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The Development of Child Subjectivity in *La lengua de las mariposas*

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Abstract: José Luis Cuerda's film *La lengua de las mariposas* is set in rural Galicia in the immediate lead-up to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. It portrays the tender relationship between a Republican schoolteacher, Don Gregorio, and a boy named Moncho. Upon the Nationalist capture of the town, the young Moncho hurls stones at his friend, but while doing so, he shouts the word *espiritrompa*, thereby referring to a type of butterfly. This final scene of the film has proved to be theoretically contentious, as some theorists alternatively interpret it as the triumph of violence and the end of Moncho's childhood, while others consider it a coded message of complicity. This article substantiates the latter view by tracing and analyzing the development of Moncho's interpretative ability, a task that involves a rereading of the film's key scenes. I contend that Moncho evidences throughout the film a capacity to contest established social mores, and to enact both subtle and direct displays of interpretative agency, an ability that reconceives childhood as a relatively autonomous developmental phase. Under this trajectory of thought, the final scene marks Moncho's transformation into a sophisticated and skilled agent of not only signification, but also of the higher-order skill of discursive resistance.

Keywords: child/niño, contemporary Spanish cinema/cine español contemporánea, contemporary Spanish culture/cultura español contemporánea, José Luis Cuerda, *La lengua de las mariposas*, memory boom/boom de la memoria

Introduction

José Luis Cuerda's film *La lengua de las mariposas* is set in rural Galicia in the immediate lead-up to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. It is based on three short stories by Manuel Rivas, namely "La lengua de las mariposas," "Un saxo en la niebla," and "Carmita," all of which are featured in the book *¿Qué me quieres, amor?* (Rojas Gordillo). It portrays the tender relationship between a Republican schoolteacher, Don Gregorio, and a boy named Moncho, who dreads going to school, a fear which is alleviated by his teacher's kind and soothing manner. Don Gregorio subsequently shares his knowledge of nature with the young boy, and the two become firm friends. Although Moncho's family likes and respects the gentlemanly and cultivated teacher, upon the Nationalist capture of the town, they participate in his public humiliation, as they fear that unconformity could result in punishment. After Sunday mass, Moncho and his family join a crowd, which watches with a mixture of trepidation and righteous anger the rounding up of known Republicans, one of whom is Don Gregorio.¹ Assenting to his mother's bidding to insult the passing Republicans, Moncho begins to call his friend "ateo" and "rojo," and, along with other children, throws stones at the truck that carries away the Republicans. While he shouts numerous invectives, he also utters the word *espiritrompa*, (literally "spirotube" or proboscis, in effect, the butterfly's tongue of the film's title).

Moncho's choice of terminology, which he learned during his nature walks with Don Gregorio, allows for the possibility that he is covertly communicating his support and his sympathy for his plight to Don Gregorio. Theorists are divided as to the actual meaning of the final scene. María Teresa García-Abad García (234) and Antonio Gómez López-Quiñones (239)

interpret it as an indictment of the triumph of violence over rationality. Teresa González Arce views the scene as signaling the end of Moncho's childhood: "El descubrimiento de la maldad, el odio y la cobardía en su comunidad, en su familia y en él mismo, significa para Moncho un abandono definitivo de ese paraíso que es la infancia" (138). Her opinion is echoed by Francis Lough, who considers that it has a destructive effect on Moncho's interfamilial relations: "[T]he tenderness and love that is felt by the two brothers, each in his own way, are only some of the things swept aside by the arrival of the war and Moncho's attack on Don Gregorio. Not only does the war destroy a peaceful existence in which two young boys are at different stages of emotional and psychological development, but it also threatens to poison this innocence by a falsely constructed hatred imposed out of fear" (153). For others, it constitutes an act of resistance; indeed, it has evolved into a metaphor for surreptitious communication processes: "[L]amo lengua de las mariposas a la manera en que un texto dice ocultamente lo que no ha podido decir abiertamente a ningún nivel" (Baena 510).

Taking this scene as my point of departure, I analyze in this study the evolution of Moncho's interpretative agency, a task which requires a rereading of the film's key scenes. I contend that, throughout the film, Moncho demonstrates a capacity to contest established social mores, and to enact both subtle and direct displays of resistance, an ability which reenvisioned childhood as a developmental phase whose progress is determined, in large part, by the child himself. Far from being constricted by the typical adult restriction of the child's world, in *La lengua de las mariposas*, childhood constitutes a site of resistance. The amalgamation of Moncho's unknowingness, which means he is not as enmeshed in polarizing ideologies as adults, and the typical child's assimilation process that prioritizes emotional connection rather than ideological affiliation, confers Moncho with an uncanny capacity to decipher social codes, and to then personalize them in the form of acceptance or rejection. Moncho's interpretative agency, developed throughout the film, enables him to withstand the coercive power of social ills, and hinder their potentially detrimental effect on his individuality. Through scenes in the churchyard, school, and home, *La lengua de las mariposas* casts Moncho as a relatively independent child who is fully capable of construing oppositional meanings to those envisaged by the dominant ideology. Not only that, but the young boy also asserts his burgeoning agency by physically combating both class superiority in the playground scene with José Luis, the son of the local *cacique*, and ideological hatred in the final scene of the film.

