Calparsoro still makes films and somebody is giving him the funds to do so. Instead, what we can observe is the aptness of Triana-Toribio's earlier observation that some films are more welcome under the diversity umbrella than others – and, if we only consider those films that merit the demands for quality of Arocena and Méndez-Leite, then our perception of contemporary Spanish cinema is going to be more than usually partial.

Calparsoro's films nonetheless receive due coverage in the press, and increasingly he can draw on fairly major actors on the Spanish scene to act in his films, notably Eduardo Noriega in *Guerreros* and Ariadna Gil and Jordi Mollà in *Ausentes*. In itself this does not prove Calparsoro a great director; it may show simply that in an industry that is small compared to the dominant US one, a director or anyone else in the industry can gain a comparatively large amount of – even begrudging – recognition. After all, cinema critics for the newspapers and magazines have a compulsion to cover Spanish films simply because they are critics in Spain and only so many of the films released

are Spanish. Nonetheless, in an era where funds are competitive and hard to come by, where subsidies are in short supply and much of the promise of some directors has only been fulfilled in part at best (including some of *Cinemania's* Spanish generation), and where the most successful options for directors are bland or bad-taste comedy, slick commercial thrillers or sentimentalised versions of social-realist cinema, Calparsoro's persistence is remarkable.

A consideration of Calparsoro, then, needs to include at the least a questioning of the insistence of contemporary reviewers on the weak points of Calparsoro's work in the context of what is currently happening in the Spanish film industry. This is not automatically to deny the possibility that the critics are correct, but the issue does point to the presupposition of specific criteria that prevail today concerning what is a good film and what is not. It seems that there is now less place for experimentation within the new generation of Spanish directors; while the label of *auteur* nonetheless grants an alibi to older directors whose work can still be thought complex in an arthouse fashion, Calparsoro is not allowed the same licence, precisely because he belongs to the '95 generation that was supposed to have moved away from the older styles. Thus one of the most overriding problems of the generational concept is revealed: although it functions as a useful shorthand for the resurgence of Spanish cinema in the mid-1990s, it serves to preclude certain types of film from the debate, and ways of perceiving film and directors that go back beyond this resurgence are also precluded precisely because they are supposedly dispensed with.

### Calparsoro and Basque cinema

In his early career Calparsoro was also confronted with the label of Basque film director, given that he comes from the Basque Country and his first three films use the Basque Country as a setting. Heredero detects roots in Basque cinema of the subsequent upsurge in cinema production by new directors (including Calparsoro), when in the early 1990s the quartet of directors, Julio Medem, Alex de la Iglesia, Enrique Urbizu and Juanma Bajo Ulloa brought a new impetus to Basque film (Heredero, 1999: 12). Joseba Gabilondo (2002: 265) includes Calparsoro in a group of Basque filmmakers recognised as crucial to the Spanish film industry (along with the usual four suspects mentioned above plus Iciar Bollaín and Arantxa Lazcano). This builds on the

earlier prominence of Basque cinema in the 1980s, of which the director Imanol Uribe was at the forefront.

The question of Basque cinema, as distinct from Spanish cinema more generally, has become bound up with the question of Basque identity as a whole. The issue as to whether or not there is such a thing as a separate Basque cinema is hard to disentangle from a desire to promote a distinct Basque identity that thus merits recognition as a nation – and thus, eventually, a nation-state – as opposed to one of many regional identities under a Spanish umbrella. The application of the label ‘Basque cinema’ to those directors who come from the Basque Country may be regarded at one level as simply a convenient marketing tool, underscored by the fact that the Basque regional government of the 1980s was a major source of funding of such cinema. But it was also a chance to promote a culture, a region and a history that had been oppressed during the Franco era and thus perhaps also to hint at the idea of an essential Basque identity distinct from a Spanish one. The prevailing party of government in the Basque Country throughout the democratic era – and thus the funders of Basque filmmaking – has been the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco, or PNV), a party specifically created to promote the Basque Country as a separate nation. The rise of Basque cinema, then, has always carried an implicit link to questions of Basque identity – questions which some directors have not wished even to attempt to answer – and these questions surface prominently in efforts to theorise Basque cinema. Although Uribe has been the Basque director most active in addressing the Basque situation, others have seen the Basque label as a trap, a potentially restrictive ghettoisation, and have either drifted away from the Basque Country both literally and in terms of subject matter, or used the Basque Country as simply incidental setting, or have avoided Basque elements of style and theme altogether. Calparsoro himself argues that a Basque identity is not possible in a climate of fear of the future and of modernisation, and is concerned about the possibility that nationalism can be restricting: an artist should not feel confined in this way (Herdero, 1997: 255). His remark that insisting on a Basque identity ensures that cinema is stuck in the past offers a link to the perception more generally and noted above that Spanish cinema also neglects the past in favour of the present.

