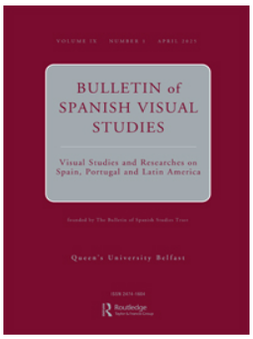

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Dressing, Undressing and Redressing: Costuming Identities in Fernando León de Aranoa's *El buen patrón* (2021)

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Introduction

Spanish film studies, as Jorge Pérez argues, has 'paid only limited attention to costume and fashion'.[1] Stereotypically associated with the feminine and the frivolous, film scholars have typically looked *through*, rather than *at* clothing onscreen.[2] Despite the critical attention paid to gender and sexuality in Spanish cinema, and that clothes are worn by living material bodies, the focus in seminal texts in the field has tended towards a focus upon performance and the star's body, rather than an interdisciplinary, extended close analysis of screen costuming.[3] Furthermore, within an

1 Jorge Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema: Costume, Identity and Stardom* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2021), 7.

2 See Stella Bruzzi & Pamela Church Gibson, 'Introduction', in *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis,* ed. Stella Bruzzi & Pamela Church Gibson (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–4; and Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997).

3 See, amongst others, Joanne Entwhistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Santiago Fouz-Hernández & Alfredo Martínez-Expósito, *Live Flesh: The Male Body in Contemporary Spanish Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Chris Perriam, *Stars and Masculinities in Spanish Cinema: From*

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industry context, the work of costume designers and wardrobe teams largely remains undervalued, underpaid and is often marginalized in the creative process.[4] Costuming is often taken for granted and relegated to 'bridesmaid' status as a craft that serves the demands of an auteurist vision, rather than a creative process. To add to the disciplinary complexities, the distinct, yet symbiotic roles of costume and fashion in cinema creates a tension between storytelling and the pleasures of sartorial spectacle.[5] Conversely, unspectacular, ordinary workwear and leisurewear is often rendered invisible, frequently not garnering the same academic, media or curatorial attention as spectacular, transgressive, luxurious and high-end designer centred looks.[6] Notably, within his timely and valuable recent book *Fashioning Spanish Cinema: Costume, Identity and Stardom*, Pérez challenges this absence and discusses the representation of men's underwear in Spanish cinema.[7] Yet there remains a disciplinary need for, and ample opportunities to, further develop the critical analysis of costuming everyday dress in the context of Spanish film studies.

This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of costuming intersectional identities in Fernando León de Aranoa's 2021 corporate satire *El buen patrón*. Inspired and informed by the thematic approach adopted by Rosalind McKever and Claire Wilcox for the Victoria & Albert Museum's *Fashioning Masculinities* exhibition in London (April to November 2022), we examine the use of dressing, undressing and redressing to construct, destabilize and reconfigure power relations in a contemporary Spanish context with a particular focus on masculinities.[8] After a short synopsis of the film, we will begin by contextualizing *El buen patrón*, by discussing the role of costume designer Fernando García, and the casting of transnational star Javier Bardem in the leading role of

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Banderas to Bardem (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2003); and Paul Julian Smith, *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar* (London: Verso, 2000).

4 See Deborah Nadoolman Landis, 'Hollywood Costume: A Journey to Curation', in *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods,* ed. Sofia Pantouvaki & Peter McNeil (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 173–77; and Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema.*

5 See Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*; and Jane Gaines, 'Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story', in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body,* ed. Jane Gaines & Charlotte Herzog (New York: AFI, 1990), 180–211.

6 See Francisco Fernández de Alba & Marcela T. Garcés, *Fashioning Spain: From Mantillas to Rosalía* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); and Sarah Gilligan, 'Fashioning Masculinities: Critical Reflections on Curation and Future Directions in Masculinity Studies', *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, 14:1 (2023), 87–104.

7 See Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema*, 99–132.

8 See Rosalind McKever, 'Do Clothes Make the Man?', in *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear*, ed. Rosalind McKever, Claire Wilcox & Marta Franceschini (London: V&A Publishing, 2022), 10–25; and Gilligan, 'Fashioning Masculinities'. The *Fashioning Masculinities* exhibition with its inclusion of spectacular menswear was structured around the themes of underdressed, overdressed and redressed.

factory owner Julio Blanco (see Figure 1). We will then focus upon the close visual analysis of costuming and its relationship with wider elements of *mise-en-scène* in supporting characterization in key scenes. In the first section of analysis, 'Dressing', we focus on the ways in which the character of Julio is dressed in stereotypical business-casual attire to establish and visually communicate his position as the archetypal, ageing Spanish patriarchal figure. Through specific garments and the use of colour, his costume functions in such a way as to allow him to perform an identity of stability and safety; yet a closer examination of Julio's costuming provides insight into his duplicitous nature. Of course, no cinematic character exists in isolation within a narrative, and thus our analysis extends beyond a focus on Julio to encompass also an examination of his multifarious interactions with a selection of his colleagues who act to disrupt the narrative equilibrium. In the 'Dressing' section, we examine how Julio's interactions with Miralles (Manolo Solo) are dominated by the assertion of power relations in which nostalgia and lies become represented as truth.

Figure 1
Javier Bardem as 'The Good Boss', Julio Blanco.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (Fernando León de Aranoa, 2021).

In the second section, 'Undressing', we examine in detail a range of different ways in which intersectional power dynamics are disrupted and Julio's status is called into question. We begin by examining how the public and private spheres are blurred—through Julio's adoption of pyjamas—and the strategies by which desire is displaced from the body onto clothes in sexualized contexts in an attempt to perpetuate the myth of virile heteronormativity. We contrast the absurdity of Julio's undressed representation with that of the confidence of his lover Liliana (Almudena Amor) in and beyond the bedroom. The dynamics of undressing power relations are further examined with close reference to Khaled (Tarik Rmili), and how he undercuts the stereotypical representation of the immigrant Other in Spanish cinema. We conclude this section through a focus on José (Óscar de la Fuente) and how the use of unkempt workwear, desexualized undressing and soiling are used to disturb order and identities.

In the final section of this article, 'Redressing', we discuss how Julio attempts to restore order and power through the adoption of conservative dress. Through his costuming, Julio performs the façade of a 'good boss', albeit one that is having to adapt to the shifting power dynamics of the workplace. Thus, through costuming, *mise-en-scène* and performance, our analysis enables us to examine the ways in which gender, ethnicity, sexuality and class intersect and disrupt the patriarchal structures of power within the shifting social and cultural contexts of contemporary Spain.

El buen patrón tells the story of a week in the life of Julio Blanco, the owner of a family-run business that manufactures and sells industrial measuring scales in an unnamed Spanish provincial town (Figure 2). The linear narrative follows a familiar Todorovian structure that shifts from one state of equilibrium to another through the pattern of disruption, recognition and repair.[9] At the opening of the film, the factory is preparing for an inspection by the local enterprise committee who are looking to confer the annual award for business excellence. On the surface, Blanco projects the image of being a benevolent, understanding boss, always looking out for his employees' best interests. However, as things do not go according to plan, it becomes apparent that this factory owner is controlling, manipulative and ruthless. He is prepared to stop at nothing to ensure that Básculas Blanco receives the coveted award. It is worth noting that in the Spanish language the word *blanco* means white, a colour that in the Western world is frequently associated with traits of purity, innocence, cleanliness and perfection.[10] There is a deep sense of irony in giving the main protagonist this last name, since Julio exhibits none of these character traits.

Figure 2
Julio and his employees at the entrance to the Básculas Blanco factory.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (2021).

9 See Tzvetan Todorov, 'Structural Analysis of Narrative', trans. Arnold Weinstein, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 3:1 (1969), 70–76.