The Child in Spanish Film

From 1939 to the present day, the figure of the child has been co-opted into both hegemonic and counter-cultural discourses in contemporary Spain. In the Francoist era, films such as Ladislao Vajda's *Marcelino, pan y vino*, which spawned a plethora of imitations, featured child star Pablito Calvo as a mischievous orphan in Napoleonic Spain. Orphanhood, a recurrent theme in these films, clearly reinforced the need for a national *pater familias*, thus serving to legitimize the Franco dictatorship. This motif was complemented by the depiction of angelic and pure children as the saviors of their beleaguered relatives: in Pedro L. Ramírez's *Recluto con niño*, Pipó (Miguelito Gil) advises his brother Miguel (José Luis Ozores) on how to win the love of the beautiful Juliá, while in *Mi tío Jacinto*, Pepote's (Pablito Calvo) childish charm secures a free bullfighting suit for his impecunious uncle. In the 1960s, Marisol, the pseudonym of a Malaguenian of Scandinavian appearance, embodied the cultural contradictions of *aperturista* Spain, where traditional culture coexisted alongside the liberalizing influence caused by the huge influx of tourists and the emergence of a consumer society. As Peter Evans so aptly comments, Marisol was "a raucous, assertive adolescent with an ambivalent relationship to the law of the father films in which she starred." Furthermore, he astutely observes that her films contained "an appeal to innocence, flickerings of rebellion as well as their endorsement of tradition" (129). This hybridity was clearly expressed through her dress, which alternated between traditional

Andalusian and modern European garments, the latter of which were often inappropriately provocative (Evans 134).

However, in the late 1960s, a different conceptualization of the child emerged, a thematic shift that was largely due to the difficult childhoods of directors, such as Víctor Erice and Carlos Saura, whose Republican families had experienced the penury and misery of the post-war years (Stone 99). Their formative experiences caused them to simultaneously value the figure of the child as a particularly effective conduit of indirect social critique, and to problematize childhood itself as a state of conflicting desires of independence and connection. Saura remarked that “there is nothing good about childhood. It’s your memory that tells you childhood was a wonderful time, but that’s only because you don’t remember things” (qtd. in Stone 98). It is also tenable that these directors were influenced by literary works such as Ana María Matute’s *Primera memoria*, where the chief character, a child named Maite, attempts to transcend ideological barriers by befriending Manuel, a Republican child, but ultimately betrays him when she fails to defend him when he is framed.

Contesting the image of the child as the lynchpin of the dictatorship, these directors fashioned independent child protagonists, such as Ana in Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena*, who “desperately needed to establish her independence from her family, particularly her father who inspired love and fear” (Riley 491). Similarly, Ana in Saura’s *Cría cuervos* also plots her father’s murder. Clearly, the depiction of patricidal intent denoted modern Spanish society’s desire to unburden itself of the stifling influence of the paternalistic Francoist dictatorship. It is also important to note, as Anne E. Hardcastle has indicated, that their oppositional stance is marred by self doubt and the disillusionment produced by the futility of their actions (397). Ana, in *Cría cuervos*, tries to poison her aunt, only to see her later in full health. Likewise, she ruminates on the motivation buttressing her desire to kill her father, which she attributes to his role as the instigator of suffering in her family, but later casts doubts on her own judgment (Hardcastle 394).

In later years, the child’s probing gaze was used to expose the hypocrisies underpinning Francoist society. In *Secretos del corazón*, the child protagonist, a nine-year-old named Javi, probes the lies of his mother and uncle who are having an adulterous relationship. The film, shot in Navarra, did not limit itself to micro social concerns, however, as it also addressed the banes of 1960s society; namely, “una larga tristeza espiritual y una educación (especialmente en los menores) que parecía discurrir por caminos ajenos a la realidad diaria” (Caparrós Lera 70). Confronted with this divergence between social discourse and the actual sordid reality, Javi emerges as the antithesis of the corruption and deceit of the society that surrounds him, so much so that he symbolizes the hopefulness of the future, post-dictatorial Spain.

From the late 1990s onwards, the child figure began to occupy a central position in *el boom de la memoria*, the cultural movement which has complemented the civil campaign to recuperate Republican memory in Spain.² Children’s prominence in these films can be ascribed to the counter hegemonic tendency of *el boom de la memoria*, which co-opts the constituent elements of the Francoist regime, such as the family and the child, into their artistic endeavors and imbues them with a subversive signification. In the post-war period, the Francoist regime adopted a policy of pronatalism with the key objective of reversing the Malthusian tendencies of the Second Republic, which involved the subsidization of the family and the awarding of prizes such as *El Premio de la Natalidad* to “familias numerosas.” Therefore, the child epitomized the future of the Francoist New State. In these films, the child’s gaze is cleverly manipulated to detect the injustices perpetrated by the Regime and to delegitimize its vilification of their Republican opponents.

