


# Portrait of migration through Spanish films (1930-2024): from rural exodus to globalization

## Representación de la migración en el cine español (1930-2024): del éxodo rural a la globalización

### *Representação da migração no cinema espanhol (1930-2024): do êxodo rural à globalização*

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**ABSTRACT** | Social phenomena are often depicted in films. Since its beginnings, cinema has witnessed socially relevant events such as political changes, social upheavals, or population movements. Spanish cinema has depicted migration phenomena since the early 1930s, although the development of the 21st century and globalization have changed this cinematic approach. The representation of migratory movements has changed from an internal perspective (both rural exodus and international emigration) to an external perspective that gives voice to those who come to Spain. This study analyzes 107 Spanish films from 1930 to 2024 with the aim of illustrating the evolution of the representation of migration phenomena. It also establishes a social approach to the socio-political history of Spain during these 100 years and clarifies how real migratory movements have changed the cinematic discourse. In this regard, the films attempt to provide a necessary understanding of the human dimension of migratory movements. The research concludes that one can also see how society has evolved from the 1930s to the 2020s through the development of the films. Finally, it was found that films have grasped the ethical and human implications of migration movements and have attempted to overcome the ethnocentric portrait of this phenomenon, although it can still be seen in many films.

**KEYWORDS:** Migration, Spanish cinema, audiovisual representation, globalization, rural flight, immigration, emigration.

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**RESUMEN** | *El cine es un medio idóneo para analizar los fenómenos sociales. El cinematógrafo ha sido testigo de sucesos imperantes en la vida social, como los cambios políticos, sociales o la movilidad internacional. El cine español ha representado el fenómeno migratorio desde principios de 1930, si bien el devenir del siglo XX y la globalización han matizado el retrato de los migrantes y de su lugar de destino. A través del análisis de 107 películas del cine español, esta investigación muestra la evolución de la representación del fenómeno migratorio entre 1930 y 2024, no solo articulando una aproximación social a España a lo largo de casi un siglo sino también al modo en el que el propio fenómeno migratorio ha influido en el discurso cinematográfico, el cual ha hecho inteligible su dimensión humana para la ciudadanía. Así, se ha pasado de una representación con perspectiva interna, consistente tanto en el retrato del éxodo rural como de la emigración internacional, a una visión externa, que ilustra la vida de aquellos ciudadanos que arriban a España con la esperanza de labrarse un futuro mejor. Se concluye que, pese a algunos reduccionismos y ausencias, la evolución del cine también muestra la transformación operada en la sociedad española de 1930 a 2024, al tiempo que se advierte un cambio de representación del fenómeno desde una postura más etnocéntrica a una que busca comprender las implicaciones éticas globales que conlleva el fenómeno migratorio.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Migración, cine español, representación audiovisual, globalización, éxodo rural, emigración, inmigración.*

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**RESUMO** | O cinema é um meio ideal para a análise dos fenômenos sociais. O cinema tem sido testemunha de acontecimentos predominantes na vida social, como as mudanças políticas, sociais ou a mobilidade internacional. O cinema espanhol tem representado o fenômeno migratório desde o início da década de 1930, embora o decorrer do século XX e a globalização tenham matizado o retrato dos migrantes e de seus destinos. Através de uma análise de 107 filmes do cinema espanhol, essa pesquisa mostra a evolução da representação do fenômeno migratório entre 1930 e 2024, articulando não apenas uma abordagem social da Espanha ao longo de quase um século, mas também a forma como o próprio fenômeno influenciou o discurso cinematográfico, tornando sua dimensão humana inteligível para a sociedade. Assim, passou de uma perspectiva interna, que inclui tanto o retrato do êxodo rural quanto da emigração internacional, para uma visão externa, que ilustra a vida daqueles cidadãos que chegam à Espanha com a esperança de construir um futuro melhor. Conclui-se que, apesar de alguns reducionismos e ausências, a evolução do cinema também revela a transformação ocorrida na sociedade espanhola entre 1930 e 2024, ao mesmo tempo em que evidencia uma mudança na representação do fenômeno, que passou de postura mais etnocêntrica para uma que busca compreender as implicações éticas globais que o fenômeno migratório acarreta.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Cinema espanhol, migrações, representação audiovisual, globalização, éxodo rural, imigração, emigração.*

## INTRODUCTION

Films, like any other form of art, fulfill an aesthetic, social, political, and economic function, enabling us to reflect on the world (García Canclini, 2010). This reflection gives meaning to a representation that is embedded in human life due to its testimonial value and its dual nature as an artistic expression and a mass communication medium. Through cinema, viewers are introduced to other communities, social classes and backgrounds, promoting a deeper understanding and knowledge of people and cultures (Morales Romo, 2017, p. 28).

Thus, cinema is a medium that produces artistic results but also acts as a reproducer of reality (Arnheim, 2008). Events portrayed in the media have a social impact and, at the same time, gain legitimacy as acts of representation that allow people to socialize, show them reality, and even reshape their memories and how they conceptualize them (Vázquez, 2001).

Despite efforts to portray immigration as a multi-layered experience with countless complexities, origins, and solutions, films' constant use of stereotypes has not prevented them from becoming a "vector of otherness" (Chikhaoui, 2009, p. 233) that represents immigration in simplistic terms. Although the gap between the two realities (host country versus immigrant population) is often stereotyped, cinema has served as a transmission belt to bring to light a multidimensional reality in the globalized society. Therefore, exploring the representation of migration through cinema becomes a means to approach the cultural assimilation of a phenomenon that influences the shaping of cities around the world.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CINEMA AND MIGRATION PHENOMENA

Cinema inevitably reflects the society in which it is embedded, becoming an appropriate framework for fulfilling "the moral imperative to investigate reality independently" and to understand "diversity as a source of richness and possibility" (Alastruey, 2022, p. 448). The history of cinema is closely interwoven with the migration phenomena of the 20th century: as an industrial system, Hollywood was founded largely thanks to European immigrants and the diaspora of film professionals who fled Europe. Even in the early days of cinema, migration was thematized in films such as *The Immigrant* (1917, Charles Chaplin), *The Auction Block* (1919, Oscar Apfel), and later works such as *An American Romance* (1944, King Vidor), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940, John Ford), and *America, America* (1963, Elia Kazan).