10 See Michel Pastourou, *White: The History of a Colour*, trans. Jody Gladding, with a foreword by Roland Betancourt (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2023 [1st French ed. 2022]); and

In 2022, the film achieved a 'record setting' twenty nominations at Spain's prestigious 36th Goya awards, winning in six categories: Best Film, Actor, Director, Editing, Screenplay and Score.[11] The film is the third collaboration between Bardem and the writer-director-producer Fernando León de Aranoa, following *Los lunes al sol* (2002) and *Loving Pablo* (2017). As David Steritt argues, all three films combine 'social commentary and political critique', enhanced in the case of *El buen patrón* 'by darkly comic observations on class inequity, professional privilege, and family life'.[12]

Since costuming identities is the focus of this article, it is only fitting that we briefly consider the work of the film's award-winning designer Fernando García. His creative work spans fashion and costume design, working both with his brother as one half of the Antonio García fashion label based in Seville, and as a film and television costume designer.[13] Over the last twenty-six years, having collaborated on more than thirty film and television productions, his work has received critical acclaim culminating in two Goya wins for *La isla mínima* (Alberto Rodríguez, 2014) and *Modelo 77* (Alberto Rodríguez, 2022), and three further nominations including *El buen patrón* (2022).[14] García has worked alongside León de Aranoa on *Los lunes al sol* and *A Perfect Day* (2015) as well as *El buen patrón*. García's style, inspired by the time and place of the narrative, is one that seeks to convey the essence of an era without resorting to the intrusion of the spectacular. Speaking of his earlier work on *La isla mínima*, he explained how important it was that, 'los espectadores se dejen llevar por la historia y no por el vestuario'.[15]

This mode of costume design extends to *El buen patrón*, where he has created 'un vestuario invisible'.[16] Whilst adhering to the dominant

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Richard Dyer, *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, with an introductory essay by Maxime Cervulle (London/New York: Routledge, 2017 [1st ed. 1997]).

11 Ryan Gajewski, 'Spain's Goya Awards: Javier Bardem's "The Good Boss" Named Best Picture', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 12 February 2022, n.p.; available at <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/spain-goya-awards-2022-winners-list-1235092610/> (accessed 13 August 2024).

12 David Sterritt, 'The Good Boss', *Cineaste*, XLVIII:2, (2023), n.p.; available at <https://www.cineaste.com/spring2023/the-good-boss> (accessed 17 June 2024).

13 María José Pérez Méndez, 'Este es el responsable del cambio de look de Javier Bardem en "El buen patron" ', *El Mundo,* 8 February 2022, n.p.; available at <https://www.elmundo.es/yodona/moda/2022/02/08/62012789fc6c83b4778b45b6.html> (accessed 3 January 2025).

14 See 'Fernando García, Goya award for Best Costume Design for Modelo 77', *PerisCostumes.com*, 3 February 2023, n.p.; available at <https://periscostumes.com/en/news/fernando-garcia-goya-award-for-best-costume-design-for-modelo-77/> (accessed 3 January 2025).

15 Teresa Garort, 'Fernando García: "Diseñar para el cine es duro pero da muchas satisfacciones" ', *El Mundo*, 7 February 2015, n.p.; available at <https://www.elmundo.es/yodona/2015/02/06/54bd39a6268e3eb6608b4577.html> (accessed 3 January 2025).

16 Pérez Méndez, 'Este es el responsable del cambio de look de Javier Bardem', n.p.

discourses of the storytelling role of costume in cinema, García modestly underestimates the effectiveness of his creative vision in transporting the viewing public elsewhere. Furthermore, García's significant body of work visibly fashions a diverse array of periods in Spain's history and beyond, for instance: the television series *La peste* (Alberto Rodríguez & Rafael Cobos, 2018–2019) set in sixteenth century Spain; *Intemperie* (Benito Zambrano, 2019) set in 1940's Spain; *Modelo 77* set in the 1970s; and *A Perfect Day* (2015) set in the 1990's Balkan conflict. García claims that the intention of his costuming in *El buen patrón* is to make 'el público se olvide de que Javier Bardem, es Javier Bardem' (see Figure 3).[17] The 'complejo y complicado' costume design journey for transforming the star into building the character of Blanco for the film was a meticulous process; one of intense collaboration in the initial phases between García, Fernando and Bardem, supported by the visual coherence across the cast enabled by the collaborative work of the wardrobe, hair and make-up teams.[18]

Figure 3
Fernando García's costuming transforms Bardem into
Julio as the archetypal conservative Spanish businessman.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (2021).

The casting of Bardem in the lead role in *El buen patrón* undoubtedly has contributed to the film's popularity and critical success. In the context of our wider research, the film is interesting example of both fashioning ageing masculinity on and beyond the screen,[19] and Bardem's capacity to have

17 Pérez Méndez, 'Este es el responsable del cambio de look de Javier Bardem', n.p.

18 Pérez Méndez, 'Este es el responsable del cambio de look de Javier Bardem', n.p.

19 See Jacky Collins & Sarah Gilligan, 'Growing Old (Dis)gracefully: Spanish Masculinities and Star-Celebrity Culture', in *On Fashion*, ed. Joseph Henry Hancock II & Vicki Karaminas, *Journal of Bodies, Sexualities, and Masculinities*, 4:1 (2023), 73–99; Sarah Gilligan & Jacky Collins, 'Suits and Subcultures: Costuming and Masculinities in the Films of Pedro Almodóvar', *Film, Fashion & Consumption*, 8:2 (2019), 147–69. These articles form part of our current wider research project 'Made in Spain: Fashioning Masculinities in Film, Media, and Fashion Space'. See also Sarah Gilligan, 'Dressing Keanu: Sprezzatura and

shifted from 'star-as-professional' and a 'global icon and sex symbol' in his youth, to the star-as-performer commanding respect as an actor in domestic and transnational contexts.[20] Despite Bardem's transnational appeal (like Antonio Banderas), seminal critical work in Spanish film studies has largely centred on his objectified youthful self as the stereotyped 'macho ibérico', rather than his negotiation and representation of ageing masculine identities.[21] As Mark Gallagher argues, Bardem's 'off axis' sex appeal has been integral to his domestic and transnational success across his roles in pop-art cinema, prestige dramas and mainstream popular films.[22] Frequently 'ethnically marked' in terms of his eroticism as the 'Latin lover', Bardem's transnational films have represented him in terms of numerous Latin and Hispanic origins spanning Spain, Mexico, Brazil and Cuba.[23] In a similar way to Bardem's roles in *Mar adentro* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2004), *No Country for Old Men* (Joel Coen & Ethan Coen, 2007), *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010) or *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012), his appearance as Julio refutes the blurring of character and star. Like so many chameleon-like performers, through costuming and appearance, Bardem is distanced from his suave, stylish off-screen, cross-media star-celebrity persona that graces advertising campaigns for Ermenegildo Zegna, the red carpet, and the pages of glossy international mens' style magazines such as *GQ*.[24]

Bardem's representation as Julio in *El buen patrón* disrupts expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Vicent Boras *et al.* point to the notion of there being different types of masculinity in a Spanish context based primarily on three aspects: power relations, production relations and sexuality.[25] These are all based on, and constructed in relation to, what R. W. Connell terms 'hegemonic masculinity', which functions to legitimize the structures of patriarchy.[26] In the character of Julio Blanco, these characteristics can be observed in the power dynamics created in the factory setting and in his misogynistic treatment of women. Further, considering hegemonic

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Fashioning Ageing Masculinity on the Red Carpet', *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*, 11:2 (2024), 103–18; available at <https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/csmf_00086_1> (accessed 10 April 2025); and Gilligan, 'Fashioning Masculinities'.

20 Mark Gallagher, 'On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal', in *Acting and Performance*, ed. Donna Peberdy, *Transnational Cinemas*, 5:2 (2014), 111–26.

21 See Perriam, *Stars and Masculinities in Spanish Cinema*; Fouz-Hernández & Martínez-Expósito, *Live Flesh*; and Smith, *Desire Unlimited*.

22 See Gallagher, 'On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal'.

23 See Gallagher, 'On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal', 112.

24 See Collins & Gilligan, 'Growing Old (Dis)gracefully'.

25 Vicent Borràs Català *et al.*, 'Male Hegemony in Decline? Reflections on the Spanish Case', *Men and Masculinities*, 15:4 (2012), 406–23.

26 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005 [1st ed. 1995]).

masculinities within a shifting post-Franco context, as Lorraine Ryan and Ana Corbalán observe:

> In the Francoist era, men were expected to conform to a patriarchal ideal of breadwinner, while transitional culture, for example the films of José Sacristán, extolled the urbane 'man about town'. In the 1980s, entrepreneurial masculinity, emblematised by 'el triunfador', was exalted.[27]

Bardem's Julio embodies these stereotypes, signalling that whilst the end of Franco's oppressive regime saw the rise of Spanish feminisms and the ushering in of significant societal freedoms and equalities, hegemonic masculinities continue to endure. Notwithstanding the contemporary setting of León de Aranoa's film, there are several aspects that convey echoes of Spanish society under Franco. In his seminal text, Stanley Payne speaks of the dictator holding 'overriding authority for central control'.[28] Within the microsociety of the factory, Blanco, as the figurehead, exerts strict control over his employees' lives to maintain his power and authority, and demands unwavering loyalty from them; as his outmoded notions of the corporate Spanish family come under threat, he is forced to rapidly adapt to a shifting and more diverse cultural and economic context.