In regard to cultural endeavors, the child is, clearly, of immense value due to a myriad of innate qualities. Firstly, they are considered to be far more perceptive for their inchoate egos endow them with a more acute sensibility, a quality which “renders them particularly susceptible and sensitive both to traumatic memory’s durability and intrusiveness and to what escapes rational comprehension or control” (Brinks 294). Children are uninhibited, and, consequently,

unabashedly violate established parameters, an attitude encouraged by delighted adults who take pleasure in their innocence. In general, their curiosity is not perceived as threatening to the dominant social order and, consequently, adults endure a barrage of questions and even the occasional *faux pas*, both of which may transcend the adult boundaries of register, politeness, and rank, but are leniently assumed to form part of child development. Children's defamiliarization with the world—that is, as Solokoff expresses it, “their ability to deform the habitual creatively and to counteract the process of habituation fostered by routine methods of seeing the world” (7)—permits them to construct novel meanings of social variables, such as class, gender, and ideology. Many contemporary Spanish film directors are motivated by a desire to connect and engage with an authentic, oft-occluded, historical reality, rather than the official version disseminated by dominant discourses. The child's exemption from circumscribed and oft-muted adult discourses, inevitably contaminated by social, political, and class prejudices, coalesces with these directors' desire to access the past in its entirety, and to subvert grandiose historical metanarratives that do not take that account of the emotional effect of war.

Thirdly, the child also serves to create empathy for the Republican plight, as their innocence makes the defeated's suffering morally reprehensible, and also introduces a highly emotive component into viewers' preconceptions of war. In her study of children in film, Karen Lury asserts that the emotional traction engendered by them makes the viewer feel morally superior as they are effectively caring for people who are vulnerable and defenseless (106). Lury also suggests that children allow for the projection of emotions that may otherwise embarrass adults who consider such demonstrativeness unbecoming of an adult (107). Certainly, the child arouses a type of empathy that is not muted, as in the case of adults, by personal judgments concerning the individual's past; moreover, the universality of children's rights supersedes the now prevalent moral relativism that refrains from making categorical judgments on ethical matters. Even more importantly, children are exempt from accusations inevitably leveled at adults regarding their capacity for positive action. In short, children are not expected to be able to defend themselves or others, a lack of expectation that guarantees forgiveness for passivity and victimhood on the part of the viewer (Hardcastle 399). This identification with the child can extend to the issue in question, and may culminate in an increasing awareness of, and empathy with, the injustices to which Republican victims were subject.

In this recent cultural production, themes from the aforementioned dissenting films of the 1970s are readily apparent: the sickness of the mother and the caring figure in *El espinazo del diablo* and *Laberinto del fauno*; menacing paternal figures, such as the priest in *Los girasoles ciegos* and Ofelia's stepfather, Captain Vidal, in *Laberinto del fauno*; and the orphanhood of Tomiche in *El viaje de Carol*. However, a marked difference is evident insofar as these child protagonists do not suffer from the debilitating self doubt of Erice's and Saura's characters, but are rather resolute in their resistance. Lorenzo in *Los girasoles ciegos* seems to possess a precocious awareness that his interaction with the institutions of the Francoist New State requires the daily feigning of obedience; but even so, he expresses his dissent covertly by merely miming the words of “cara al sol” in the schoolyard. Such portrayals reconfigure the image of children from passive victims to active agents who can be classified, in the words of Dieter Baacke, as “developing personalities who appropriate the environment in which they find themselves and simultaneously influence it” (Jans 34).

The emergence of a wholly determined child protagonist, who is not subjugated by social injustice, crystallizes the unequivocal, eminently ethical views of these films' directors. Their opinions are reflective of their adherence to a European cosmopolitan memory that equates redress as a sign of democratic health and the supportive cultural frameworks that have occasioned an enormous shift in Spanish collective memory since the mid 1990s. In a recent interview, Imanol Uribe, the director of *El viaje de Carol*, observes: “¡Mira, cuantas películas se han hecho sobre Vietnam! Y no hay tantas sobre nuestra historia” (qtd. in Brito 14). Significantly, the child is being used to introduce an urgently needed nuanced ambiguity into a cultural

phenomenon worryingly defined by Manichean characterization, and a consequent lack of subtlety. The recent Catalan production, *Pa negra* (*Pan negro*), depicts a child protagonist who begins to fight to clear his father's name, but is eventually corrupted by his environment. The film's director, Agustí Villaronga, explained the motivation underlying this portrayal as follows: "[H]ay que pensar que hay una dualidad moral en todas las personas y más viviendo un conflicto tan grave" (qtd. in Brito 14). Certainly, the child's developmental process is very well suited to portraying the nuances, the "grey zones" (53) as Primo Levi termed it, of moral decisions, unattributable in all but exceptional cases to inherent malignity or virtue. More frequently, they constitute either the outcome of the complex interplay between macrosocial catastrophes and venal human failings, such as envy and greed, or capitulations to the dominant social order motivated by a desire to survive the hardships imposed by an inimical social environment.