While films have attempted to portray the multicultural nature of human societies, they have also helped to propagate stereotypes about foreign populations, especially those less represented in the mass media: "Different ethnic groups have

seen their identities reduced and homogenized when incorporated into national identity narratives” (Woodside, 2012, p. 67). Indeed, Spanish society was often misrepresented in foreign productions — so much so that in 1929 the magazine *El Cine* published the now famous article *Counterproductive Procedures*, which emphasized the need to reevaluate the representation of Spaniards and their ridiculed otherness with a more unbiased perspective (García Carrión, 2016, p. 124). These portrayals of people, countries or even ethnicities form a framework that shapes how these realities are conceptualized and how future representations will be constructed (Erll, 2008).

Nevertheless, directors such as Jean Renoir (*Toni*, 1934), Roberto Gavaldón (*La barraca* / *The Shack*, 1944), Alfonso Patiño (*Dulce madre mía*, 1943), and Alejandro Galindo (*Espaldas mojadas* / *Wetbacks*, 1955) showed a remarkable sensitivity in depicting migration in their respective national contexts (France and Mexico), as José Miguel García Ascot later did in *En el balcón vacío* (*On the Empty Balcony*, 1963).

In terms of Walter Benjamin, the migratory phenomenon changes depending on the historical period in which it occurs (Lindner, 2014, p. 37). Currently, when 1.5% of the world’s population is in a situation of forced displacement and more than 117.3 million people have been forcibly displaced (ACNUR, 2023) films reflect a different reality than in previous periods, when migration flows were both qualitatively different and quantitatively smaller.

Over the decades, Spanish cinema has increased the number of productions dealing with the theme of migration. Isolina Ballesteros (2009) has referred to this genre of cinema as “(im)migration films” because they “transcend national borders and apply to all films that approach, from an aesthetic and political perspective, the dilemmas of people displaced from economically disadvantaged areas or political conflict zones in the global South” (2012, p. 66). Similarly, Bárbara Zecchi refers to this genre as the “cinema of otherness” (2010, p. 158). Both scholars identify key characteristics of this genre, such as a positive portrayal of the migrant and a narrative that involves the progressive transformation of host territories.

This type of cinema often condemns the degrading treatment that migrants are subjected to both during displacement and after their arrival in the host country. In general, these films explore the concept of illegality associated with migration and the unfavorable conditions of irregular status— - particularly the abuse and exhaustion that often accompany it. These elements usually lead to dramatic outcomes, resulting in physically and psychologically unbearable situations.

These characteristics are consistent with the idea of the cinema of (im)migration as a branch of World Cinema that emerged in the 1980s to “give voice

to marginalized, displaced, oppressed and transitioning people” (Ballesteros, 2012, p. 65). These films consciously adhere to their ethical responsibilities to the populations they depict, forming “a symbolic space of conflict and solidarity, activism and articulation of social justice” (Ballesteros, 2012, p. 65). Naturally, this type of cinema encompasses a wide range of representations of otherness (Al-Shamayleh, 2021, p. 22) and offers a deeper perspective on global society. Moreover, these films are also linked to the notion of postcolonialism, which affects the way migrant populations are portrayed: “The postcolonial subject in these films becomes a victim of the prejudices that dominate host societies” (Jesurun, 2017, p. 120).

Although in relative terms Spain has only recently begun to receive large-scale immigration, its geographical location as a bridge between Africa and Europe and its strategic position between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean have facilitated the arrival of foreign populations since the 1980s (Basu, 2013). This has brought to light latent racism and a perceived superiority of certain ethnic and cultural groups over others (Rathzel, 2002).

In this regard, racism in Spain manifests itself both socially and institutionally, particularly against African citizens –a population that is rejected, considered inferior, and feared in order to justify colonial expansion, slavery, and the exploitation of natural resources (Rodríguez Ruiz, 2015, p. 13). Other population groups are viewed with less hostility, although representations remain inconsistent. For example, Indian customs and their cultural heritage are generally respected and accepted (Basu, 2013), while Maghrebi culture is often denigrated despite its geographical proximity to Spain (Al-Shamayleh, 2021). The Latin American populations are frequently associated with the service sector (Cavielles-Llamas, 2009), whereas Asian populations had only a limited presence until the early 21st century.

The case of Spanish emigrants is quite different: they are often portrayed as desperate people crossing Europe or the Atlantic in search of a better future. Unskilled workers, seasonal laborers, and industrial technicians are portrayed as victims of a system that expels them with little hope of returning. However, the idea of returning home remains a central theme in both the cinematic narratives about emigration and immigration (Piñol Lloret, 2017).

## **METHODOLOGY**

For this study, 107 feature films produced in Spain and released between 1930 and 2024 were analyzed to uncover the representation of migration and

characterize its evolution. These films were shot both domestically and abroad and include Spanish co-productions and titles filmed by Spanish artistic and technical teams in other countries. The film catalog was compiled based on an analysis of cinematic production found in yearbooks, publications, and biographical volumes for the period 1930–1970 (Gubern, 2009; Caparrós, 1983; Heredero, 1993). The remaining titles were identified through a keyword search using the following terms in the *Anuario de Cine* (Film Yearbook) of the Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (ICAA) (1979–2023<sup>1</sup>) and the Film Yearbook of Spanish Production 2024 (APCE): migration, emigrant, immigrant, ‘cayuco’, rafter, illegal, and undocumented. Short films and documentaries were omitted, while generic hybrids (docufiction) and films with segmented structures were included.