In analysing Spanish fashion in the Franco era, Ana Melendo argues that power can 'be exercised over the body, containing it, marking it, taming it, subjugating it and using it for certain symbolic purposes'.[29] Furthermore, the boundaries between past and present, public and private, clothing and the body in a contemporary post-Franco context are deliberately visualized and disrupted through García's costume designs in *El buen patrón*. Blanco crystallizes the particular 'estética del empresario conservador' that is epitomized by the enduring and familiar 'boutiques de barrio cargadas de chaquetas de paño, pantalones camel, mocasines con calcetines en colores verdes y burdeos'.[30] Coupled with his Jaguar car and flashy watch, Blanco is fashioned as a 'provocador', but this is a look that is increasingly outmoded within contemporary Spain.[31] Power and control are sartorially

27 Lorraine Ryan & Ana Corbalán, 'Introduction: The Reconfiguration of Masculinity in Spain', in *The Dynamics of Masculinity in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, ed. Lorraine Ryan & Ana Corbalán (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–15 (p. 1).

28 Stanley G. Payne, *The Franco Regime, 1936–1975* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 213.

29 Ana Melendo, 'Female Fashion in the Franco Era and the *Imágenes* Magazine Programme', *Film, Fashion & Consumption*, 11:1 (2022), 29–49 (p. 30); available at <https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/ffc_00038_1> (accessed 10 April 2025).

30 Fernando García quoted in Pérez Méndez, 'Este es el responsable del cambio de look de Javier Bardem', n.p.

31 Fernando García quoted in Pérez Méndez, 'Este es el responsable del cambio de look de Javier Bardem', n.p.

asserted through dressing via colour, tailoring and cleanliness. Conversely, undressing and dirt function to signal disequilibrium and challenges to the status quo, after which masculinity is redressed and revealed as an empty performative signifier.

Dressing

With his confident, authoritarian posture and spatial distance from his employees, Bardem's Julio echoes notions of General Franco's autocratic direction from above.[32] As he addresses his workforce atop the cherry picker on the factory floor, Julio asserts the enduring values of unity and success (see Figure 4). The long shot initially positions the spectator as one of the many employees looking upwards as Julio announces that the company has been selected as a finalist in the regional government awards for Business Excellence. Rather than wearing a slick, sharply tailored monochromatic wool suit that refashions the male body as a unified ideal, Julio's costuming is marked by its functionality and unspectacular styling. With his greying flicked slicked-back hair and spectacles, Julio is adorned in the stereotypical jacket and slacks attire of ageing middle class, white Spanish masculinity in which the separate elements maximize the wearability of the garments across different seasons and contexts. Combined with an open-collared shirt and a red knitted pullover, the look is respectable, and commands authority, rather than being either overly formal, fashionable or flashy.

Key to the fashioning of this stereotypical Spanish business-casual look is Julio's green jacket (see Figure 5). Constructed from soft, light, mid-weight wool, it is loosely reminiscent of the iconic Spanish Teba. Characterized by its unstructured construction that facilitates movement, the Teba is inspired by the hunting wardrobe. The flapless pockets and distinctive lapel enable it to function as a smart casual jacket that is easy to wear in a range of contexts, but still asserts a level of formality. Originally created for King Alfonso XIII, the Teba is less formal than a traditionally tailored suit jacket and is suited to the Spanish climate. Allegedly, the king's jacket was much admired by his friend and shooting companion Carlos Alfonso de Mitjans y Fitz-James Stuart—the twenty-first Conde de Teba. The king, in an act of generosity, gave the jacket to the Conde (who was also known as

32 See Payne, *The Franco Regime*; as well as *Spain Transformed: The Late Franco Dictatorship, 1959–75*, ed. Nigel Townson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Sergio Rodríguez Tejada, 'Surveillance and Student Dissent: The Case of the Franco Dictatorship', *Surveillance & Society*, 12:4 (2014), 528–46; available at <https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/article/view/francodissent> (accessed 10 April 2025).

'Bunting') who wore it religiously, so much so that the jacket from then on took the name of its new owner—Teba.[33]

Figures 4 & 5
Julio addresses his workers on the factory floor.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (2021).

Within a Spanish context, the Teba can be understood to signify right-wing political affiliation, as reflecting class conservative functionality (the not-fashionable/the unspectacular) and speaks to utility rather than sartorial flourish. Devoid of pattern or embellishments, the look is one that functions to assert Julio's hegemonic masculinity, status and age. The way that his attire (not just the jacket) speaks to tradition in Spain, adheres to Manuel Ahedo's proposition that '[d]uring the 1960s, conformity in conduct and dress characterized daily life'.[34] Although the political and social

33 See Consuelo Font, 'La discreta y poco conocida condesa de Teba, una aristócrata con apabullante pedigrí', *El Mundo*, 7 October 2020, n.p.; available at <https://www.elmundo.es/loc/famosos/2020/10/07/5f7c68a921efa0df458b4689.html> (accessed 9 August 2024); and Mikel Soro, ' "Teba", chaqueta de Zarautz', *El Diario Vasco,* 3 March 2006, n.p.; available at <https://www.diariovasco.com/pg060303/prensa/noticias/Contraportada/200603/03/DVA-ULT-418.html> (accessed 9 August 2024).

34 Manuel Ahedo, 'Traditional Regional Dressing, Identity, Sociality and Aesthetic Enchantment in the Fallas Festival in Valencia (Spain)', *Critical Studies in Fashion &*

contexts of Spain have significantly shifted over recent decades, the key to the enduring allure of Spanish menswear and its seemingly effortless elegance is the combination of a functional purpose combined with craft and tradition. Conservative values are combined with the influence of regional customs and the pervasiveness of both countryside living and Catholicism. The boundaries between the city and country become blurred, as garments are worn both for work and leisure pursuits. The influence of the hunt and its implied power dynamics runs through the film's visual and verbal narrative, as green wool, checks and waxed jackets offer allusions to 'voguish aristocratic pastimes'.[35] Colour, as Michel Pastoureau discusses, is a 'complex cultural construct' devoid of 'transcultural truth' and thus is often marginalized in academic analysis.[36] The polysemic nature of colour means that it is mutable, its meanings shifting in different social, political and cultural contexts, enabling it to play a significant role in the fashioning of identities. Combining cultural formation and visual symbolism, colour becomes tangible, multi-layered and complex through clothing.[37] In a counter shot, the audience views Julio from the point of view of the workforce and if we look closely, we can see the use of colour palette where the red of his jumper and the grey backdrop of the factory is echoed in the overalls of the workforce. There is a sense here of the workers belonging to Julio—the factory owner and good boss.

Furthermore, echoes of Franco's autocratic 'direction from above' as the embodiment of masculine hegemony, permeate the *mise-en-scène* and can be observed in the slogan found on the factory wall 'Esfuerzo, Equilibrio, Fidelidad' (see Figure 6). The colour used is very similar to that of the jumper worn by Julio atop the cherry picker, and the content is reminiscent of slogans used extensively between 1936 and the beginning of 1940 in printed propaganda and official tripartite mottos painted on public-facing buildings and walls.[38]

Beauty, 9:1, (2018), 35–66 (p. 39); available at <https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/csfb.9.1.35_1> (accessed 10 April 2025).

35 Chris Cotonou, 'These Spanish Menswear Brands Deserve Your Attention—and Your Closet Space', *Robb Report*, 27 July 2020, n.p.; available at <https://robbreport.com/style/fashion/spanish-menswear-2938461/> (accessed 9 August 2024).

36 Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Colour*, trans. Markus I. Cruse (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2023 [1st French ed. 2000]), 7.

37 Jonathan Faiers & Mary Westerman Bulgarella, 'Introduction', in *Colours in Fashion*, ed. Jonathan Faiers & Mary Westerman Bulgarella (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1–10.

38 See Paul Preston, *¡Comrades!: Portraits from the Spanish Civil War* (London: Harper Collins, 1999); Mariam Basilio, 'Genealogies for a New State: Painting and Propaganda in Franco's Spain, 1936–1940', *Discourse*, 24:3 (2002), 67–94; Mireya Folch-Serra, 'Propaganda in Franco's Time', in *Agonía republicana. Living the Death of an Era: Essays on the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Susana Bayó Belenguer, *BSS*, LXXXIX:7–8 (2012), 227–40.

Figure 6
Echoes of Franco's legacy: the faded and peeling slogan
'Esfuerzo, Equilibrio, Fidelidad' adorns the wall of the factory.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (2021).

