

The Image of Basque Immigration in American Cinema (1916-2011)

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Rain... A gray world, a chill world: Idaho. Basque country. Sheep. Jai alai. A language they say the Devil himself could not master...²

Introduction: Basque migration to the USA.

What is a Basque? A question that I was asked more than once during a recent stay in the United States and can be still heard in many other places in the world despite the huge impact of mass media and news broadcasting services that have turned the darkest aspects of the last decades of Basque history and the rise and persistence of a local branch of terrorism, into a globally known topic. Basques are supposed to be "the oldest people of Europe,"; an unconventional definition of which Basque politicians have been very proud in the past and a way to claim the nationalistic conception of the Basque Country as being a little "nation without state" located at the Southwestern corner of Europe, politically divided between France and Spain but united by culture and language. About three million people reside today in the territories that have traditionally been considered part of the Basque Country, a cultural construct that has never become a political entity, whose main distinctive features are a particular language (Basque or *Euskara*)³ and a historical tradition of home rule, erased at the end of 17th century in the north of the country because of the French Revolution and eroded but still alive in the Spanish territories of the Basque Country.⁴

Even though Basques, like many other European people, were also protagonists of the

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- 1 Some colleagues and nevertheless friends of mine reviewed the first version of this text and helped me bettering it. Of course, whatever mistake of its content is only mine. Among others, I have to thank Ana de Zaballa, Alberto Angulo, Jon Ander Ramos, Eneko Sanz, Iker Arranz and Stephen Murray. I wish also specially to thank Stephen Murray for editing the language.
 - 2 Philip K. Dick and Roger Zelazny (1976); *Deus Irae*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, p. 160.
 - 3 The Basque language is still spoken by about one third of the population of the Basque Country, nearly one million people, but the situation of the language is not equal in the whole region. Historically the Basque-speaking area has been backing away, loosing almost half of its former territory in the last two centuries. Moreover, the legal situation is quite different, from the situation of full official recognition and some degree of protection in the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain, to the lack of both recognition and protection in the French Basque Country.
 - 4 Some good approaches to the history of the Basque Country in the last two centuries, in José Luis de la Granja and Santiago de Pablo, eds. (2002); *Historia del País Vasco y Navarra en el siglo XX*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva. Iñaki Bazán, dir. (2006); *De Túbal a Aitor. Historia de Vasconia*, Madrid, La Esfera de los Libros.

so-called "Age of the Great Overseas Migrations," Basque migration to the United States is still a relatively unknown topic in the field of American immigratory studies. This situation reflects, to a certain extent, the difficulties that Basques have endured in creating a widely recognized identity among their fellow American citizens yesterday, and even today. It is said that Basques did not start to become visible until the beginning of Reno, Nevada, in 1959⁵. The event is considered to be a major turning point in the process of mainstreaming Basque identity out of the previous lack of knowledge that they had to deal with before.

There are several reasons that can explain the delay and weakness of the emergence and public knowledge of Basques as one of the European groups that came to populate the country during the second half of the 19th and the first two thirds of the 20th century. The quantity of the flows is one of them. From approximately 1850, shortly after the Gold Rush and the annexation of California to the United States, until the beginning of the 1970s, roughly about 90,000 Basques are supposed to have migrated from their homeland, mainly to the Western side of the country.⁶ By 1980 only 57,793 people declared themselves to be "of Basque origin" according to the US Census of Population. The Census also highlights the predominantly rural pattern of Basque settlement whose main stocks could be found in the States of California, Idaho, Nevada and, in smaller numbers, in Wyoming, Utah and New York (the only State on the East coast with a noticeable Basque population).

Two other factors also affected the process of creation and social emergence of the Basques as a recognizable group within the populations of the States they had predominantly settled in.