The information was analyzed using an inductive methodology in which the structure of the corpus serves as the basis for the subsequent analysis (Garrido, 1995). For the quantitative analysis, a standardized ad hoc coding sheet was developed, which included elements such as film genre, role of the character (leading role, supporting role, extra), characteristics of the migrant character (male, female, qualification, origin, education), trajectory (emigration or immigration), and the item regarding the respect or violation of Human Rights. Additionally, a qualitative analysis of dialogues defining the migration phenomenon was conducted. The sociopolitical and migratory context of Spain in each period was also considered to see how it relates to the representation of migration in cinema.

### Research objectives

The main objective is to analyze the evolution of the representation of migration in Spanish cinema and to quantify its prevalence. Secondary objectives include studying the contextual characteristics and variations of the phenomenon depending on historical changes and identifying differences and idiosyncrasies in the representation of specific migrant groups, as well as shifts in tone, genre, and thematic focus depending on whether migration is represented as emigration or immigration. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Identify changes in the portrayal of migrant characters, storylines, or circumstances.
- Quantify the presence of migration in Spanish cinema.
- Qualitatively assess the migration phenomenon based on the dialogue in selected films.

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1. <https://www.cultura.gob.es/cultura/areas/cine/mc/anuario-cine/portada.html>



- Determine if there are differentiated portrayals based on migrants' social, political, gender, ethnic, or religious features.
- Identify whether certain directors address this theme more frequently than others.

### Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are proposed:

1. The image of the immigrant is accompanied by negative stereotypes associated with criminality, prostitution, or social marginalization.
2. Immigration is identified with illegality and marginalization.
3. The origin, ethnicity, or religion of immigrant characters are relevant factors in their cinematic representation.
4. Emigrants are portrayed more sympathetically than immigrants.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the entire period studied, 107 productions were found that deal with the theme of migration between 1930 and 2024 –whose distribution by decade and type of migration can be found in table 1– with the first film exhibited being *La aldea maldita* (The Cursed Village) (1930, Florián Rey). From then on, all the films deal with the reality of migratory flows in Spain, with marked differences in terms of their themes, approaches, and contexts.

Over the decades, there has been a significant increase in these film productions, which peaked in the 2000s. In the decades from the 1930s to the 1960s (10.28% of the films), there is a marked interest in rural exodus, while between 1960 and 1970 (8.41% of the total) international emigration comes to the fore and the number of films and protagonists emigrating abroad increases significantly. In the early 1990s, there is a marked increase in production, with 53 titles accounting for half of the total production of films on the theme of immigration. The role of migrant characters is of great importance, as they are protagonists in 82% of the films, while in 13%, they play a supporting role. In 5% of cases, they fulfill a contextual or secondary narrative function.

Regarding gender, male characters clearly predominate in all three periods (64%, 52%, and 56%, respectively), although the proportion of female characters has risen slightly in the last two decades (14%, 26%, and 32.5%).

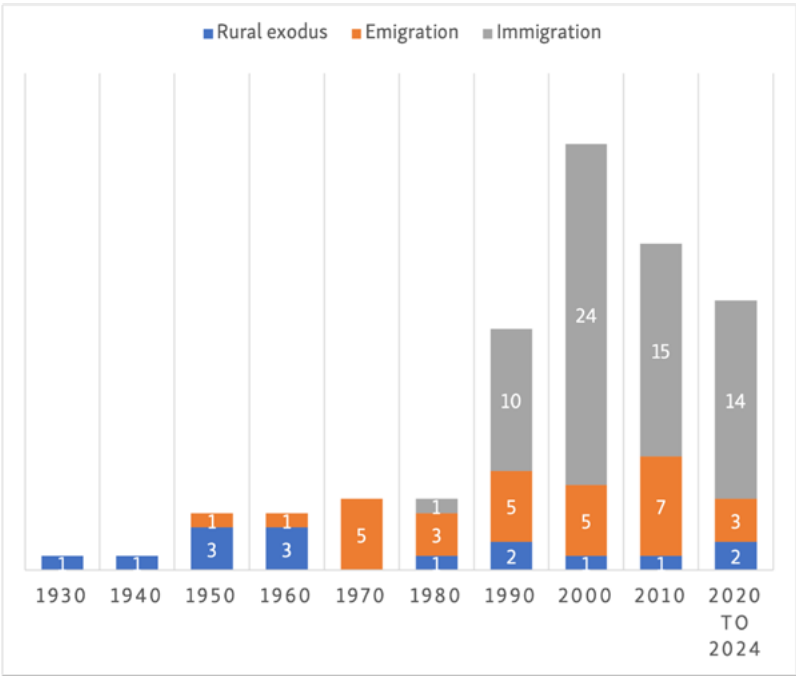


Figure 1. Films about migration in Spanish cinema (1930-2024)