Whilst the film with its use of mobile phones and social media is set loosely in the present, Blanco's factory resides in the fading shadows of Franco's legacy. Compared to the typical, fiery Almodóvar red that is so often associated with Spanish cinema, this shade is dirty and mucky, rather than bold and defiant.[39] Red remains 'the strongest, most remarkable colour, and the one richest in poetic, oneiric, and symbolic possibilities.[40] This hue of red is Pantone® 7628 C, Rich Burgundy; a powerful colour often associated with passion and ambition that is also the official colour red of the Spanish flag. In various other cultures, it is seen as a symbol of prosperity, danger and success, and is understood to represent determination and resilience.[41] Characteristics found in Julio Blanco, but at what cost? This red permeates both the costuming and spaces of the film, connecting characters to signify the bloodline of this pseudo family constructed by this corporate institution. Away from the factory, the red dominates the *mise-en-scène* of Julio's life and can also be seen in both his wife's and his lover's clothing, the walls of the home, work and the restaurant. Just as the power structures of Franco's regime bled into every aspect of Spanish life, Julio constructs himself as the benevolent patriarchal figure in and beyond the factory. No one can escape the pervasive trickle of his influence upon their working and personal lives.

39 See Gerard Dapena, 'Making Spain Fashionable: Fashion and Design in Pedro Almodóvar's Cinema', in *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar*, ed. Marvin D'Lugo & Kathleen M. Vernon (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 495–523; and Gilligan & Collins, 'Suits and Subcultures'.

40 Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Colour*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2017 [1st French ed. 2016]), 7.

41 Pastoureau, *Red*, trans. Gladding, 175.

Figures 7, 8 & 9
Evoking the past as Julio and Miralles (Manolo Solo) meet over dinner.
Film stills from *El buen patrón* (2021).

For instance, in order to address his dissatisfaction with Miralles' performance in the workplace, Julio talks to him over dinner in a restaurant. Julio employs emotional blackmail and nostalgia, as he berates Miralles for his shoddy performance at work. Both manager and employee seemingly mirror one another in their costuming signalling their friendship. However, through the respective presence and absence of a tie, the visual narrative signifies the hierarchical differences between the men. Julio seemingly deliberately adopts the tie as a symbol of power, respect and privilege (see Figure 7). Ties function as 'one of the most insistent

indicators of gender difference in the male wardrobe'.[42] They are, as Jonathan Faiers argues, 'a textile equivalent of the phallus, both in its general shape and its ability to be read as a directional sign connecting the head downwards to the genital region'.[43] As sartorial narrative devices, ties can communicate dysfunctionality through their capacity to act as a murder weapon, or to signal inappropriateness and discomfort.[44] Conversely, in this scene, Miralles' tieless attire and open shirt exposes his throat, signifying his vulnerability (see Figure 8). Through the intermittence of the sharp edge of the collar, and delicate flesh, he becomes marked as the defenceless prey faced with the predator poised to strike at the jugular.[45]

Woven into this painful conversation between Julio and Miralles, about workplace expectations and Miralles's suspicions of his wife's infidelity, are references to their enduring friendship, family connections and the complicit and consensual upholding of lies as truth. Julio nostalgically harks back to their youth and when their fathers were out hunting together. These reminiscences, along with the stuffed boars' heads hung on the restaurant wall above their table, evoke Carlos Saura's classic *La caza* (1966) (see Figure 9). The film focuses on three fifty-something businessmen, who participate in a rabbit hunt. As veterans of the Nationalist Civil War, Paco (Alfredo Mayo) is the leader and dominant member of the group. His business success, as David Archibald argues, 'suggests that his commercial ruthlessness parallels his wartime behaviour'.[46] As has been observed by many Spanish cinema scholars, *La caza* served as a 'metaphorical evocation of the Spanish Civil War and the societal wound it left behind', a veiled critique of the Civil War and the damage wrought upon Spain's population.[47] The oblique referencing of

42 Jonathan Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously: Dysfunctional Fashion in Film* (New Haven/London: Yale U. P., 2013), 137.

43 Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously,* 137.

44 Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously*, 135–41.

45 See, in a different context, Barbara Brownie, *Acts of Undressing: Politics, Eroticism, and Discarded Clothing* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 43; and Claire Pajaczkowska & Barry Curtis, 'Looking Sharp', in *If Looks Could Kill: Cinema's Images of Fashion, Crime and Violence*, ed. Marketa Uhlirova (London: Koenig Books, 2008), 62–67.

46 David Archibald, *The War That Won't Die: The Spanish Civil War in Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 2012), esp. ch. 4 'Film under Franco: *La caza*/*The Hunt* and *El jardín de las delicias*/*The Garden of Delights*', 82–98.

47 Patricia Hart, review of Marvin D'Lugo, *The Films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing*, *Film Criticism*, 17:1 (1992), 69–72 (p. 71). See also Marvin D'Lugo, *The Films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1991); Rob Stone, *Spanish Cinema* (Harlow: Longman, 2002); and Sally Faulkner, 'Ageing and Coming of Age in Carlos Saura's *La caza* (*The Hunt*, 1965)', *MLN*, 120:2 (2005), 457–84.

Saura's earlier film here serves to underscore Julio's character and the predominant abusive power dynamic operating at the Básculas Blanco factory.

Although *El buen patrón* makes no explicit reference to Spain's political past or present, the authoritarian manner in which Julio runs the factory and treats his employees could also be read as signalling the recent resurgence of populist right-wing ideology. Prior to the film's release, in the 2019 elections Spain's conservative party Partido Popular (PP) saw an increase in the number of parliamentary seats won. Moreover, Vox, the emerging far-right party espousing an authoritarian ideology, as Carles Ferreira discusses, is not dissimilar to the dominant principles of the Francoist dictatorship.[48] Having secured seats in the Cortes for the first time in the April 2019 General Election, Vox saw their success increase in the subsequent November General Election, turning them into the third-largest parliamentary party in Spain. At the time of writing this article, despite Vox losing seats in the snap 2023 General Election, as Ana Mar Fernández-Pasarín and Asbel Bohigue explain, they 'achieved a good result, allowing it to gain access to significant local and regional government's [*sic*] headquarters, such as both the city and region of Valencia, alongside the PP'.[49] In order to better understand this oppressive relationship between Julio and Miralles, and Julio's relationship with his workforces more widely, Antonio Gramsci's theorization of hegemony can be utilized here with its dual mechanism of domination—force (*dominio*) accompanied by consent (*direzione*).[50] Yet, against this contemporary political landscape, in performing hegemonic masculinity perhaps Julio Blanco seems more akin to a conservative entrepreneur of the moment, rather than a fully-fledged throwback to pre-Transition Spain. Through costuming and performance, *El buen patrón* offers an impactful exposition of the dynamics at play in performing hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal power both within the setting of the factory and beyond.

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48 Carles Ferreira, 'Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España: un estudio sobre su ideología', *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 51 (2019), 73–98.

49 Ana Mar Fernández-Pasarín & Asbel Bohigues 'Spain: Political Developments and Data in 2023, European Semester, Snap Elections and the Reformulation of the Left-Wing Coalition', *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*, 63:1 (2024), 460–480 (p. 460); available online at <https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/2047-8852.12439> (accessed 10 April 2025).

50 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921–1926*, ed. & trans. Quintin Hoare (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1978); and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* ed. & trans. Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

Figure 10
Julio and his wife Adela (Sonia Almarcha) breakfast *al fresco* at home.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (2021).

Undressing

Being dressed enables Julio to perform hegemonic masculinity; conversely in *El buen patron*, stages of undress function as a means of disrupting and dismantling dominant power structures. Acts of undressing within wider cultural contexts span the public and private domains, and the meanings signified by removing a garment shift between the functional, mortifying and the erotic depending on motivation and situation. As Barbara Brownie examines, undressing is often regarded as a binary process, a means by which the clothed body becomes naked. Yet, the transition does not always 'culminate in nakedness', as, often, unpeeled layers continue to reveal further layers of clothing masking the materiality of the body.[51] For instance, in *El buen patrón* whilst Julio is eating his breakfast *al fresco*, adorned in red pyjamas and blue robe he can be seen as undressed in a state of comparative intimacy, compared to his work attire (see Figure 10). As he communicates with his domestic staff, the power dynamics and boundaries between work and leisure, public and private are blurred. As Shaun Cole argues, the smoking jackets of the late nineteenth century marked a move between casual and more formal styles of menswear. In British menswear, such garments tended to be silk, velvet, quilted and decorated. Conversely, Julio's cotton robe and pyjamas are far removed from the 'sumptuous silk or chintz banyan derived from eastern dress that was the forerunner of the smoking jacket and dressing gown'.[52] Additionally, Julio lacks the glamour, extravagance and handsome looks that we associate with classic Hollywood stars, or figures such as Cecil Beaton or Noel Coward.