These directors have avoided the common cultural tendency to "other" the child; that is, to portray him or her in an unflatteringly light as the lesser half of the adult-child dichotomy, whose inarticulacy justifies the adult and the inauthentic appropriation of his incipient voice. This approach is reflective of the theoretical sea-shift in the sociology of childhood, which now regards the child as an active participant in the social world in which he grows up, and hypostatizes his individual experience of that world (Wells 14). The child is now considered a sentient being with a nascent, but nevertheless substantial, personhood. In the words of Richard Mills: "They are also growing people, not merely physically but also emotionally and psychologically, and, in this regard, may be valued as persons in their own right since such growth is not obvious to the observer. It occurs in the brain: it is secret, and unlike physical height, unmeasured. But it also takes place, nevertheless, stealthily, and children need private mental space for it to occur" (22). It should be emphasized, however, that a child's agency is contingent upon social perceptions. Allison James and Alan Prout observe that childhood is never experienced in isolation as social variables such as class, gender, and ideology invariably inflect upon, and indeed often distort, the experience (250). William Corsero asserts that while children can be classified as actors in the construction of society, they are also circumscribed by the social perception of the child's capabilities (153). This perception of the child may range from "the dependent innocent, whose lack of development gives evidence for social potential rather than individual agency" (Epstein 376) or "helpless, ignorant beings who are too ignorant to represent themselves" (Honeyman 2). Given the prevalence of these negative perceptions, one can gauge that the child's potential for agency may not be facilitated or encouraged by a society that, by rigidly casting children in a subaltern role, purposefully infantilizes them. Social identity is invariably constituted through concepts and practices made available by school, society, and state; therefore, a child's development is also contingent upon the state's opportunity structure and the political and pedagogical ideologies upholding the educational system.

This contention is amply illustrated by the gulf that separated the educational system of the Second Republic from Francoist society. The former was based on the dissemination of Enlightenment ideals and the progressive policies of *La Institución Libre de la Enseñanza*, a governmental body responsible for the initiation of the *Misiones Pedagógicas* which traveled to remote villages to educate illiterate peasants. It had as its primary objective the egalitarianisation of an educational system previously characterized by "la presencia débil del Estado subordinado a la actuación de la Iglesia católica en la enseñanza," an imbalance that resulted in "la discriminación que tenía lugar entre quienes podían cursar el bachillerato y quienes no tenían la posibilidad de estudiar tras la primaria" (Maravall 14). Between 1931 and 1935, the number of teachers increased from 37,500 to 50,500 (14). The educational system of the Second Republic aimed to create "un hombre nuevo, ético, más racional y más humano que pudiese hacer frente y superar con ideas y acciones renovadoras la degradada situación de su país de aquella época" (Rojas Gordillo 13). Memorialization, religious affiliation, and corporeal punishment were prohibited, and children were empowered through the encouragement of independent thought and their resolution of academic problems through discussion (14). Furthermore, the

nexus between the school and the external world was continually emphasized not only through the actual syllabus, but also through its stated aim to produce useful and conscientious citizens (14). Premised on the eradication of Republican ideals and the consolidation of an ultra Catholic state, the educational system of the Francoist regime perpetuated the divisiveness of the Spanish Civil War by propagating a monolithic identity, thereby ensuring “la muerte civil” of their enemies. In so doing, it made no effort to conceal its appropriation of an intellectual function for its own purposes, effectively transforming the essence of the educational system by relegating knowledge to low second priority: “[N]o es que los niños sepan sino más bien que sientan y de ese modo se dispongan para saber y para hacer” (Fernández Soria and Mayordomo 176). Thus, society, politics, and culture are extensively involved in the construction of the child’s subjectivity, and the liminality of child identity can be attributed to the tension arising from their attempt to define themselves and the social imposition of a disempowering or empowering identity. As Rosa Montero so eloquently puts it: “De niños, todos estamos locos; estamos poseídos por una imaginación sin domesticar y vivimos en una zona crepuscular de la realidad en la que todo resulta posible. Educar a un niño supone limitar su campo visual, empujarse el mundo y darle una forma determinada, para que se adapte a las normas específicas de cada cultura” (193). Any discussion of child agency must be accompanied by an analysis of its enactment; that is, how it is translated into effective action. Richard Mills warns that “it is not sufficient to stipulate children as active creators of mini cultural meaning if their actions are not associated with their construction of meaning and their intentions with their interaction” (73).

This article examines Moncho’s development of agency through an analysis of his assimilation of the social world in, what Marc Jans terms, the four zones of child development. This typology consists of the ecological center, composed of the family and home, a zone characterized by warm emotional relationships with a high degree of dependency; ecological proximity, the neighborhood in which the child grows up, and establishes his first relation with the external world; ecological sectors, such as the school, where the child is expected to conform to predetermined roles; and the ecological periphery, a space that the child encounters infrequently (Jans 34). In *La lengua de las mariposas*, Moncho must assimilate, navigate, and negotiate the intricacies of these four zones that frequently have irreconcilable value systems. Evidently, the family and school are the foremost agents of acculturation as they impart authoritative values and standards to children, thereby reproducing the social system and consolidating hegemony. In his classic study, *The Social System*, Talcott Parsons asserts that the values internalized during childhood will remain deeply ingrained throughout the individual’s life (208). These values are “in a very important degree, a function of the fundamental role structure and dominant values of the social system” (227). Moncho’s trajectory proves Parsons’s views to be somewhat reductionist, as the child is shown to be, not just a member of a collective, but an individual who seeks to mesh together the often mutually exclusive values, opinions, beliefs, and facts penetrating his social world.