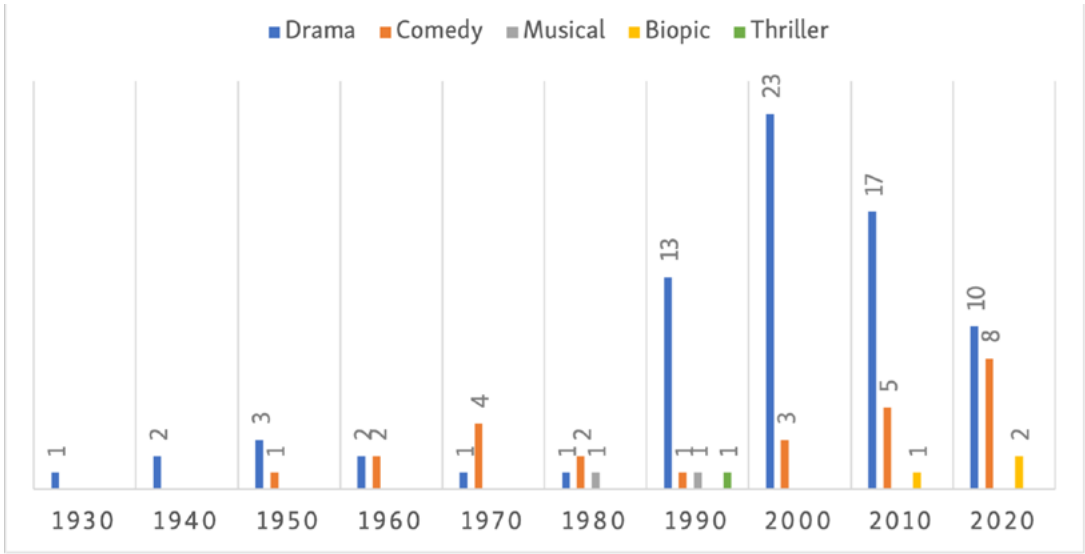
Source: Own elaboration.

Furthermore, there are narratives in which male and female migrant characters are combined or not clearly differentiated — observed in 12% of the films from the first period, 22% in the second, and 12% in the third. These figures are particularly striking for the period from 1980 to 2020, as this was “predominantly a period of female migration” (Piscitelli, 2011, p. 2224), a trend that has not been reflected in the same way in cinematic representation.

It should be emphasized that female directors (20, representing 17.8% of the total) most frequently place female protagonists at the center of their narratives. Of the 48 films in which the migrant protagonist is a woman, 20 were made by female directors (41.66%). These include some of the most paradigmatic titles: *Flores de otro mundo* (Flowers from Another World) (1999, Icíar Bollaín), *Lejos de África* (Far from Africa) (1996, Cecilia Bartolomé), *La vida secreta de las palabras* (The Secret Life of Words) (2005, Isabel Coixet), *Bajo el mismo cielo* (Under the Same Sky) (2008, Sílvia Munt), *Retorno a Hansala* (Return to Hansala) (2008, Chus Gutiérrez), *Evelyn* (2011, Isabel de Ocampo), *Sin retorno* (No return) (2002, Julia Montejó), *Un amor* (2023, Isabel Coixet) or *Chinas* (2023, Arantxa Echevarría).

Isabel Coixet stands out because she has directed the most films with a migrant character in Spanish cinema (eight titles, 7.5% of the productions analyzed). She is followed by Pedro Lazaga with five films (4.7% of the sample). Next are Chus Gutiérrez and Carlos Iglesias with three films each, followed by Florián Rey, Ana Mariscal, José Luis Garci, Fernando Colomo, Marina Seresesky, Pablo Llorca and Marcel Barrena with two titles each.





**Figure 2. Film genre distribution (1930-2024)**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

As far as the genre of cinema on immigration is concerned, the dramatic approach predominates in 71.96% of films (77 titles), along with a surprising number of comedies (24 titles, 22% of the sample), particularly in the emigration films produced in recent years. Other genres are significantly less represented: biopic (3%), musical (2%), and thriller (1%).

Based on this quantitative framework, the data is analyzed across three periods of the migratory phenomenon.

**Rural exodus (1930-1960)**

Although rural exodus is the least represented migratory movement (15 films, 14.15%), it plays an important role in the films of the 1930s to 1960s, which illustrates its impact on the Spanish population. At the beginning of the 20th century, Spain lacked a competitive agrarian policy. While the agricultural sector remained the basis of the national economy until the 1960s, there was no successfully implemented agrarian reform in the 1920s, and the improvements of the 1930s were not satisfactorily completed (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, n.d.a), leading to a massive social movement.

The reality of rural exodus –understood as “depopulation of rural areas with a corresponding increase in population in urban centers, especially in large cities” (Achával, 1950, p. 3)– was dramatically portrayed twice in the film *La aldea maldita* by Florián Rey: in 1930 and 1942. These films contain prayers such as: “Protect our fields, Lord, drive away the curse that ruins our land”, and statements such as “it seems that faith is fleeing Castile” or “a thousand curses on the land that makes us slaves”. The title of the film is introduced in the 1930 version as follows:

“The Cursed Village: this is what the neighboring towns call the small village of Luján, which has now lost its crops to hailstorms for the third year in a row. The inhabitants are fleeing from hunger and looking for work in other regions”. The story continues: “Once again, the tragedy of the exodus has taken place over the ruins of Castile” (Rey, 1930, 08:02).

This exodus became even more pronounced in times of adverse environmental conditions and was exacerbated by the rationing system introduced after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), which was implemented on May 14, 1939 and lasted until 1952 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, n.d.a). With the introduction of the ration cards, the population faced increasing poverty, which triggered new waves of migration towards the industrial cities –Madrid, Catalonia, and the Basque Country– as depicted in the film *Surcos* (Grooves):

Even the most remote villages are reached by the allure of the city, which entices the farmers to leave their land with promises of easy wealth. They are tempted by the urban world without being prepared to resist or cope with it, and so these rural migrants –who have lost the countryside without gaining access to the demanding processes of civilization are like rootless trees, splinters of the suburbs, broken and corrupted by life. This is the most painful problem of our time (Nieves Conde, 1951, 1:08).