51 Brownie, *Acts of Undressing*, 2.

52 Shaun Cole, 'Casual Subversion', in *Dandy Style: 250 Years of British Men's Fashion*, ed. Shaun Cole & Miles Lambert (New Haven/London: Yale U. P., 2021), 125–38 (p. 129).

With its complementary piping, structure, colour and embroidered monogram, Julio's look is one that communicates formality even in private contexts. Faiers argues that beyond 'utilitarian embellishment' to signify individualized ownership, adding 'initials or monograms to clothing is an immediate, simple and relatively inexpensive way of individualising clothing, bestowing a certain level of prestige and exclusivity'.[53] Whilst not wholly or clearly visible, the embroidery on the pocket of the robe appears to be a branded logo, rather than Julio's monogrammed initials. It appears to be Hackett of London, a British menswear brand sold at the Spanish department store El Corte Inglés. Like the Teba, the continuing trickle-down influence of such garments associated with wealth, tradition and status, functions to differentiate Julio from his domestic staff. As Katherine Appleford argues, class is mobilized through the intersections of fashion, gender and space. Being adorned in public social spaces in pyjamas makes individuals visible and (women in particular) subject to class-based scrutiny.[54] Although it would be uncouth for the middle-class Julio to be in the public sphere in his pyjamas, in this liminal, intimate outdoor space he asserts his power to be seen with his wife in such garments. Furthermore, the pyjamas create a sartorial armour, shielding the flesh of the ageing body, and averting desire when Julio is with his wife both *al fresco*, and in the bedroom creating a tactile barrier between the pair. The situated practice of Blanco's domestic space is one that is within his individual control, and one cannot underestimate how fashion operates as a Bourdeauian marker of taste and class in these contexts.[55] Conversely, the displacing of desire from the body onto clothes through acts of undress is evident when Julio is unfaithful to his wife with Liliana.

Within Franco-era Spanish cinema, the man in underwear, as Pérez argues, frequently represents an 'absurd spectacle' that 'prompts giggles rather than desire'.[56] Furthermore, illicit encounters that make a mockery of the institution of marriage become represented as humorous; functioning as a safety valve to defuse the pressures of ideals of virile masculinity within patriarchal structures.[57] In the case of *El buen patrón*, rather than Julio being represented as a contemporary cosmopolitan and sexualized Spaniard, he is rendered as comedic, outmoded and inadequate. In the absence of a scene of assured eroticized undressing, and a display of

53 Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously,* 246.

54 See Katherine Appleford, 'Being Seen in Your Pyjamas: The Relationship between Fashion, Class, Gender and Space', *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography,* 23:2 (2016), 162–80.

55 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London/New York: Routledge, 2005 [1st French ed. 1979]).

56 Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema*, 105.

57 Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema,* 102–11.

confident male sexuality, the camera centres on Julio adorned in his shirt and spectacles as he has sex (see Figure 11). The softened form of Julio's body articulates a 'manliness of maturity', one that lacks the taut eroticized spectacle of Bardem's youthful physique (see Figure 12).[58]

Figures 11 & 12
Julio with his latest intern and lover Liliana (Almudena Amor).
Film stills from *El buen patrón* (2021).

Where in Bigas Lunas' seminal 1992 film *Jamón, jamón*, Bardem is stripped to the waist, his glistening muscular torso echoing the tension of the meat that hangs behind him (see Figure 13); as Julio, his torso remains sheathed with only a strip of his torso exposed. Rather than the intermittence of the borders between fabric and flesh being eroticized, they draw attention to that which is concealed.[59] The shirt, like the glasses, becomes incongruous situating Julio as confined to the public, rather than comfortable within the private domain. Although *El buen patrón* offers the scope to further question and destabilize

58 Sarah Goldsmith, 'Polished Impressions', in *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear*, ed. McKever, Wilcox & Franceschini, 26–43 (p. 29).

59 See Brownie, *Acts of Undressing,* 44; and Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, preliminary note by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976 [1st French ed. 1973]), 9–10.

Figure 13
Film still of Javier Bardem in his youth as Raúl in
Jamón, jamón (Bigas Luna, 1992).

patriarchal constructions of masculinity, the film perpetuates the myth of enduring virile heteronormativity. Julio is seemingly able to charm Liliana—he may have aged, but he confidently believes through his charisma that he still retains the power to consistently seduce younger, attractive women. As in *Skyfall*, through his performance as Julio *El buen patrón,* Bardem merges 'sexual charisma with diabolical tendencies'.[60]

Dressed in his unspectacular corporate attire, Julio lacks the sartorial flashiness and flamboyance of the *nouveau riche*, blonde Bond villain Raoul Silva—adorned in his patterned Prada shirt, and suit by costume designer Jany Temime.[61] In withholding bodily display, it is Julio's/Bardem's emphasis of 'vocal performance, facial expressions and body language', coupled with his status and power that is utilized.[62] Thus, the scenes hint at the 'dynamic interplay between sexiness and unsexiness' that, as Gallagher notes in a different context, has come to define Bardem's body of work since the 2000s.[63] His vocal performance, in this as in Bardem's

60 See Gallagher, 'On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal', 124.

61 Stelios Phili, 'Style Reconnaissance: Skyfall's Jany Temime on Daniel Craig's Wardrobe Requests, the First Bond Villain to Wear Prada, and the Deal with Javier Bardem's Blond Hair', *GQ*, 9 November 2012, n.p.; available at <https://www.gq.com/story/jany-temime-skyfall-interview-james-bond-style-daniel-craig> (accessed 17 June 2024).

62 Gallagher, 'On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal', 123.

63 Gallagher, 'On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal', 116.

representations in English language cinema, 'signals his sexual availability more than physical displays or actions do'.[64]

The reality is that this power play of seduction is more multifaceted than Julio realizes. The locus of control resides with Liliana as she flirts, seduces and choreographs a performance of sexuality and desire to pander to his fantasies. Adorned in black lingerie with a breast exposed and a silk blindfold that he has provided (from his wife's shop), Liliana initially presents herself to him as the passive object of desire. She grants Julio the illusion of power and ownership over her body in a heteronormative dynamic that carries the traces of Francoist gendered ideologies, before taking control, removing her blindfold, kissing him and then riding him on top.[65] Her sexual confidence both fuels his fascination and undermines his power, Liliana reveals that she has learned her repertoire from watching pornography. Both sexually confident and commanding in the workplace, she is marked from previous generations of Spanish women. For instance, as Melendo argues, in the Franco era:

> […] the state thus began working effectively and efficiently to promote the modesty and austerity expected of Spanish women, established in opposition to immorality, extravagance and frivolousness.[66]

Liliana's undressing of Julio extends beyond the bedroom, to the boardroom. She commands authority and defies his attempts to control and undermine her. Where her love-struck predecessor was moved on by Julio from the intern scheme, Liliana ties herself to the blood of the Blanco family. Increasingly adorned in an array of rich burgundy accessories and garments (see Figure 14), Liliana aligns herself with Julio's wife both sartorially and in her actions. She further manipulates Julio, as the daughter of family friends, until he has no choice to give her the role of marketing manager.

The undressing of power dynamics extends beyond gender and sexuality, to the challenge seemingly posed by the immigrant 'Other'. *El buen patrón* is not, in and of itself, a film that focuses specifically on the theme of immigration. However, the character of Khaled and his interactions in and beyond the workplace resonate with characters that have appeared in films previously released in Spain collectively known as 'immigration films'.[67] Present in these earlier releases, the 'Otro bárbaro y externo', the threatening North

64 Gallagher, 'On Javier Bardem's Sex Appeal', 124.

65 Melendo, 'Female Fashion in the Franco Era', 36.

66 Melendo, 'Female Fashion in the Franco Era', 33.

67 See Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema*, 133–68. Films such as *Flores de otro mundo* (Icíar Bollaín, 1999), *Un novio para Yasmina* (Irene Cardona, 2008), *Retorno a Hansala* (Chus Gutiérrez, 2008), *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010) and *15 años + 1 día* (Gracia Querejeta, 2013) might be included under this term.

Figure 14
Liliana tries on a dark burgundy dress in Julio's wife's shop, signalling her ties to the Blanco family.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (2021).