Calparsoro, in fact, is one of very few directors of Herdero’s generation that has given specific and sustained attention to the Basque Country with his first three feature-length films. While Calparsoro’s

trilogy does not profess any specifically nationalist vision – even though the third film, *A ciegas*, has a Basque terrorist as protagonist – the fact that the director is telling us something about the Basque Country (its urban deprivation as a result of the falling off of earlier industrial and commercial success) is undeniable. In one interview Calparsoro insisted that the economic situation and unemployment are equally as crucial as nationalism in understanding the Basque Country (Rubio, 1996). So why does Calparsoro deny the label of Basque director? His denial may appear to chime in with the concept of Basque cinema posited by Jaume Martí-Olivella: ‘Basque cinema seems to constitute itself by its (paradoxical) opposition to its own existence’ (Martí-Olivella, 1999: 205). There have to some extent been attempts to package films by Basque film directors as ‘Basque cinema’, which has in turn led some directors deliberately to look outside of the Basque setting for inspiration, in a fear of ghettoisation. Martí-Olivella cites Calparsoro’s denial of the existence of Basque cinema and comments on the director’s remarks as a refusal to be imprisoned, ghettoised, in ‘reductive identity politics’ (206). Martí-Olivella compares this move to that of Spanish women writers and filmmakers who fight shy of being identified with feminism. But he views the director’s remarks also in terms of the inability of Basque cinema to ever ‘go home’: Basque cinema, like Basque culture more generally, cannot find its own home territory because that territory is understood as either too violent or non-existent. In this sense, Martí-Olivella argues, Basque cinema is a ‘migrant cinema’, estranged from itself (208).

Calparsoro is perhaps rather unfairly singled out, as other directors have either expressed similar concerns or demonstrated it in their filmmaking. Directors such as Alex de la Iglesia have rejected the Basque Country as setting, while others show ambivalence; Medem moved well away from the Basque setting before returning with a vengeance to make the documentary about Basque violence *La pelota vasca* (Basque Ball, 2003: the controversy aroused by this film demonstrates the dangers in attempting to go home), while Uribe has vacillated after his early work on Basque separatism. But if, as Martí-Olivella suggests, Basque cinema is always migrant and estranged to itself, what does this say about the interaction of Basque cinema with the Spanish cinema that overlaps it, and both held in the potentially suffocating embrace of US cinema? Martí-Olivella’s concept of Basque cinema appears to exist in an international cultural vacuum. Calpar-



soro, however – and he is not alone of Basque directors in doing this – responds either instinctively or overtly to traces of other cinemas, as is very clear in terms of his most recent, genre-modelled films. Martí-Olivella was, however, particularly unlucky when discussing a possible execution by the Basque terrorist group ETA at the end of *Salto al vacío*, which Calparsoro at the time denied was a direct reference to the terrorist group. Martí-Olivella offered this as an example of Calparsoro's tendency to deliberate self-estrangement from his own local reality by a refusal of local politics (Martí-Olivella 1999: 217); unfortunately, his argument does not take into account Calparsoro's *A ciegas*, which overtly acknowledges ETA.<sup>2</sup> Martí-Olivella's criticism of Calparsoro also neglects another, very real possibility in tackling Basque problems within cinema, the threat of a permanent sacrifice of individual identity at the service of national identity: Calparsoro received ETA threats while making *A ciegas*.

Gabilondo (2002: 266–7) prefers to describe Basque cinema in terms of the Freudian uncanny: 'uncanny identity is a negative identity, an othered identity that, in its negativity, returns to haunt the attempt to repress its being' (266). And 'Basque identity and its visibility recur with a violence that is clearly uncanny: familiar in its effect and yet frightening' (267). Gabilondo's theory of Basque cinema as uncanny refers to the Freudian concept of the uncanny as 'unheimlich' or literally unhomely, implying in turn a putative concept of home that also exists in Martí-Olivella's migrant cinema. This notion of home that underlies both concepts of Basque cinema threatens to subsume the latter under questions of an essential Basque identity once again. On this reading, by denying the label of Basque cinema Calparsoro and others may simply be denying the possibility of the Basque land as homeland. What the director demonstrates with his trilogy is precisely the fact that the Basque Country itself functions not as a home but a prison for his characters. The use of the term 'home' as a basis for these theories of Basque cinema does not take into account the fact that home can mean different things to different people, in particular women, for whom home may entail work, responsibility and entrapment.