The Development of Moncho’s Agency in *La lengua de las mariposas*

La lengua de las mariposas presents us with a vision of the child as an autonomous being with an incipient, but nevertheless, formidable ability to comprehend and form judgments about the world in which he lives. The film is notable for its nuanced attention to the interconnectedness of child development, family, immediate community, and the national political sphere as Cuerda adroitly interweaves national events into the lives of Moncho, the main character, and his family. Not only does the director show the effect of social tensions on Moncho’s family, but he also conveys a wider vision of their interrelatedness through a focus on the views of minor characters, such as Don Avelino and the priest. In the churchyard scene, a group of women, one of whom is Moncho’s mother, express different views on the Second Republic, while Don Avelino, the village *cacique*, utters inflammatory and categorical comments that bode ill for the

Second Republic. For Cuerda, memory is located at the interface between individual, familial, social, and political memory and, consequently, Moncho acts as a barometer through which the narrative discourses of these memories are filtered, mediated, rationalized, and contested. The young Moncho negotiates a complex set of interrelating and constantly changing beliefs, such as the divergence between his father's actual beliefs and his public performance of an affiliation to antithetical ones, and also the reversal of the social order upon the commencement of the Civil War.

The film's first scenes depict an ill and taciturn Moncho, suffering from asthma, who is being coaxed into attending school by the kindly teacher, Don Gregorio, played by Fernando Fernán Gómez, a casting selection which has been unanimously acclaimed. In the words of José Luis Castro de Paz: "[D]ifícilmente, pues, podría Don Gregorio haber obtenido mayor espesor y credibilidad que los que le aporta el actor Fernán Gómez" (40). Moncho's silence in the presence of figures that symbolize the ecological sector can be defined as a defensive measure that protects his selfhood because it renders his voice inaccessible to a world that he clearly perceives as threatening. Indeed, it constitutes a form of resistance for it transmits Moncho's desire to maintain the intimacy of his suffering and to somehow thwart the invasiveness of an ecological sector embodying the prospect of even more hardship. As regards Moncho's illness, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for the ailing Republic, which, at the beginning of spring 1936 (when Moncho returns to school following his recuperation), was severely threatened by the rise of the Falangist Right. Moncho's illness symbolizes a moribund political project whose discursive possibilities are steadily waning, menaced as they are by the increasing power of the right. It represents the encroachment of politics on private space, an infringement that produces tensions that eventually give rise to psychosomatic symptoms. The body reacts to changes in the social environment; for an individual's experiential capacity is largely predicated on the body's assimilation of social transformation. In the words of Kleinman and Kleinman: "Experience is an assemblage of social processes that together create a medium of interaction that flows back and forth through the social spaces of institutions and the body self" (712). Moncho's reluctance to attend school and his urination in the school on his first day of attendance substantiate the view that he is frightened by the ecological sector or, more specifically, by the possibility of physical punishment. In particular, urinating at school reinforces the vision of his body as debilitated and overtly susceptible to stressful external stimuli. The ecological sector and proximity are in a state of turbulence, and the young boy regards the ecological center, his home, as a type of refuge in which his security is guaranteed.

In *La lengua de las mariposas*, the school is primarily responsible for the development of Moncho's agency, as it undermines the force of the ecological center as his primary source of information concerning the world.³ Filmic techniques convey the prominent role that the school will play in widening the ambits of the young boy's worldview, and, indeed, in creating a more questioning attitude towards the ecological center, the home. The ecological center (the home) is shrouded in darkness or only illuminated by lamplight until the scene when Ramón, Moncho's father, offers Don Gregorio a suit as a gift—a gesture which symbolizes the belated harmonization of home and school. The ecological sector (the school) basks in sunlight from the very beginning of the film. This contrast in lighting serves to underscore the role played by the primary schools of the Second Republic in cultivating young minds previously inculcated with only reactionary discourse in the home. The presence of two competing ideologies in Moncho's life is reinforced by traveling shots of the crucifix in the room that Moncho and his brother share and the tricolor Republican flag in the school. This binary opposition is once again conveyed in the scene in which Moncho departs for the first time to school. He is isolated by a close-up while his mother and Don Gregorio dominate the scene (Castro de Paz 42). However, the following subjective traveling shot confers Moncho with primacy by showing his entire body, while simultaneously demoting his mother to a figure of secondary importance as she transforms into a receding figure (42). Her retreat into the ecological center augurs Moncho's

future trajectory, for it prefigures the empowerment of the ecological sector, which will widen the ambits of her son's mind and simultaneously destabilize the position of the ecological center as an undisputed space of indoctrination and ideological reproduction.