African immigrant male is now nothing new in Spanish cinema. As noted respectively by Isabel Santaolalla, Daniela Flesler and Julia Barnes, the immigrant is frequently portrayed as criminal, parasitical and delinquent.[68] Representational strategies within *El buen patrón* break with this stereotype; no longer is the migrant in a position of marginalization and helplessness in the host society.[69] Khaled's representation in *El buen patrón* breaks with previous filmic representations of the stereotypical eroticization and exoticization of the 'Other'. Khaled represents an indirect challenge to the status quo that Julio has established at Básculas Blanco, both in his status in the workplace, and for his ability to get the girl.

The shift in power relations between Khaled and Julio can be traced through the visual narrative of costuming. Khaled's transformation in how he dresses for work, runs parallel to his changing status as he occupies the position previously held by the disgraced Miralles. Initially, Khaled aligns himself with the Spanish workers, his garments not dissimilar to the functional, hard-wearing cotton and corduroy clothing worn by other staff on the factory floor. Corduroy, as Alanna McKnight argues functions as 'an emblem of working-class utilitarianism'.[70] As Khaled's status increases,

68 See Isabel Santaolalla, *Los 'Otros': etnicidad y 'raza' en el cine español contemporáneo,* (Zaragoza: Prensas Univ. de Zaragoza, 2005), 134; Diana Flesler, 'New Racism, Intercultural Romance, and the Immigration Question in Contemporary Spanish Cinema', *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* [*Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*], 1:2 (2004), 103–17; and Julia Barnes, 'Immigrants and National Anxieties in 21st-Century Spanish Film', *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 43:2 (2019), 1–16; available at https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol43/iss2/6/ (accessed 14 May 2025).

69 Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema,* 143.

70 McKnight quoted in Natalie Michie, 'Why are we so fickle about corduroy?', *CBC Life*, 22 February 2023, n.p.; available at <https://www.cbc.ca/life/style/why-are-we-so-fickle-about-corduroy-1.6739651> (accessed 8 August 2024.)

gone are his dark blue padded gilet and burgundy needlecord shirt (see Figure 15). Instead, he wears a dark blue denim shirt, jeans, black leather belt, and a black leather jacket.

Adorned in the 'ultimate heterosexual symbol of masculinity'—the black leather jacket carries echoes of Marlon Brando's Johnny in Stanley Kramer's *The Wild One* (1953), a cult icon of hypermasculinity.[71] Khaled's self-confidence, and sexual prowess threatens both Julio's professional status and his heteronormative masculine identity. In examining the 'context of power, privilege and impunity', Maureen Tobin Stanley's critical analysis focuses on how the predominant narrative of previous films holds 'the non-privileged accountable while conferring immunity and impunity to the privileged'.[72] Khaled's response to the contentious dynamic with Miralles in the workplace is not one of submission, rather he is proactive; he speaks about running Logistics and about those who load the trucks being his people. Further, he offers a workable solution to the shipment problem. Khaled's costuming, words, actions and demeanour all suggest he aspires to and has the capability of becoming a leader just like Julio.

Furthermore, Khaled's costuming disrupts the stereotypical patterns of costuming the 'immigrant other' in Spanish cinema. As discussed by Pérez, there is typically within the genre 'an over-exposition of non-white characters (flashy colours, cheap fabrics and body revealing designs that hypervisualise them as exotic and sexualised)'.[73] Conversely, Pérez argues, Spanish characters are typically dressed understatedly, with restraint (muted colours, loose-fitting shapes, and discreet styles) 'in a way that presents them as occupying a neutral position'.[74] Although Khaled is constructed as an active sexual agent in the film, he is not constrained through costume and the body to stereotyped tropes of fetishistic representations of the eroticized 'Other'.[75] Rather than the male body being repeatedly stripped bare and lingeringly displayed for the scopophilic gaze, when Khaled is briefly shown having sex,

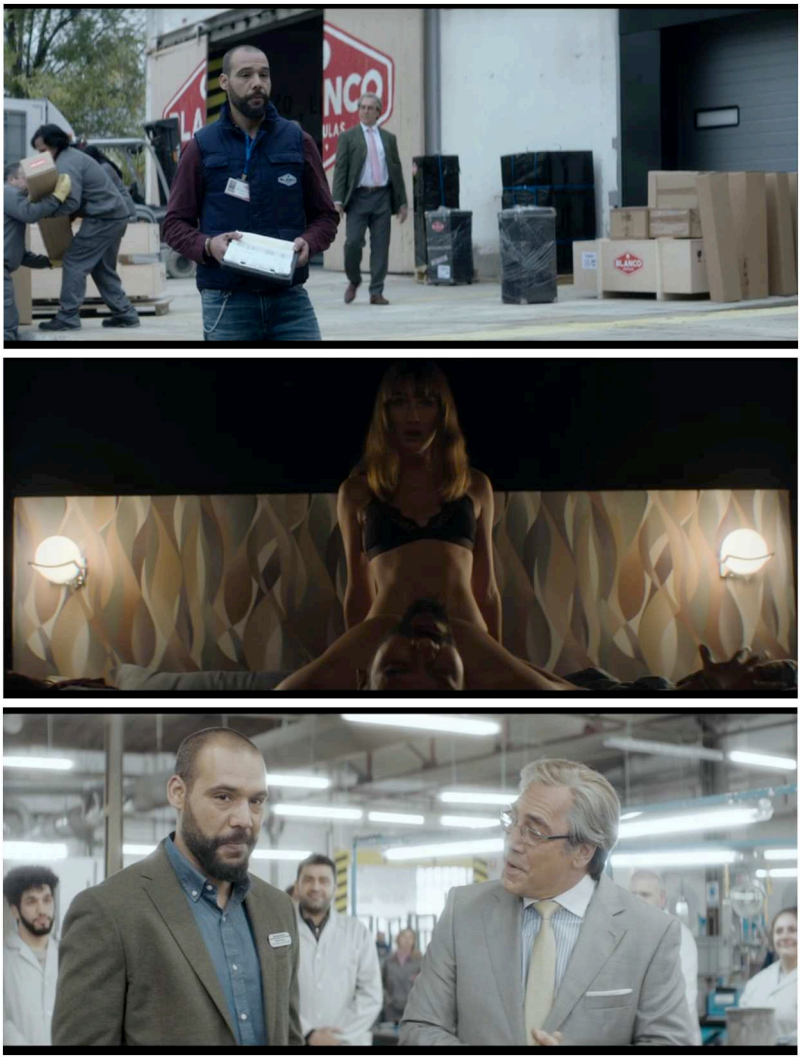
71 John Preston, 'Introduction', in Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook* (Los Angeles: L. T. Publications, 2000 [1st ed. 1972]), 27–29 (p. 27). See also Robert Tanitch, *Brando* (London: Cassell Illustrated/Octopus Publishing, 1994).

72 Maureen Tobin Stanley, 'Seeing (as) the Eroticized and Exoticized Other in Spanish Im/migration Cinema: A Critical Look at the (De)Criminalization of Migrants and Impunity of Hegemonic Perpetrators', *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 43:2 (2019), 1–26; available at <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol43/iss2/7/> (accessed 24 April 2025), here Tobin Stanley provides close textual analysis of a range of Spanish immigrant films: *Cartas de Alou* (Montxo Armendáriz, 1990), *Bwana* (Imanol Uribe, 1996) and *Flores de otro mundo*; and three from the 2000s: *Princesses* (Fernando León de Aranoa, 2005), *14 kilómetros* (Gerardo Olivares, 2007) and *Retorno a Hansala*.

73 Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema*, esp. ch. 4 'Dressing the Immigrant Other', 133–68 (p. 136).

74 Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema*, 134.

75 See Pérez, *Fashioning Spanish Cinema*.



Figures 15, 16 & 17
Khaled's (Tarik Rmili) sartorial transformation.
Film stills from *El buen patrón* (2021).

only the muscularity of his bare shoulders, chest and arms is revealed with the camera focusing Liliana astride him in her lingerie (see Figure 16). The porno-chic styling of the scene, privileges identification with Khaled, and places the semi-clad Liliana, rather than Khaled as the spectatorial object of desire. Heteronormative masculine desire is displaced from the body onto clothing, as Khaled is granted agency and status within a personal and professional context.