This excerpt is crucial for understanding the phenomenon of rural exodus in Spanish films. The demographic concentration in urban centers was so great that the Francoist regime tried to prevent rural exodus by portraying the countryside as idyllic, in contrast to the corruption, crime, and misery of urban life. As the character who gives his name to the film *Segundo López, aventurero urbano* (Segundo López, urban adventurer) suggests, he may have spent his time in his village “contemplating the Extremaduran landscape and occasionally getting drunk to relieve boredom” (Mariscal, 1953, 1:20:50), but he claims that there is no future for anyone in the big city: “We are swallows, birds that come and go. There is nothing left to do in Madrid” (Mariscal, 1953, 1:21:30). Perhaps for this reason, a character in *La venganza* (Revenge) says: “The land is vast, there is room for us all” (Bardem, 1958, 1:42:10).

Although most of these films are set in the 1950s and 1960s, there has been a resurgence of films depicting the journey from the countryside to the city in recent decades, such as *Andalucía chica* (Little Andalusia) (1988, José Ulloa), *En la puta calle* (Hitting Bottom) (1997, Enrique Gabriel), and *Solas* (1999, Benito Zambrano). Even more remarkable is the recent reversal of this trend, in which the protagonists return to the countryside in search of tranquility, as depicted in *Poniente* (West) (2002, Chus Gutiérrez), and *Un amor* (One Love) (2023, Isabel Coixet)

### International emigration (1960-1970)

The dictatorship, the lack of employment opportunities, and economic immobility characterized the Spanish economy in the postwar period. Between the 1960s and 1970s, more than 70,000 Spaniards emigrated abroad (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, n.d.b), mainly to Western Europe (Germany, France, or Switzerland). In 1956, the government founded the Spanish Institute of Emigration to control migratory movements. However, many citizens escaped hunger by evading the regular migration processes. This situation is described in the *Notes sur l'émigration – Espagne 1960 (Notes on Emigration – Spain 1960)*:

Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to leave their families and their country to earn a living abroad. Unemployment and the decline in purchasing power have accelerated the wave of emigration at an alarming rate. This plight is due to the extremely low level of wages in relation to the cost of living and rising unemployment (Esteva, 1962, 2:04).

This social reality is reflected in films with admiring speeches about the host countries (31 films, 29.24%), emphasizing their ethical position and all the opportunities they offer to migrants. As said in *Llegar a más (To Go Further)* (1963): “To earn money, you have to work really hard and even save your breath. These people know what life is all about, whereas we never get anywhere at this pace. What is in store for us? To stay poor for the rest of our lives” (Fernández Santos, 1963, 13:56). The same feeling is expressed in *¡Vente a Alemania, Pepe! (Come to Germany, Pepe!)* (1971): “That place is another world — and they call it the German miracle! It’s like Lourdes, but mechanized” (Lazaga, 1971, 05:04). A similar message appears in *Perdiendo el norte (Off Course)* (2015): “For the Germans we are a bargain –they get a skilled workforce at the expense of our taxes. Would you go back if you earned in a week what you earn in a month in Spain?” Another character adds: “All the jobs we’re missing here must be over there. It’s not just about opportunities –they invest in talent” (Velilla, 2015, 09:40).

It should be noted that comedy is the predominant genre, with two-thirds of films –both early and recent– addressing emigration (16 films). In contrast, comedy is only slightly present in films about immigration (eight films), which points to different cinematic interpretations of both phenomena.

Nevertheless, a sense of nostalgia underlies all these films, especially when the characters encounter another category of Spanish emigrants: political exiles. After the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), there was what became known as *La Retirada* – “almost half a million Spaniards who fled across the Pyrenees to France to escape the reprisals of the victorious side” (CIDA, 2024, para. 1).

Many of these exiles ended up in French labor camps, where hundreds of displaced persons died due to the terrible living conditions. After the Nazi army invaded France, more than 30,000 Spanish exiles were sent to German labor camps, where many of them died. In addition to European destinations, the exile of Republican intellectuals “spread throughout the Americas, from the United States to Argentina” (Aznar Soler & López García, 2019, p. 2), where they settled in countries such as Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina. These exiles suffered the hardship of flight and the resignation of never returning, of losing their roots and their place in their country of origin. As expressed in *¡Vente a Alemania, Pepe!*: “I can’t go back. I wouldn’t know where to go. Everyone is gone, even my enemies. No one would recognize me. I would be just as much a stranger there as I am here. Why should I go back?” (Lazaga, 1971, 1:29:26).

Despite the historical significance of these displaced persons, this topic is only addressed indirectly in three films (2.8%).

Immigration (1980-2024)

Migratory movements that have transformed Spain into a host country are a contemporary phenomenon that is depicted in 64 films (60.37%).

This trend solidified in the late 1990s and early 2000s, leading to demographic growth: between 2004 and 2019, the population grew by 8.8% (3,809,683 people), of which 4.5% were born in Spain (Fàbregues & Farrés, 2019). However, the financial crisis of 2008 reversed these figures: in 2012, more than 132,535 people left the country and in 2011 the first negative net migration was recorded, as more people left Spain (50,090) than immigrated or returned (8,751) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, n.d.c, 2013).