The following scenes demonstrate an altogether more discerning Moncho who does not unquestioningly accept the values transmitted to him within the ecological center as he later approaches a representative of that sector, Don Gregorio, for an alternative viewpoint. In a conversation that takes place in the family kitchen, Moncho affirms that he likes Don Gregorio. His mother's further questioning reveals that the schoolteacher has taught the biblical story of Cain and Abel, a response that alleviates Moncho's mother's preoccupation that her son may not be receiving a Roman Catholic education. In light of this confirmation of Don Gregorio's religiosity, which has clearly been the subject of much doubt and speculation, she affirms: "[M]e extrañó a mí que Don Gregorio fuera ateo." Moncho asks the meaning of the word and immediately identifies his father as falling within this category. His mother admits that his father blasphemes, but denies that he does not believe in God, a belief that she asserts is characteristic of all decent people. In regard to religious precepts, the family and the school are at antipodes as the former adheres to biblical definitions while the latter, epitomized by Don Gregorio, espouses philosophical concepts. In response to Moncho's questioning, his mother explains that the devil was an angel who rebelled against God and was banished from Heaven, while Don Gregorio refutes the existence of the Devil, and instead asserts that the Devil can be more realistically considered as a manifestation of evil, evident in human greed and envy. Moncho's conversation with Don Gregorio intimates to the spectator that the boy was not entirely convinced of the rationality of his mother's explanation, and also points to a certain discernment that is usually not attributed to children. Furthermore, Moncho's constant reiteration of Don Gregorio's affirmations, implicit in which are an affiliation to progressive and Enlightenment ideals, indicate the formidable influence that Don Gregorio has had on his thinking.

Although the ecological sector and center do not clash, but rather coexist in a type of peaceful if somewhat uneasy truce, internal conflict within the ecological sector does manifest itself. Determined to purge Spain of what they considered to be that country's unbearable burdens of reactionary Catholicism and the domination of the big landowners, the Second Republic introduced legislation that threatened not only to reduce the affluence of these two groups, but also to curtail the Church's involvement in various spheres of Spanish life, thereby subverting the Church's privileged position as the custodian of the morals and values of the Spanish people. For the Catholic Church, the Republic's initiative resurrected long-dormant memories of the confiscation of their lands in the nineteenth century by a liberal government: as owner of 19,000 estates, they were understandably nervous about socialist views on property (Tamames 89). These sociocultural tensions permeate the ecological proximity in the film and are very well reflected in the churchyard scene. The frame centers on Moncho's mother and two other female mass goers, while Moncho, who is silently assimilating the different viewpoints, has his back to the camera. The fact that his face is not visible reflects that he is a passive assimilator rather than an active participant in the conversation. Later, it is revealed that Moncho has ceased his training to be an altar boy and that his knowledge of the Roman Catholic catechism is somewhat scant. Moncho's withdrawal from Church activities is viewed with much suspicion by the parish priest who observes that it coincided with his entry into the school, a place where Moncho encounters a more progressive value system.

The young boy's dilemma centers on the struggle to preserve his incipient individuality and to unshackle himself from the constrictions imposed by society. As Emile Durkheim puts it: "Is it our duty to seek to become a thorough and complete human being, one quite sufficient unto itself: or to be part of a whole?" (148). Hinting at the possibility of individual agency, Durkheim later affirms that "although man must unite himself in a group, he is not obliged to remain united to the same group" (148). Moncho's distancing from the Church symbolizes his instinctive desire to construct his own identity in accordance with his own wishes and to avail

himself of a private space in which to rationalize his incipient beliefs. It also conveys a clear determination to not permit his subjectivities to be overwhelmed by the coercive power of the ecological sector. One can perceive a certain tendency towards individualism, which has been clearly fostered by Don Gregorio's propagation of Enlightenment values that affirm the equality of all human beings and their right to liberty. It bespeaks a maturity that reconfigures childhood from an assimilative and development phase to a period of growth in which Moncho is not just exposed to the exterior world; he also attempts to control this exposure by actively resisting the relinquishment of his individual value system. The young boy's nascent autonomy is not subsumed by the pressures of conformity in this scene, a fact which reconceives the child as a self-assured agent of signification and a molder, to a certain extent, of his relationship with a world that he seeks to infuse with his own desires and opinions, however unorthodox they may be. Evidently, his formulation of the world constitutes a private and wholly independent odyssey, and, consequently, his subscription to a value system requires belief in the validity of its tenets. Neither the ecological sector nor the ecological center will coerce him into unthinking compliance, for he is intent on retaining dominion over his value system.

Throughout the film, nature, education, and child development form a fluid triad, a compatibility that devalues the ecological center of the home as the primary agent of socialization and accords primacy to the ecological sector and proximity. This is reinforced by the rural setting, showcasing the beauty of the countryside and Moncho's subsequent discovery of the natural world through "planos medios y generales que muestran a los personajes pacífica y armónicamente integrados con el contexto" (Gómez López-Quiñones 223). The melodious music of Alejandro Amenabar and the photography of Javier Salmones also strengthen this impression of a certain complicity (223). The interrelatedness of the two zones is transmitted by a close-up of a lady wrapped in the Republican flag during a meal in the countryside, suggesting the affinity of Republican values with nature. It is noteworthy that Moncho's parents feature in the same scene, sharing a meal with Don Gregorio, as this seems to point to a cohesive Republican society, sustained by mutual tolerance of different ideas (in the case of Don Gregorio and Moncho's mother). The coalescence of the zones, however, will soon be torn apart by the impending war, represented in this scene by the soldiers on horseback who, while maintaining a certain physical distance, menace the group.

