

## WHO ARE *THE BEASTS*?

### QUEM SÃO AS *BESTAS*?

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Sorogoyen, R. (Director). (2022). *As bestas* [Film]. Arcadia Motion Pictures; Caballo Films; Cronos Entertainment; Le Pacte.

Lydia, we ignore. We are foreigners/Wherever we are/Lydia, we ignore. We are foreigners/Wherever we live. —Fernando Pessoa, *Odas a Ricardo Reis*

“A vaca, non onde nace, senón onde pace” (a cow is not from where it is born, but from where it grazes) — this proverb, which can be found with different variants and in different languages in literature and popular culture throughout the Iberian Peninsula, from *Don Quijote* (Cervantes, 1605–1615/2003) of la Mancha to *La Lozana Andaluza* (Portrait of Lozana: The Lusty Andalusian Woman; Delicado, 1528/2004), from the *Refraneiro Gallego da Vaca* (Galician Proverbs About the Cow; Benavente & Ferro, 1995) to the *Rifoneiro Português* (Portuguese Proverbs; Chaves, 1928) sums up the *modus vivendi* of the protagonists of the film *As Bestas* (The Beasts; 2022), a tough rural western directed by Rodrigo Sorogoyen. It is set in deep Galicia and tackles timeless, contemporary topics such as belonging, globalisation and the relationship between human beings and the land, including animals, plants, and the environment.

Rural themes have been a constant in the cinematography of the Iberian Peninsula. In the case of Spain, they were addressed as early as the silent era, coincidentally in Galicia, with *Carmiña, Flor de Galicia* (Carmiña, Flower of Galicia; Rino Lupo, 1926). Examples of Spanish rural cinema, ranging from bestiality to satire, include *Las Hurdes, Tierra Sin Pan* (Las Hurdes, Land Without Bread; Luis Buñuel, 1933), *¡Bienvenido Mister Marshall!* (Welcome, Mr. Marshall!; Luis García Berlanga, 1953), *Furtivos* (Poachers; José Luis Borau, 1975), *Los Santos Inocentes* (The Holy Innocents; Mario Camus, 1984), or *Amanece que No Es Poco* (Dawn Breaks, Which Is No Small Thing; José Luis Cuerda, 1989).

In recent years, especially after the pandemic, several films have flourished that turn their gaze towards the rural world. Many of these films are directed by women and have actresses in the leading roles. This key female presence entails a new way of representing rurality, showing a diversity of genres, accents, landscapes, and sensibilities. In the Spanish panorama, we can mention the film *Alcarràs* (Carla Simón, 2022), which, like *As Bestas*, reflects the new challenges faced by the countryside in the light of the 21st century, and which won the Berlin Golden Bear; *Cinco Lobitos* (Lullaby; Alauda Ruiz de Azúa, 2022); *Cerdita* (Piggy; Carlota Pereda, 2022); *El Agua* (The Water; Elena López Riera, 2022); or the most recent *O Corno* (The Rye Horn; Jaione Camborda, 2023), a frontier film that follows

the smugglers' routes between Galicia and Portugal. Also Galician are the film *Lo que Arde* (What Burns; Óliver Laxe, 2019) and the documentary about the networks of affections of the shellfish harvesters *Tatuado nos Ollos Levamos o Pouso* (Tattooed in Our Eyes Is the Landing; Diana Toucedo, 2022).

In the case of Portugal, it was the Italian Rino Lupo who, in the 1920s, directed two works with a rural setting, *Mulheres da Beira* (Women From Beira; 1921) and *Os Lobos* (The Wolves; 1923). In the following decades, Manoel de Oliveira, director of the classic *Aniki-Bobó* (1942), made a short documentary entitled *Douro, Faina Fluvial* (Labor on the Douro River; 1931). In 1942, José Leitão de Barros directed the docufiction film, *Ala-Ariba!*, about the customs of the fishing community of Póvoa de Varzim. In Portuguese cinematographic history, the importance of the documentary genre in representing the rural world is remarkable (Huidobro, 2018). This is the case of *O Pão* (The Bread; 1959) or *Acto da Primavera* (Act of Spring; 1963), both by Oliveira; of *Mudar de Vida* (Change of Life; Paulo Rocha, 1966), a fiction film that draws on the waters of the documentary; of *Trás-os-Montes* (António Reis and Margarida Cordeiro, 1976); or the poetic *O Movimento das Coisas* (The Movement of Things; Manuela Serra, 1985). More recently, the documentary genre continued with titles such as *Terra que Marca* (Land That Leaves Its Mark; Raul Domingues, 2022). In fiction, in recent years, mention should be made of *Farpões, Baldios* (Barbs, Wastelands; Marta Mateus, 2017) or *Alma Viva* (Living Soul; Cristèle Alves Meira, 2022).

Rural cinema from the Iberian Peninsula, a historic land of migrants, delves into its own identity with self-criticism, pride, humour or nostalgia, not always in relation to other cultures. The film in question, *As Bestas*, reflects on tradition, placing it in the context of the challenges that come from abroad in a globalised world. Migration, as a crucial issue, has traditionally been addressed by cinema, but also as a communication problem, as analysed by numerous scientific studies, such as those collected in *Estudios Sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* (Studies About the Journalistic Message; Collado et al., 2023).