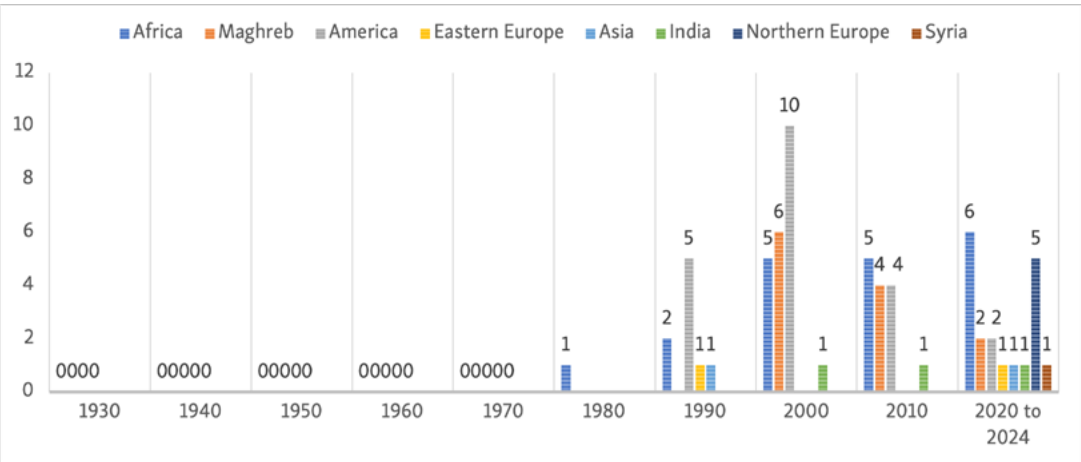


Figure 3. Immigration films in Spain (1980-2024)

Source: Own elaboration.

Until the new century, immigration was hardly represented in Spanish cinema. Some earlier films, such as *Es peligroso casarse a los sesenta* (Getting Married at 60 is dangerous) (1980), reflected the astonishment of citizens at the arrival of African immigrants and showed a marked Eurocentrism bordering on racism (Ortega-Giménez & De-Lara-González, 2024, p. 7). From the 1980s onwards, immigrants were increasingly integrated and stabilized in Spanish society, especially those from Latin America (García, 2010). One of the films that best addresses Latin American immigration is *Martín (Hache)* (1997), which contains one of the most significant monologues on voluntary migration:

Madrid is a good place to live. Talking about homesickness, nostalgia, and so on is nonsense. You don't miss a country —at most you miss a neighborhood, but even then you'd miss it if you moved ten blocks away. Anyone who feels patriotic, who thinks they belong to a country, is mentally disturbed. The nation is an invention. What do I have in common with someone from Tucumán or Salta? They are just as foreign to me as a Catalan or a Portuguese. Statistics, faceless numbers. You feel connected to very few people. Your friends are your country —and you truly miss them (Aristarain, 1997, 37:16).

The portrayal of Latin American immigration in Spanish cinema was immediate, with a series of dozens of films dealing with the Latin American diaspora — especially female migration— which “has grown rapidly, tripling between 2004 and 2008” (Piscitelli, 2011, p. 2224). This shift is particularly evident in films featuring Colombian migrant women, a group that was the third largest non-EU population in Spain between 2001 and 2004, after Morocco and Ecuador, and was only surpassed by Romania from 2005 onwards (Actis, 2009).

Spanish films also portray migrant women as victims of trafficking or as a vulnerable group objectified and forced into prostitution, reinforcing the idea of female commodification (Lindner, 2014, p. 73). In addition, Latin American or African women are sexually exploited in 20 films (18.5%), such as *Agua con sal* (Salt and water) (2005, Pedro Pérez Rosado), *Evelyn* (2011, Isabel de Ocampo), or *La venta del paraíso* (The sale of paradise) (2012, Emilio Ruiz Barrachina). In other films, human trafficking is not explicitly addressed, but racism is evident in sexualized and derogatory comments towards migrant women, such as in *Flores de otro mundo* (1999): “It's easier to talk to the little brown girls — well, easier to do everything” (Bollaín, 1999, 00:00). However, the aspirations of the migrant women are quite different:

- Getting married is fine, but I wanted to think about whether or not I really want to get married.

- That's all well and good if you're white and the police don't stop you in the street. They keep asking you for this paper or that paper and when you leave, you don't know if they'll let you back in or not. That's why I'm telling you. If you want to stay here, you'd better sort that out (Bollaín, 1999, 27:59).

Another migrant woman, this time Cuban, reflects in *Sobreviviré* (I Will Survive) (1999) on having left her home country: "You don't know what it's like to hustle, to make a living on the streets. I love Cuba deeply, but things are really hard" (Menkes & Albacete, 1999, 21:42).

From 2010 to 2024, the cinematic portrayal of immigration focuses on the migratory flows from Africa and across the Mediterranean, emphasizing in particular the human tragedy of the small fishing boats (cayucos, pateras) and their perilous attempts to reach Europe. This is particularly evident in *Mediterráneo* (Mediterranean Sea) (2021), which illustrates the story of the ship Open Arms:

- I don't understand how the coast guards of two countries that are so close allow so many people to die.
- They died just ten meters from the coast, right where we lifeguards work. We must go to Lesbos. I'm going. We need to help the Greek lifeguards [...] Everyone should do what their conscience tells them. People are dying at sea, and we're lifeguards! Who's coming?" (Barrena, 2021, 7:40).

In this decade, not only are the experiences of migrants depicted in all their harshness, but also social indifference and racism, as in *Catalunya über Alles* (Catalunya Above All!):

I am not a racist, I am realistic. And being realistic means being aware of the situation in Catalonia. A very difficult crisis for our citizens (...) there is a risk that migrants will take jobs away from our own citizens. Of course, there is room for immigrants on our platform, but it is limited, because there is not room for everyone (Térmens, 2010, 6:21).