The harmonious portrayal of the aforementioned relationship between nature, education, and child development contrasts with the depiction of Moncho's assimilation of schismatic social issues. Cuerda's portrayal of the trenchant social stratification of the Second Republic is partially devoted to expanding and developing the role of Moncho as an autonomous agent, fully capable of understanding and rejecting social norms. Central to this process is Moncho's growing awareness of class divisions and their multiple ramifications, such as the perpetuation of injustices, a disproportionate sense of entitlement, and their barely concealed contempt for and often unashamed intimidation of people who are considered social inferiors. His first encounter with class takes place in the school where he becomes acquainted with José Luis, the son of the local *cacique*, Don Avelino. José Luis does not deign to study, as his privileged social position has already guaranteed him a future life of ease and leisure as "un señorito en La Coruña." Although, as previously mentioned, the Second Republic prioritized the forging of a more egalitarian Spain that would facilitate class mobility, in *La lengua de las mariposas*, these transformations are not very apparent. For example, Don Avelino, who is the incarnation of a social order that considers itself infallible and is, therefore, intransigent exercises his power in an aggressive and arrogant manner with impunity. One day, he barges into the school to express his dissatisfaction at his son's lack of progress and to order Don Gregorio to begin using corporeal punishment. The schoolteacher disagrees with him in a timid and nervous manner, and reluctantly accepts his present of two birds, which he later orders José Luis to return to his father. Evidently, Don Avelino considers himself as entitled to adapt the social system to his needs. Indeed, one could venture that he regards it as subservient to him. His assertion in

the churchyard that his solution to the social instability sundering 1936 Spain would be to put fire to Madrid is a further echo of this attitude and epitomizes the belligerence of the powerful right-wing factions in Spain of that era.

José Luis later replicates the arrogant behavior of his father, disturbing the children's play by entering their space with his bicycle. Moncho pushes him from the bike and the two boys begin to wrestle. In this scene, Cuerda weaves together contestatory discourses: childhood as a site of resistance and the blatant injustice of class divisions. Moreover, the fight marks the fundamental shift of Moncho's interrogation of the discourses of power to his unequivocal rejection of them, thus consolidating the emergence of the young boy's self-assured individuality. The implicit identification of children with the home space and the consequent justification of their theoretical exclusion from the ecological proximity are also shown to be erroneous. Judging from this scene, children are able to perform higher-level cognitive tasks, such as deduction derived from various disparate facts. It would seem that they do not perceive the ecological sector as essentially restrictive, for Moncho curtails José Luis's bullying tactics, despite the fear of a reprimand from Don Gregorio. The steady progression from the school scene in which Don Avelino barges into the school to the boys' skirmish belies any claim that Moncho acts from a childish, uninformed sense of justice. Rather, Moncho has amassed facts and information, and, in a mature fashion, has made certain inferences from both conclusions that compel him to curb José Luis's aggressiveness towards the other children. The fighting Moncho is unrecognizable from the small boy who crouched behind his mother's back in earlier scenes and cowered at his schoolmates' jibes and jeering. His facial expressions, which in earlier scenes ranged from a wide-open mouth to wide-eyed staring, thereby oscillating between bewilderment to wondrous innocence, is replaced by an angry semblance. Returning to the metaphor of Moncho's body as the Second Republic, this scene can be interpreted as a microcosm of the conflict that will soon commence. The strengthening of Moncho's body mirrors the desperate attempts of the Republic to maintain political power and to hinder its undermining by powerful opponents, thus reaffirming the notion of the body as a sensitized repository of the environmental tensions in which it exists.

The final scene in which Moncho communicates his loyalty to Don Gregorio reflects his mastery of the processes of resistance which he has honed and manipulated throughout the film, for his individuality is confronted with the collective force in its most elementary and brutish form: the crowd. Theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Gustav Le Bon stress that the masses subjugate individual will and identity to its collective spirit and that the individuals who compose the crowd are imbued with a powerful sense of security and purpose that renders individual morality dangerously contingent on the collective spirit of the crowd. The inclusion of his own family members in this gathering further increases its forcefulness as Moncho's affective bond to his family exerts a powerful emotional force in which his loyalty to his friend could potentially be subsumed. Prior to this scene, Moncho witnesses his mother's frantic attempts to protect the family in the wake of the announcement of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. She insists that they do not reveal Moncho's father's gift of a suit to Don Gregorio. Tension is palpable in these scenes, but, significantly, the now fortified Moncho does not wilt as he observes his mother's panic. Rather, Moncho begins to quietly read the book Don Gregorio gave him, *La isla del tesoro*.