These theories of Basque cinema ignore the possibility that has been posited by other critics such as Fecé and Pujol, mentioned above, that Spanish cinema itself does not exist. But they also ignore Calparsoro's own belief that such cinema is very much tied up with the past, and is thus a trap. The Basque Country in his films is all past

and no future, revealed in the dereliction of former industrial glory within which today's youth cannot find any work and can only rebel against those in authority, that authority being precisely symbolic of the Basque land and the Basque law. The only way of acquiring a future is to abandon the Basque Country and the search for an authentic identity as suggested by the abandonment by the protagonist of *A ciegas* of ETA's armed struggle and her departure for a new life. Calparsoro is not so much denying a Basque identity as simply demonstrating its irrelevance to solve contemporary problems. Hence he can make films about the Basque Country while denying the label of Basque cinema, if the latter entails laying claim to an essential Basque identity. Perhaps we should not be talking in terms of the migrant and uncanny but simply of the alienated, which sounds less theoretically elevated but, I believe, comes nearer to the truth as far as Calparsoro's cinema is concerned.

I do not want here to imply necessarily that there is no such thing as Basque cinema or that films from or about the Basque Country are simply a subset of a more general Spanish cinema. In terms of putative national cinemas, I believe there is a need to explore further the attempt to carve out a Basque cinema over and against a Spanish cinema. In the Basque debate, Spanish cinema is itself a term that remains undefined and uncontested at a time when the very existence of a Spanish national cinema is coming under question elsewhere (see Triana-Toribio, 2003: ch. 6). While this question cannot be addressed adequately within the scope of the present study, it is pertinent here to ask how this slippage between purported cinemas positions the director. What does it mean when Martí-Olivella highlights what Gabilondo would describe as Calparsoro's active denial of a repressed, subconscious Basque identity that supposedly haunts him? At the very least it suggests the intended subordination of the director to a national cinema: any director who denies the pertinence of such a cinema would thus require the therapeutic recovery of the national buried within his or her subconsciousness. If previously auteurist theory in its more traditional conceptualisation ran the risk of overestimating the contribution of the individual director to the cinematic process while ignoring the cultural context, such a rigid definition of national cinema takes us too far in the opposite direction. The auteur can never be entirely separate from his or her cultural and industrial context, but it seems to me highly problematic to assume that the auteur must be totally subject to it in order to be discussed

within the national cinema project. The need of a national cinema for the director is made clear with another comment of Martí-Olivella on Calparsoro's work (in this case *Salto al vacío*): this film 'becomes another powerful example of Basque cinema's shining paradox: to render visible its own invisibility' (Martí-Olivella, 2003: 112). This comment reminds us that a national cinema still requires films in order to exist, and for that to happen it needs directors, too. Perhaps the fear underlying the theories of Basque cinema outlined above is its very dependence on directors, without whom it cannot exist – a dependence that, as demonstrated by directors such as Calparsoro, is by no means mutual.

### Violence in Basque and Spanish cinema

One particularly germane question that illuminates some of the difficulties in positing a specifically Basque cinema is that of the representation of violence. The struggle over Basque identity has been and at the time of writing continues to be sometimes violent: there is a currently indelible association of Basque identity with violence, fairly or not, and that trace of violence has in turn figured within discussions of Basque cinema. Gabilondo discusses violence in Basque cinema, arguing that it is not confined to terrorism, and the 'Basque cinema does not represent violence but rather *performs the violence of the process whereby its identity is represented as other*' (Gabilondo, 2002: 268, italics in original), though this conceptualisation of violence once again relies on too narrow a link of Basque cinema with the Basque nation, and ignores the possibility that Basque directors may take their cues from elsewhere. Gabilondo posits violence purely in terms of the axis of Basque identity and the Spanish state (276–7); in itself this hypothesis neglects the possibility that the Basque nation (or certain elements of it, anyway) can itself 'other' people through violence, but violence is implicit in any unequal relationship and is not confined to the state.