Similar to these arguments are the insults directed at an African migrant in the same film: "Listen, nigger, you are worthless here. Long before you arrived in a dinghy, my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, and my great-great-grandparents worked this land — not for a bunch of monkeys to come and steal it from us" (Térmens, 2010, 1:02:00). This crude and senseless tone is not repeated in many productions. However, the same racist critique can be found in films such as *Aprendiendo a conducir* (Learning to drive) (2014), in which a Sikh driving instructor cannot teach at a college because of his dress and religion:



- I was a university professor, like my father.
- Why do you give driving lessons?
- Because I would have to take off my turban and shave my beard to get a better job. People think I look dangerous. But this way I know who I am, and here it is very easy to forget that.
- Do you ever go back?
- I can't return to India, that's how political asylum works (Coixet, 2014, 43:50).

Another type of racism is portrayed in *As Bestas* (The Beasts) (2023), where a villager lashes out at a Frenchman attempting to restore the village:

- Did you know that the French wanted to conquer us at the time because they thought we were a bunch of worthless idiots? Napoleon himself said so (...) What you want to do with this village is the same: conquer it and turn it into a tourist resort.
- It's not for tourists, it's for the locals.
- Don't you realize, in your wild urban plans for the village, that none of us have a place in it? (Sorogoyen, 2022, 21:39).

Although Eastern European migration is also observed in this decade, it occurs far less frequently in films (only two cases, 1.8%). It is portrayed in *Vasil* (2022), where a Bulgarian migrant arrives on the Cantabrian coast and is helped by a retired architect after the social services inform him that the migrant can no longer stay in the shelter:

- I won't be able to meet for lunch. I must accompany someone to the social services office.
- Someone?
- I don't even know him, he's from Bulgaria. He had nowhere to sleep and spent the night here.
- At your house? Are you serious, dad? (Prat, 2022, 01:32).

In the last four years of the study, a new type of immigration emerges— less urgent and dramatic. These are retired Europeans who settle in Spain, attracted by the climate, the cost of living, the possibility of starting a business, or the public healthcare. This trend is particularly evident in the films *Nieva en Benidorm* (It Snows in Benidorm) (2020, Isabel Coixet) and *As bestas* (2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study, it has been confirmed that Spanish cinema has shaped its filmography in accordance with the social changes in its territory (rural exodus, political exile, emigration) and the migratory movements that have taken place over the decades. In this way, the objective of quantifying the migratory phenomenon in Spanish films from an evolving perspective has been achieved, even if it is not always comprehensive, global, or plural. The hypothesis that the figure of the migrant is often entrenched in negative stereotypes has been confirmed, since migrants are usually associated with illegality and marginality and are assigned the role of passive victims. It has also been shown that not all migrants are equally represented in quantitative terms: certain ethnic groups –such as Asians, Hindus, and Northern Europeans– are barely portrayed, while others –especially Africans and Latin Americans– are overrepresented.

Moreover, two realities stand out that have been systematically overlooked. First, the lack of early films dealing with the number of Spanish exiles –over half a million in the 1930s. It was not until 1971, with the abolition of pre-censorship of screenplays, that this topic could be addressed. Second, refugees and asylum seekers in the context of international immigration were largely excluded. Instead, cinematic attention was focused on the arrival of people in dinghies or makeshift boats. Also conspicuous is the absence of films describing the harsh reality of these journeys through several countries to reach the boats, the conditions under which these journeys take place, and the systematic Human Rights violations they endure –especially women. All these elements would give a wider context to the arrival of migrants on the Spanish coast.

Furthermore, there are few films that approach immigration as a phenomenon that enriches communities— - in contrast to the treatment of emigration, which tends to be portrayed more positively. Immigration is frequently depicted as illegal and consistently associated with poverty, while emigration is often shown as beneficial to host countries, especially in the 21st century. This polarization erases diversity in representation, although some filmmakers, such as Isabel Coixet, show skilled immigrants who are denied employment commensurate with their skills, thus offering a more ethical portrayal.

It is also worth noting that, despite the current relevance of the phenomenon of empty Spain, there are no titles dealing with it, just as there are no films focusing on European migrants (mainly British and German) settling on the Spanish coast after retirement— - once again highlighting the portrayal of immigration as something marginal.

The fact that two thirds of films dealing with the subject of emigration are comedic is in stark contrast to the predominantly dramatic tone of films dealing with immigration is relevant regarding the cultural meaning attributed to each variant of migratory movement. Fortunately, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of films that portray immigration from a less dramatic perspective and normalize the migratory phenomenon away from ethnocentrism.

In terms of characters, the overwhelming dominance of male actors in migratory narratives erases women from these stories and distorts the fundamentally feminine nature of migration. Furthermore, the frequent depiction of migrant women through the lens of sexualization contributes to their objectification and stereotyping. Portraying women's freedom of movement would be an important step towards normalizing individual freedoms and would help to make the cinematic portrayal of migrants in Spanish film truly diverse and inclusive.