Since *As Bestas* was released in 2022, it has won awards all over the world. The Goya for Best Film (it won nine Goyas), the César for Best Foreign Film, the Audience Award for Best European Film at the San Sebastian Film Festival, and the award for Best Film at the Tokyo International Film Festival, among others. In addition to the awards, international critics have praised *As Bestas* mainly for its genre, “an engrossing rural thriller” (Loayza, 2023, para. 1) according to *The New York Times*, comparing it to rural thrillers such as *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971) or *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972). The screenwriters, director Rodrigo Sorogoyen and Isabel Peña acknowledge that those films were in their heads, and they add the influence of filmmakers such as Michael Haneke or films such as *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005) and *45 Years* (Andrew Haigh, 2015).

The film, which took about seven years to materialise, is based on a real event published in the press in 2015 that took place in Galicia, a land with which the scriptwriters had connections. Isabel Peña admits that they moved away from the real events because they did not want to make a film about a true crime, but they decided to keep the Galician setting, which offered wild landscapes, another language and a particular type of humour. While they were researching the topic for the script, they came across the *rapa das bestas*

(shearing of the beasts), the ancestral tradition that is reflected at the beginning of the film and gives title and symbolic depth to the story. Another aspect that interested the scriptwriters was the fact that the Dutchman involved in the real-life case always carried a camera, much like the protagonist in *As Bestas*, a very metacinematic element.

A French couple, Antoine and Olga, decide to build their life project in a Galician village. They grow organic vegetables for a living, an activity that they combine with the altruistic restoration of old houses so that more people can relocate to the area. However, what could have been a peaceful life in the countryside is altered by their neighbours, the brothers Xan and Loren, who show violent animosity against them every time they cross their path. The interaction is not exempt from xenophobic overtones: “you are not from here” (00:24:44). The reason, which is revealed as the film progresses, is that the Gallic couple do not want to sell their land for the construction of wind farms, thus truncating the brothers’ hopes of getting a good deal on the sale of their small cattle farm. The tension escalates until the brothers murder the Frenchman.

The film begins with a scene depicting the *rapa das bestas*, an ancestral tradition in which the *aloitadores*, that is to say the horse handlers, go up into the mountains and round up the wild horses to cut their manes (shave them), deworm them and release them again. The initial scene, a one-shot sequence in slow motion, shows the body-to-body contact between man and animal, blends them kinetically and visually to the point of making them almost indistinguishable, offers parallels with another fundamental later scene, and allows us to understand in all its depth, both literally and metaphorically, the word that gives the film its title and meaning: *as bestas*.

Bestas (beasts) is the Galician word for animals in general and wild horses in particular. From Latin, the word *bestia* gives a name to a four-footed animal, a domestic beast of burden, a monster and even a rude and ignorant person. “Beast” in Latin has a double use: in literary Latin, it is applied to land animals of great strength and ferocity, what we call “wild beasts”, but in vulgar Latin, it designates all kinds of wild or domestic animals and is also applied to brute humans. Plautus, as early as the 3rd century BC, used the expression “bad beast” in reference to a person (Helena, 2018).

As for the context of *As Bestas*, the film is a free version of real events that occurred in a Galician village in the first decade of the 21st century, also with wind turbines in the background. When he picked up his Goya Award for Best Director, Rodrigo Sorogoyen said:

the wild horses in the film have lived in the wild for centuries. They are from the mountains of Sabucedo, in Galicia. The people of Sabucedo taught us to love the fauna and flora, the animals, in a way that I had never seen before. Four gigantic wind farms are being planned in this area, which would irreparably damage the fauna and flora. I fully support the people of Sabucedo in their defence of the horses and their mountains. Wind energy, yes, but not like this. (RTVE, 2023, 00:02:57)

A few months later, in July 2023, this claim was once again made visible when, during the celebration of the *rapa das bestas* in Sabucedo, the neighbourhood displayed t-shirts and banners against the wind mega-projects.

This quixotic misadventure of the story's anti-hero against modern wind turbines is full of shots semiotically deep, such as the one in which a tiny Antoine faces a gigantic wind turbine, with the blades of another pointing at him like spears, and of visual metaphors, such as the body-to-body fight with the *bestas* and the physical ruin of the houses that the Frenchman is trying to restore. It is also worth noting the deep psychological portrait of the characters.

Although the film is imbued from the beginning with a strong, even aggressive, male presence, as it develops, the screenplay by Isabel Peña gives more and more prominence to the female vision of the story. The widow Olga faces her mourning by searching the mountain, methodically and relentlessly, for the body of her deceased husband in order to clarify the truth and obtain justice, as well as defend and reclaim the land that she loves. Her sorority to another female character becomes clear when she goes to the house of her husband's murderers, informs them that she is going to put them in prison and then reaches out to their mother, her Galician neighbour: "you will be left alone, like me" (02:04:43).

With this action, the female protagonist shows strength, determination and courage that her male antagonists do not possess: "they are more afraid than I am" (01:39:33). This is where we understand the deep motivations that drive violent people to hate those who are different just because they are different. The book *Miedo* (Fear) by Patricia Simón (2022) finds the points of connection between irrational fear and visceral hatred.

As a ray of light in a story crossed by shadows, Olga's courage is commendable. Using the words of the veterinarian and writer María Sánchez (2019) in her essay *Tierra de Mujeres* (Land of Women), it is a token of the feminine sensibility so long silenced in the rural world, of courage, of generosity and of the harmonious preservation of the necessary relationship between tradition and modernity, between human beings and the natural world. Because the cow, like all other beasts, is not from where it is born but from where it grazes.

### Translation: María Cristina de Lucas Olmos

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