Violence in contemporary Basque cinema has been noted by Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas as a particular trend among contemporary Basque filmmakers such as Juanma Bajo Ulloa and Alex de la Iglesia; and they remark:

among some of the younger Basque directors of recent times, we find a certain fascination with the excesses of screen violence and what might appear to be a knowing, self-conscious indulgence in physical

injury and cruelty. In some cases, such truculence forms part of a wider parodic intent, the impact of which is lessened by its very explicitness, exaggeration and excess, all of which tends to distance the spectator. In other cases however, the violence sometimes becomes transformed into a sensationalist visual spectacle. Blood and gore are fully and explicitly displayed for the specular delight and delectation of the audience, the horrors of aggression and physical injury are given a deliberately graphic, shocking treatment. Needless to say, the boundaries between the filmically warranted portrayal of the terrible effects of violent behaviour and screen violence as an aestheticised visual spectacle in itself tend to become seriously blurred. (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998: 191)

The question of violence is of particular import when it comes to discussing Calparsoro's work because violence is a paramount element within it and has been identified by critics as such, right from the opening scene of *Salto al vacío* with its apparently pointless killing of a policeman by a gang who themselves find self-expression difficult except through violent means. Violence is a recurrent motif in the Basque trilogy and *Asfalto* as part of living life on the margins. Violence in a war film such as *Guerreros* is in itself a defining generic characteristic, while it remains a latent possibility in all horror and thus in *Ausentes*. The issue of violence in Calparsoro's films has relevance in relation to the discussion of him as a putative Basque director, but also to Spanish cinema more generally and the '95 generation specifically; and thus it serves as a demonstration of how confining Calparsoro to the Basque camp is detrimental to our understanding of his own work. For violence has also been identified as characteristic of Spanish cinema.

Mark Allinson perceives the use of violence in recent Spanish film as an imitation of violence in US cinema, a way of catching up with the latter and a move away from 'years of introspective, politically engaged or otherwise commercially unpopular manifestations of violence' (Allinson, 1997: 315). Allinson comments of this historical trajectory that nonetheless 'most of these violent films are firmly rooted in a Spanish context, historical or contemporary, many telling stories which can be seen as being necessary to tell. There is almost an element of catharsis in their expression of repression, fratricide and torture, a kind of national purification of Spain's *leyenda negra*' (Allinson, 1997: 319). Calparsoro's use of violence can, however, be seen as a throwback to the earlier notion of violence as introspective and politically engaged – more reminiscent of the violence of some of

Carlos Saura's films such as *Los golfos* (1961), *La caza* (The Hunt, 1965) and *Llanto por un bandido* (Lament for a Bandit, 1964), as well as the excessive violence of films of the Spanish transition to democracy.

This is not to say that Calparsoro's work can be seen as a contrast to a simple series of American film clones, as Allinson makes clear when he refers to specifically Spanish cultural references that may be present or absent in different films. It seems clear that Calparsoro's films do participate in forms of cinematic violence that touch on the generic as well as the national. The violence in these films serves purposes related to the depiction of specific and localised issues (urban alienation in the Basque Country and Madrid, the apparently purposeless violence of warfare), but it also makes use of a more generalised presence of violence to imply that these specific cases are linked to violence as an endemic and pervasive form of expression and communication. It may also allude to some American films: references to Tarantino are commonplace in early reviews of Calparsoro, while individual films may also quote particular American films or genres (the contemporary war film, for example, in relation to Calparsoro's *Guerreros*: I say more about this example in chapter 7).

On the other hand Calparsoro's work does not fit with the grotesque, esperpento style of films such as Alex de la Iglesia's *El día de la bestia* (The Day of the Beast, 1995), with its approach of parody and black humour. In this I disagree to some extent with Allinson who argues that Calparsoro's first film *Salto al vacío* is another interesting blend of socially inspired conflict (though internalised) with an almost esperpentic aesthetic in the lack of sympathy for its protagonists' (Allinson, 1997: 329). The term 'esperpentic', suggesting as it does the grotesque, seems inappropriate for the violence we find in these films. The violence may be excessive but is rarely funny or parodic; it certainly suggests blackness but there is no humour within it. This accords better with *cine social* films about urban youth; the violence, arising from the frustrations of deprivation, is too seriously grim to include the least element of humour.

One of the key theorists writing about violence in Spanish cinema is Marsha Kinder in her groundbreaking *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (Kinder, 1993). Kinder posits two theories with which to analyse violence in Spanish film: René Girard's theories of sacrificial violence (Kinder, 1993: 140–50), and the Oedipal narrative (197–200). While some cinematic violence may certainly operate in this way in the Spanish context, there is nothing to say that

all film violence has this function, and, while Kinder nowhere claims her theories to be exhaustive, it is nonetheless a lack that there is no sustained link between violence and urban deprivation. By the time of the '95 generation, with democracy well established, it is harder to see how violence in these films serves as sacrificial ritual or Oedipal narrative beyond the notion of Spanish youth as the scapegoats of economic policies in Spain and elsewhere, policies decided by their elders without reference to them. But violence in contemporary cinema has also on another level reflected moves in some quarters away from the use of violence as a metaphor for Francoist repression and also towards a use of violence more closely aligned with Hollywood. Kinder commented of the situation up to the time of writing (1993):

this oppositional system of violent representation developed against a double hegemony: domestically, it had to be distinguished from the conventions of the Counter-Reformation (particularly as remolded by the Francoist aesthetic), where violence was eroticized as ritual sacrifice; globally and commercially, it had to be distinguished from Hollywood's valorization of violence as a dramatic agent of moral change. (Kinder, 1993: 138)