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- *El emigrante* (1959), dir. Sebastián Almeida
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- *Llegar a más* (1963), dir. Jesús Fernández Santos
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- *La ciudad no es para mí* (1966), dir. Pedro Lazaga
- *La piel quemada* (1967), dir. Josep María Forn
- *Españolas en París* (1970), dir. Roberto Bodegas
- *¡Vente a Alemania Pepe!* (1971), dir. Pedro Lazaga
- *El alegre divorciado* (1975), dir. Pedro Lazaga
- *Estoy hecho un chaval* (1976), dir. Pedro Lazaga
- *El rediezcubrimiento de México* (1979), dir. Fernando Cortés
- *Es peligroso casarse a los 60* (1980), dir. Mariano Ozores
- *Volver a empezar* (1982), dir. José Luis Garci
- *La línea del cielo* (1983), dir. Fernando Colomo
- *Andalucía chica* (1988), dir. José Ulloa
- *Las cartas de Alou* (1990), dir. Montxo Armendáriz
- *Sublet* (1991), dir. Chus Gutiérrez
- *El techo del mundo* (1994), dir. Felipe Vega
- *Bwana* (1995), dir. Imanol Uribe
- *Lejos de África* (1996), dir. Cecilia Bartolomé
- *Cosas que dejé en La Habana* (1997), dir. Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón
- *En la puta calle* (1997), dir. Enrique Gabriel
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- *Flores de otro mundo* (1999), dir. Icíar Bollaín
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- *El tren de la memoria* (2005), dir. Marta Arribas Ana Pérez
- *Agua con sal* (2005), dir. Pedro Pérez Rosado
- *La vida secreta de las palabras* (2006), dir. Isabel Coixet
- *Un franco 14 pesetas* (2006), dir. Carlos Iglesias
- *El próximo Oriente* (2006), dir. Fernando Colomo
- *14 kilómetros* (2007), dir. Gerardo Olivares
- *Masala* (2007), dir. Salvador Calvo
- *Los veraneantes* (2007), dir. D. Betancor M Lorente M. Trudu
- *Invisibles: Cartas a Nora* (2007), (segmento) dir. Isabel Coixet
- *Retorno a Hansala* (2008), dir. Chus Gutiérrez
- *Bajo el mismo cielo* (2008), dir. Sílvia Munt
- *Un novio para Jasmina* (2008), dir. Irene Cardona
- *Elegy* (2009), dir. Isabel Coixet
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- *Naufragio* (2010), dir. Pedro Aguilera
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- *Evelyn* (2011), dir. Isabel de Ocampo
- *Ispansi* (2011), dir. Carlos Iglesias
- *La venta del paraíso* (2012), dir. Emilio Ruiz Barrachina
- *Ismael* (2013), dir. Marcelo Piñeyro
- *El Rayo* (2013), dir. Fran Araújo Ernesto de Nova
- *Maratón* (2013), dir. Breogán Riveiro
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- *Learning to Drive* (2014), dir. Isabel Coixet
- *A escondidas* (2014), dir. Mikel Rueda

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- *Los objetos amorosos* (2016), dir. Adrián Silvestre
- *Sol y luna* (2016), dir. José Enrique Pintor
- *La librería* (2016), dir. Isabel Coixet
- *Las distancias* (2016), dir. Elena Trapé
- *Lo nunca visto* (2019), dir. Marina Seresesky
- *Historias lamentables* (2019), dir. Javier Fesser
- *Adú* (2020), dir. Salvador Calvo
- *A este lado del mundo* (2020), dir. David Trueba
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- *Invisibles: Cartas a Nora*, 2007 (segmento Isabel Coixet)
- *Retorno a Hansala*, 2008 Chus Gutiérrez
- *Bajo el mismo cielo*, 2008 Sílvia Munt
- *Un novio para Jasmina*, de Irene Cardona (2008)
- *Elegy*, 2009, Isabel Coixet
- *Mapa de los sonidos de Tokio*, 2009, Isabel Coixet
- *Biutiful*, 2010, Alejandro González Iñárritu
- *Las chicas de la 6ª planta*, 2010, Philippe Le Guay

- *Catalunya über alles!* 2010 Ramon Térmens
- *El dios de madera*, 2010 Vicente Molina Foix
- *Naufragio*, 2010 Pedro Aguilera
- *Implosión*, 2010 Sören Voigt
- *Evelyn*, 2011 Isabel de Ocampo
- *Ispansi*, 2011, Carlos Iglesias
- *La venta del paraíso*, 2012 Emilio Ruiz Barrachina
- *Ismael*, 2013, Marcelo Piñeyro
- *El Rayo*, 2013 Fran Araújo, Ernesto de Nova
- *Maratón*, 2013 Breogán Riveiro
- *La vida inesperada*, 2013, de Jorge Torregrosa
- *Learning to Drive*, 2014, Isabel Coixet
- *A escondidas*, 2014 Mikel Rueda
- *Dos francos, cuarenta pesetas*, 2014, Carlos Iglesias
- *10.000 kilómetros*, 2015, Carlos Márquez-Marqués,
- *Perdiendo el norte*, 2015, Nacho G. Velilla
- *Los objetos amorosos*, 2016 Adrián Silvestre
- *Sol y luna*, 2016 José Enrique Pintor
- *La librería*, 2016, Isabel Coixet
- *Las distancias*, 2016, Elena Trapé
- *Lo nunca visto*, 2019 Marina Seresesky
- *Historias lamentables* 2019 Javier Fesser
- *Adú*, 2020, Salvador Calvo
- *A este lado del mundo*, 2020 David Trueba
- *Nieva en Benidorm*, 2020, Isabel Coixet
- *Mediterráneo*, 2021, Marcel Barrena
- *Seis días corrientes*, 2021, Neus Ballús
- *Vasil*, 2022, Avelina Prat
- *La voluntaria*, 2022, Nely Reguera
- *El vasco*, 2022, Jabi Elortegi
- *Santa Bárbara*, 2022, Anaïs Pareto Onghena
- *As Bestas*, 2022, Rodrigo Sorogoyen
- *Érase una vez en Canarias*, 2023 Armando Ravelo
- *Película del hierro y la nieve*, 2023 Pablo Llorca
- *Dobla la esquina, el volcán*, 2023 Pablo Llorca
- *Chinas*, 2023, Arantxa Echevarría
- *Empieza el baile*, 2023 Marina Seresesky
- *Un amor*, 2023, Isabel Coixet
- *Fin de fiesta*, 2024 Elena Manrique
- *El salto*, 2024, Benito Zambrano
- *El 47*, 2024 Marcel Barrena