Towards the end of the film, the transformation in Khaled's workwear is even more pronounced. The olive-green, fine wool-blend jacket he now sports

is reminiscent of the one worn by Julio at the start of the film, implying further promotion and a shift in status and authority (see Figure 17). The fitted jacket evokes the tailoring of the European continental suit. With its trim, tight and short tailoring, it emphasizes the muscularity of the wearer, rather than concealing or making concessions to the male anatomy. Where Julio's traditional tailoring skims and masks the ageing body, Khaled's look is more youthful, casual and wearable with an affected nonchalance.[76] The challenge posed by this immigrant worker has indeed been successful, not for Khaled the fate that typically befalls non-white foreign male characters who are generally reduced to 'an anonymous, voiceless, victimised or drowned body'; rather he occupies a place of privilege, as part of the factory's management team, declaring himself Julio's 'hijo adoptivo'.[77] In this disruptive portrayal, the viewer is encouraged 'to consider a new way of seeing the viewpoint of the racialised Other'.[78] A viewpoint that breaks with the 'social disempowerment of the immigrant', and represents a destabilization to the status quo, challenging the established hierarchy imposed by Julio at Básculas Blanco, thus contributing to the undoing of this not so good boss.[79]

A further undressing and dismantling of Julio's authority can be observed in his conflict with former employee José. In contrast to Julio's managerial uniform, José's costuming bears all the hallmarks of a working-class poor aesthetic. Sleeping rough in his car by the entrance to the factory, José is devoid of any status afforded by full time employment, or the protection associated with being part of the Básculas Blanco family. José's attire in his encampment is unprofessional, unkempt and unimpressive. José wears a number of looks, including a brown beany cap, worn fleece-lined British khaki padded jacket, crewneck striped jumper, protest t-shirt, pale-blue shirt, scuffed utility boots and utilitarian baggy jeans. Denim within modern global capitalism, as James B. Salazar argues, 'memorializes the transnational movement of labour'.[80] Although unemployed, through his attire and the adoption of denim, José could easily be mistaken for a manual labourer. Despite numerous attempts by Julio and other members

76 See Valerie Steele & Gillion Carrara, 'Italian Fashion', in *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 430–32; and Shaun Cole, *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

77 Isolina Ballesteros, 'Foreign and Racial Masculinities in Contemporary Spanish Film', *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*, 3:3 (2006), 169–85 (p. 183).

78 Tobin Stanley, 'Seeing (as) the Eroticized and Exoticized Other in Spanish Im/migration Cinema', 1.

79 Parvati Nair, 'Borderline Men: Gender, Place and Power in Representations of Moroccans in Recent Spanish Cinema', in *Gender and Spanish Cinema,* ed. Steven Marsh & Parvati Nair (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2004), 103–18 (p. 106).

80 James B. Salazar, 'Fashioning the Historical Body: The Political Economy of Denim', *Social Semiotics*, 20:3 (2010) 293–308.

of the management team to intimidate and bribe José to cease his protest, he stands his ground, chanting slogans through his megaphone.

Figures 18, 19, 20 & 21
Julio and José (Óscar de la Fuente) square up to one another and
Julio is left with his hands abjectly dirty.
Film stills from *El buen patrón* (2021).

As Julio and José square up to one another, this 'David and Goliath' moment evokes memories of Spain's massive labour mobilizations of the 1970s (see Figures 18 & 19). As Rubén Vega García discuss, towards the end of Franco's dictatorship 'organized labour resurfaced in the 1960s and by the 1970s had become a decisive agent, creating intense conflict and initiating mass mobilisation, in the crisis of the Franco regime'.[81] Echoes of this iconic moment in the history of Spain's labour movement can also be found in a previous scene at the factory gates, in the background we can hear the iconic song *La muralla* which first appeared on the 1976 album *La paloma del vuelo popular*, made famous by Ana Belén & Victor Manuel, performers who were seen to epitomize the spirit of Spain's Transition to democracy. With lyrics taken from a poem by Nicolás Guillén, the Cuban poet, journalist and social activist, and music from the Chilean folk group Quilapayún, the song speaks of a need for solidarity in the battle between good and evil.

In an act of desexualized undressing, Julio's reaction to José's enduring protest is to remove his tie and unbutton his shirt. His sartorial transformation is of someone who has been provoked, who has lost control and who is ready to get their hands dirty to resolve the situation. This act of seeming to dismantle the sartorial hierarchy, is rendered futile and undercut by a malicious prank that

81 Rubén Vega García, 'Radical Unionism and the Workers' Struggle in Spain', trans. Carlos Pérez, in *Radical Left Response to Global Impoverishment*, ed. James Petras & Timothy F. Harding, *Latin American Perspectives,* 27:5 (2000), 111–33 (p. 111).

leaves him with his hands very literally in the shit (see Figure 20). In this context, the white-collar worker becomes marked by the dirt of his labourers that he treats so badly. Dirt becomes abject and no matter how hard he scrubs; Julio is tainted by the legacy of his actions towards others. In Julia Kristeva's seminal work on abjection, the abject refuses to 'respect borders, positions, rules' and 'disturbs identity, system' and 'order'.[82] The spectator is positioned with Julio, in a heightened moment of self-scrutiny and surveillance as the camera reveals his panic-stricken face in a fragmented, rapid sequence of shots in the mirror above the trough as he scrubs his flesh (see Figure 21). Borrowing from Freud's notion of the 'uncanny', Kristeva argues that the abject functions 'as a threat to the social order that prompts an urge to exclude such disruption and to seek a return to normalcy'.[83] For Julio, such a moment is dominated by horror and revulsion. His body is palpably angered, disgusted and at the brink of fury. Not that he is disgusted by reflecting upon his own behaviour. It is rather the fear of the loss of control and that his public performance of untarnished respectability threatens to be revealed to be a façade.

Redressing

In this final section, we posit that in the film's final Act, following the narrative journey through dressing (to represent equilibrium), undressing (to signal disequilibrium and the dismantling of power), there is an attempt to restore a new equilibrium through the process of redressing. There is a return to a performance of respectability and normalcy as Julio's authority is restored, albeit with significant concessions. To redress, as Rosalind McKever argues, is to remake the man. Where examples of masculine dressing in the V&A's *Fashioning Masculinities* exhibition eroded 'the monolithic model of gender it embodies', Julio's redressing is marked by conformity.[84] It is not only what is worn by Julio, but how and where it is worn that is integral to his redressing and regaining control. The first sense we have of this restoration is at the funeral of Fortuna's (Celso Bugallo) son, killed in an attempt instigated by Julio to remove José and his protest camp from outside the factory gates. Julio's clothing for this sombre occasion conforms to the advice of funeral directors Funeraria Magdalena, in terms of the acceptance of conservative casual wear, colour and cut at contemporary Spanish funerals.[85] The classic

82 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia U. P., 1982 [1st French ed. 1980]), 4.

83 Zachary Sheldon, 'Hell House or Something More? Horror, Abjection and Mental Illness', *Northern Lights,* 17:1 (2019), 43–56 (p. 45).

84 McKever, 'Do Clothes Make the Man?', 11. See also Gilligan, 'Fashioning Masculinities'.

85 See 'Cómo vestirse para un funeral', *Funeria Magdalena*, blog post, 30 January 2022, n.p., <https://funerariamagdalena.es/como-vestirse-funeral/> (accessed 12 August 2024).

Barbour wax jacket signifies class, history, heritage and quality, with the brand being associated with, as Kevin Almond observes, 'auspicious design credentials and impeccable workmanship'.[86] The deep green is coupled with a pale shirt and a deep navy blue, wool crew-neck sweater (see Figure 22). Blue, as Pastoureau argues, is less 'symbolically marked' than colours such as red, black or white. Blue can be read as neutral, 'it does not shock, offend, or disgust' and is historically associated with traits of wealth, power, and prestige.[87]

Figures 22 & 23
Julio attends the funeral of Fortuna's (Celso Bugallo) son.
Film stills from *El buen patrón* (2021).

As the ceremony draws to a close, although it is not his responsibility to do so, Julio moves to address the mourners assembled, endeavouring to climb a set of ladders used to access the niches located higher up the wall (Figure 23). This scene acts as a pale imitation of the cherry-picker scene from the beginning of the film, where Julio appears to hold the entire workforce's attention. Yet in this instance, rather than standing at the top of the ladder, he stops halfway. The practical reason for this being so that he can be sheltered against the rain by an umbrella carried by Rubio (Rafa Castejón) one of his factory managers. This positioning also speaks to the constraints that now exist on Julio's professional capacity, curbing his ability to manipulate others and make unjust decisions. Further, those attending this solemn event are fewer in number than the factory employees. However, an alternative interpretation could be that those willing to listen to Julio's worn-out rhetoric are reducing in number, his sphere of influence having diminished.