In the final scene, the boy jeers along with the crowd, but he also includes a reference to a type of butterfly. This moment signals Moncho's evolution into a sophisticated and skilled agent not only of signification, but of the higher-order skill of discursive resistance. In a situation of enormous pressure, he encodes his affiliation to Don Gregorio's values, but skirts retaliation and social sanctions by his choice of terminology, which remains cryptic to onlookers. His timing is impeccable, for he carefully chooses to utter the words as he runs after the truck carrying Don Gregorio when the crowd is out of earshot. His deft maneuvering lends credence to James C. Scott's view that "persecution cannot prevent even public expression of the heterodox truth, for

a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed provided he moves with circumspection" (183). Moncho's ceding to his mother's anxiety-ridden demands does not reflect weakness nor an inability to exercise his own judgments, but rather a precocious understanding of the precarious situation of his family in the ecological center and its vulnerability to the hostile external forces of the ecological proximity. Even more importantly, he has recognized the tacit and explicit rules of each of the zones and cleverly dissimulates obedience, while preserving and even manifesting, in covert form, his individuality. He has observed that his father cries while he utters insults and, therefore, deduces that his father's participation in Don Gregorio's humiliation results from his mother's coercive urgings and fear of retaliation for any manifestation of an oppositional ideology. Although his loyalty is divided between the family and Don Gregorio, he succeeds in satisfying their incompatible needs for support in the face of adversity, a feat which attests to his aptness in negotiating the social world that had previously terrified him.

The antebellum world of spring 1936 seen through the eyes of Moncho constitutes an understated indictment of adult resignation and sectarianism and the depredations of ideological conflict. It is also a categorical paean to the values of loyalty and resilience in the face of adversity. In *La lengua de las mariposas*, Cuerda combines contemporary views on childhood with longstanding concerns about class and historical injustices and manipulates the narrative frame of the coming-of-age story to create a subversive text in which the child becomes an agent of resistance. The result is the incorporation of novel perspectives that address a conflict, which, prior to the making of the film in 1999, had been subjected for the most part to a traditional and discriminatory collective remembering, at best, and a mandatory sidelining, at worst. Cuerda divests childhood of its nostalgic value, showing that it is not an unproblematic, future-orientated process, a relatively inconsequential period of transition. Instead, it is portrayed as an epoch in which discursive and social skills do not remain statically undeveloped, but rather continually evolve. In fact, Moncho's metamorphosis from the timorous boy of the first scenes to the resourceful negotiator of familial and social tensions of the final scenes conveys an image of childhood as an accelerated developmental phase. This portrayal simultaneously elevates child abilities and inscribes the image of an independently minded child into the viewers' perspectives. Deprived of its habitual social connotations of inadequate understanding and judgment of the social world, childhood, in this film, is imbued with the positive qualities of independent thinking, judgment, wisdom, and intrepidity.

NOTES

¹The term "Republican" refers to the supporters of the Spanish Second Republic (1931–36). It introduced progressive legislation, such as the right to divorce, and undertook to reform the agrarian, clerical, regional, and military sectors. Politically, it consisted of an umbrella group of Socialists and Communists, except for the period (1933–35) when the *CEDA* (Confederación Española de Derechos Autónomas) obtained a majority.

²*El boom de la memoria* aims to counteract both transitional public memory discourses that staunchly refused to address the affective and emotional scars which subsisted in the Spanish psyche following the Civil War and post-war period, and also to expose the flawed nature of post-millennial legislative measures that have attempted to contain, rather than fully satisfy, victims' demands. As Asunción Bernárdez Rodal phrases it: "[E]l interés por representar el conflicto en la literatura, en el cine, en la crítica histórica, proviene de que hoy todavía siguen vivos los discursos sobre víctimas y verdugos, y es la muestra palpable de que todos los esfuerzos de los últimos años del franquismo e incluso durante la Transición que se hicieron para dejar como pasado todo lo ocurrido durante más de cuarenta años, no ha sido más que una forma de cerrar en falso las heridas de una contienda civil que se resolvió luego en decenios de terror. Hoy hay mucha gente en España que se resiste a olvidar lo que pasó" (45).

³In my opinion, it would be erroneous to dichotomize Moncho's development into a facile ecological center versus the ecological sector binary opposition, that is, home versus school. Moncho's espousal of more enlightened viewpoints cannot be entirely attributed to Don Gregorio, since Moncho has also

eavesdropped on arguments between his parents in which his father categorically expressed his support for the Second Republic. As the conversation in the kitchen illustrates, he is aware that his father, Ramón, holds different religious views. This being so, the germination of his curiosity can be partially ascribed to his father, an inquisitiveness that subsequently flourishes in the school. Therefore, it is plausible that he recurs to Don Gregorio in order to alleviate his confusion regarding the two mutually opposing viewpoints aired in the home. In a similar vein, Moncho's brother is the bemused receptor of Moncho's newly discovered knowledge concerning sex, which he garnered watching Carmencita and her lover in the woods. Thus, both the ecological sector and center inform Moncho's worldview and do not, until the end of the film, enter into open conflict.

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