But this system has become more diffuse since then, and directors such as Amenábar in particular and those who make horror films have produced representations of violence more akin to that of mainstream US cinema as Allinson argues (which may also function as spectacle as much as dramatic agent of moral change). On the other hand, as Kinder also observes, violence has historically been linked with Spanish auteurism (137), and this way of viewing the use of violence still persists. This would appear to persist in Calparsoro's case at least: critics quickly perceived violence as a specific trademark. The continuity with the cinema of the Franco era may help us to rethink the violence of the earlier cinema not simply in terms of opposition to Franco (though it certainly enacts this). But violence also expresses other ways in which the social fabric has been torn, and therefore forms a more generic element of *cine social*. Yet Calparsoro's use of violence also reflects the more nihilistic tendencies of some US cinema, thus problematising a split in the consideration of violence between Spain and Hollywood.

Calparsoro himself argues that the whole cinematic process is violent:

te metes en una sala oscura y te asaltan. Cuando colocas la cámara delante de un actor, con veinticinco personas mirándolo y el director dándole órdenes, estás ejerciendo violencia sobre él. Todo lo que se mueve para cambiar las cosas también es violento, pero lo que me interesa es la violencia como motor, no como regodeo. (Herdero, 1997: 269)

(you go into a dark room and are assaulted. When you place the camera in front of an actor, with twenty-five people looking at him and the director giving him orders, you are doing violence to him. Anything that moves to change things is violent, too, but what interests me is violence as motivation rather than pleasure.)

He continues by saying that he is more interested in conveying the true experience of death and the internal effects of violence rather than violence as spectacle (Herdero, 1997: 270). For Calparsoro, then, violence is an inherent part of any form of cinema so that, while it may explicitly express localised forms of violence, violence and cinema are more universally related. Although the comparison to Tarantino suggests an excessive use of violence for sheer spectacle, the director declares himself more concerned with audience empathy: we are to experience the violence that the characters undergo as directly as possible, to enter into it, rather than sit back and view it as entertainment. Of course, this goal is a utopian one, as our experiences of filmic violence can never be immediate but must always be mediated; and the impossibility of this aim induces in us a sense of frustration



2 Chino gets violent in *Asfalto*

and bewilderment to match that of many of Calparsoro's characters. Calparsoro's use of violence, then, has some connection with the earlier Spanish auteurist use of violence in cinema before 1995, and also with the desire to expose the contradictions in contemporary Basque and Spanish society, but it is not obvious that the violence functions in metaphorical terms as Kinder proposed, simply a symbol of something else. Calparsoro's violence is 'pure' in the sense that it stands above all for itself: it does not represent anything else – it simply *is*. Calparsoro tells us of violence, rather than using violence to tell us of something else.

To conclude, the motif of violence in Calparsoro's films can be perceived within more than one framework, and the use of it by contemporary directors indicates some of the problems raised by attempting to distinguish Basque violence, within Basque cinema, from Spanish violence and Spanish cinema. Gabilondo's hypothesis, outlined above, does not take into account the pressure placed on both cinemas by the dominance of US filmmaking, the interrelation between traditions and trends in Spanish and Basque filmmaking and the fact that violence is not confined to the Spanish state. This is not to say that cinema can never reflect the 'othering' process perpetrated by the Spanish state on Basque identities as Gabilondo posits: such a process does indeed go on. Nor is it to say that theoretical frameworks should not be attempted within which to discuss a specifically Basque cinema. It is to say, however, that such frameworks run the risk of being out of step with cinematic trends in the Iberian peninsula, of neglecting the overlap with Spanish and other cinemas and of constricting the interpretation of a director's work. In the latter case, the simultaneous awareness of an auteurist framework can help to counteract this, as this brief discussion of Calparsoro in the light of Basque/Spanish cinematic violence should make clear. Calparsoro's films might well conform to Gabilondo's hypothesis of the othering process of the Spanish state but, as we shall see in the chapters on the individual films, there are other ways of looking at the question.

## Notes

- 1 Conversation with Núria Triana-Toribio, 2 March 2006.
- 2 *A ciegas* may not have been released at the time Martí-Olivella was writing, although it had been released before publication.