The redressing of Julio to reassert his power in the workplace culminates in him being adorned in a buttoned-up, pale grey single-breasted wool suit,

86 Kevin Almond, 'Raiding the Past, Designing for the Future', published conference paper, *Futurescan 2: Collective Voices. Association of Fashion and Textiles Courses, Sheffield Hallam University 10th–11th January 2013,* ed. Helena Britt, Sally Wade & Kerry Walton (online 2013), 112–23 (p. 120); available at <https://futurescan.figshare.com/articles/conference_contribution/Raiding_the_Past_Designing_for_the_Future/9943598?file=17907110> (accessed 25 April 2025).

87 Pastoureau, *Blue*, trans. Cruse, 97.

Figure 24
Julio greets the jury committee at the factory.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (2021).

Winchester shirt and tie as the judges arrive at the factory (Figure 24). Historically, the monochromatic wool suit enabled the male figure to be 'recut and the ideal man recast', as the 'nude hero was even more natural when dressed'.[88] To Anne Hollander, the modern suit 'conveys a superior level of ease', that combines a look of 'comfort and crispness, with its neat collar and tie that perpetually defy the forces of hot weather, hard work and high anxiety, its unruffled tailored envelope suggesting an invincible physical aplomb, including sexual'.[89] For Julio, the suit enables him to perform a seemingly slick, public-facing image of the good boss, that is seemingly far removed from the manipulative and tainted owner that he really is. Christopher Breward argues that suits function as a 'canvas for representation', as a 'central prop for either characterisation or narrative drive'.[90] Many men's suits simply function onscreen to connote 'respectability, authority, and conservatism'. Yet as Faiers argues, they can also bestow a 'mythical status upon their wearers', as super functional, armour-plated suits that provide practical and emotional protection, as well as being the 'perfect site for the display of vestimentary economic superiority'.[91]

The pale grey suit as middle-aged amour is a familiar trope within popular culture. In the case of Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and the subsequent 1956 adaptation starring Gregory Peck (dir. Nunalley Johnson), the suit affords its wearer a level of anonymity in its adherence to the conventions of corporate culture. Such

88 Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (Brinkworth: Claridge Press, 1994), 90.

89 Hollander, *Sex and Suits,* 99.

90 Christopher Breward, *The Suit: Form, Function and Style* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 191.

91 Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously*, 227.

anonymity in the case of Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) facilitates both mis-recognition and disguise with Cary Grant's Roger Thornhill on the run in a case of mistaken identity. As Jan Olsson discusses, in the script for *North by Northwest*, the sartorially sophisticated Thornhill is a Madison Avenue executive, not simply 'a man of the grey flannel-ilk'. As the narrative progresses, Thornhill is unwittingly pushed 'towards the world of less elegant suits of the flannel variety'.[92] Although Grant's lightweight grey two-piece is subjected to 'a succession of textile traumas', it remains unmarked as a 'miraculous garment' that is characterized by its indestructibility.[93] Conversely, Julio's suit is marked by its cleanliness, newness and its difference from his other clothing. It is as though he has appropriated the uniform of corporate respectability and wears it as an empty façade.

Where Grant's 'characteristic debonair appearance' blurs the boundaries between character and star, Bardem conversely is not positioned as playing himself.[94] Furthermore, Bardem's Julio is costumed by García, whereas Grant (*per* the standard contractual requirement at the time) provided his own wardrobe and thus as Olsson argues, raises notions of self-referential 'sartorial authorship'.[95] Bardem's characterization of Julio is marked both by Bardem's performance style, combined with and the meta-performance of Julio performing a façade of the good boss for the scrutiny of the judges. Clean, starched and seemingly devoid of the literal and metaphorical stains upon his character, Julio may attempt to construct a 'perfect surface' and appear 'immaculately attired' in the style of Grant's Thornhill, but he lacks the suaveness of Grant (or Peck), and instead appears as a middle-aged man desperately looking to icons from the past, for a template of how to (re)fashion the future in a context of change.[96] As the film draws to a close, Julio believes that his power and status has once again been secured. Back at his home, he gazes proudly at the latest affirmation of his success, the award fills the spot-lit space on the deep red wall that has been foreshadowed throughout the film. In this moment of apparent closure, there remains a lingering doubt of the longevity of this achievement, Fortuna standing behind him, drill in hand with the spectator positioned seeing the potential future threat to Julio (see Figure 25).

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92 Jan Olsson, 'Shooting and Shopping: Suiting Grant and Dressing Saint', *Film, Fashion and Consumption*, 8:1 (2019), 49–69 (pp. 58–59).

93 Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously*, 227–28; Ulrich Lehmann, 'The Language of the PurSuit: Cary Grant's Clothes in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by North West*', *Fashion Theory,* 4:4 (2000), 467–86.

94 Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously*, 228.

95 Olsson, 'Shooting and Shopping', 61.

96 See Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously*, 228.

Figure 25
At the end of the film Julio's future remains uncertain.
Film still from *El buen patrón* (2021).

Conclusion

Through dressing, undressing and redressing, costuming serves a crucial role in *El buen patrón* to visually communicate the trajectory of how power, status and authority are challenged, changed and reconfigured. Hegemonic masculinity may appear to be maintained, but the finale of the film raises pertinent and timely questions as to how long these outmoded notions of heteronormative, white patriarchy will endure in the wider shifting cultural, political and economic contexts of contemporary Spain. The shifting dynamics of gender in and beyond the workplace, position Liliana as holding the power both to accelerate her career and pursue sexual pleasure on her own terms. Through the representation of Khaled, the status of the immigrant worker is granted power and authority to successfully lead and manage others, and not be confined to the exoticized 'Other', or marginalization. Miralles and José signify the tensions and frictions in the class-based power relations between employers and workers that signals that the pretence of loyalty and nostalgia, coupled with false truths, are not enough to unify a mythical workplace family. This change can be read in two ways, on the one hand these challenges go some way to diminish the iron grip of patriarchy, echoing societal changes in post-Franco Spain. On the other, the failure to eradicate such control completely speaks to the need to persist in working towards societal change or to the threat of the growing influence of far-right politics in contemporary Spain.

Julio's wardrobe and actions evoke a disquieting archetype of masculinity that carries the traces of the enduring legacy of the dictatorship. His representation calls into question the hierarchies, lies and duplicity that underpins his façade of being the good boss. Through his adoption of business-casual attire Julio's look is both familiar as the embodiment of the provincial, middle-class modes of dress that continue to pervade Spanish

culture and echoes the ways in which right-leaning, conservative values are signalled through unspectacular, yet hard wearing and durable everyday garments. In fashioning Bardem's character in this way, a spatial distance is created between the character of Julio and the familiar, transnational cross-media star-celebrity with his off-axis sex appeal. The discomfort prompted by Bardem's performance of the slimy patrician both highlights his status and range as a performer, and enables the film to offer a critique of hegemonic masculinity with wider appeal and reach than perhaps the film would have achieved with a lesser-known actor in the lead.

Through our close analysis of costuming in *El buen patrón,* we have granted critical attention to the unspectacular and ordinary dress, and undressing in and beyond the workplace. It is by no means intended to be the final word on the film, or on the role of costume and fashion in Spanish cinema. This article functions as a prompt for further work in the field from a range of scholars, and for the connections between costuming, cinema and the Spanish context to continue be granted more academic attention. In focusing our critical attention primarily upon masculinities and menswear, and in particular ageing masculinities, this article together with our wider research project aims to challenge the disciplinary focus on high fashion and the feminine in studies of costume onscreen. Whilst hegemonic Spanish masculinity may be adorned in less diverse, spectacular and disruptive ways than those identities that permeate the work of directors such as Pedro Almodóvar, it is essential that the plurality of identities within Spanish culture are granted academic attention. In order to expand and more thoroughly develop the critical examination of the construction, performance and transformation of intersectional identities through dress, it is imperative that Spanish film studies adopts an interdisciplinary approach. Through drawing upon the interdisciplinary methods, debates and approaches from fashion and cultural studies, academic work in film studies will be able to more thoroughly critically examine the crucial role that costuming plays in the construction, transformation and performance of cinematic representations of identities. It is not sufficient for film studies to discuss the fashioning of appearance in broad terms, reducing dress to generalizations or name checking designers. Understanding and analysing how the nuances of costuming utilize and play with design elements and principles of dress, is key both to understanding how meaning is created in cinematic texts, and grants critical attention to the often-undervalued creative work of designers and wardrobe teams. Furthermore, it is not enough to only discuss costumes as empty garments divorced from the material, living body and performance; it is not just what is worn, but how and upon whom. The polysemic nature of dress means that its meanings shift in different contexts. Examining the processes of dressing, undressing and redressing

offers valuable insights into the ways in which the creative work of costume designers such as García are integral to collaborative cinematic world building, and the ways in which visual discourses of intersectional identities are communicated to domestic and international audiences in Spanish cinema.*

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