On the one hand, in a striking coincidence, Basque immigrants to the United States came almost exclusively from two small districts that happened to be within the area in which the *Euskara* was still the primary language: the Eastern sector of Biscay in Spain; and some valleys in Spanish Navarre and French Lower Navarre alongside of the Pyrenean border. Because of this, Basque was the mother tongue of the majority of these immigrants and sometimes the only one they could speak on arrival in their new country. A popular joke in some Western States suggests that many Basques, after spending half their life shepherding in America, were still only able to speak two languages: Basque and Sheep! This circumstance, that could have permitted an early emergence of a common shared identity based on culture

5 Miel Anjel Elustondo (2007); *Western Basque Festival 1959. Urte hartan gertatu zen*, Donostia, Susa.

6 Figures cannot be accurate, because Basque has not been a recognized statistical category in international migration to the United States until the census of 1980. Before that date, Basques were tabulated as Spanish or French, depending on the side of the Basque Country they were coming from, usually with no other complementary information about their actual region of provenance in both Spain or France.

and language, as eventually happened, was nevertheless countered by other elements. First of all, both Biscayan and Spanish/French Navarrese groups presented quite divergent patterns of settlement. While Biscayans choose to migrate mainly to Idaho, Navarrese immigrants generally opted for California but also formed some smaller more isolated colonies in other States. Only Nevada remained as a shared ground, in which both groups coexisted from early times⁷.

On the other hand, in all these locations Basques used to be the only representatives of their broader national groups, i.e. Spanish or French. With the exception of the two biggest cities of the region (San Francisco and Los Angeles, both in California), there were no other Spanish or French immigrants living in appreciable numbers. There was, therefore, no chance of reproducing the same kind of "culture clash" that divided, along the lines of language diversity for instance, the Spanish immigrant communities in Latin American countries like Argentina, Uruguay or Chile and which, in turn, created disputes around whose regional culture had the "right" to seize the 'true' representativeness of the whole Spanish identity.⁸

From the 1920s onwards, Basques in the United States started a process of constructing a common identity and the construction of a common institutional background was one of the tools they used for this purpose. Milestones can be placed, for instance, in 1923 with the creation of the first Basque club in New York (although limited to Spanish-Basques only)⁹; 1959 with the forementioned "Basque Festival of Reno" (the first shared initiative of both Spanish and French Basques in the States) and 1970 (with the incorporation of the North American Basque Organization, NABO (a federation of Basque clubs throughout the country, regardless their Spanish or French origins).¹⁰ One of the main purposes of NABO, among others things, is to "to educate and enlighten the public in matters relating to the Basque people,"¹¹ i.e. to spread the knowledge and image of Basques and Basque-Americans into the mainstream of American people. At the end, Basques have somehow

7 William A. Douglass and Jon Bilbao (1975), *Amerikanuak. Basques in the New World*, Reno, University of Nevada Press, p. 530.

8 Needless to say, as the balance between the different languages spoken in Spain was not equivalent, with the Castilian or Spanish in the way to be converted into the only official language for administration and education, the most usual response led to the emergence of clashing identities by Catalan, Basque and, to a lesser extent, Galician speakers.

9 In fact, even the name the institution first received was in Spanish rather than English or Basque: "Centro Vasco Americano."

10 Argitxu Camus-Etchecopar (2007), *The North American Basque Organization (NABO), Incorporated*, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Autonomous Government.

11 NABO's "Mission Statement", at http://www.nabasque.org/NABO/mission_statement.htm.

achieved the aim of no longer being *Hidden in Plain Sight*.¹² and one of the ways they became visible was the cinema.

Cinema, Immigration and Basques

Cinema is much more than "the stuff the dreams are made of"¹³. It has been considered one of the greatest achievements of popular culture and art of the 20th century. Something which it may continue to do so in the 21st. Moving images have developed into the major source for observing and understanding today's world, as we are introduced almost directly to knowledge of other societies and cultures, far away in space and even in time and providing us with a more immediate access to their whereabouts. The impact of cinema, television and other ways to spread moving images cannot be therefore disputed.

There is still, nevertheless, a problematic relationship between historians and cinema. Most of us, educated under the assumption that History is based upon the use of written documents (the largest period of human History is precisely called Pre-history because it happened before the invention of writing), are still somehow reluctant to introduce other kinds of sources into our analysis, such as that which happened in Spanish historiography during the last three decades with the use of oral sources. Besides, the understanding of iconology is a much more difficult task to perform, as visual information is presented in a language we are usually not able to decode properly. Furthermore, there are also some prejudices due to the clash of "high" and "low" cultures, as cinema is usually regarded as no more than a mere entertainment. As Ostreicher points out, the typical approach of the academy of historians to cinema is hugely controversial:

If historians want to play film critics, cinematic historical epics usually give them plenty to work with. Movie histories often outrage professional historians because film-makers tend to garble facts and construct romantic and heroic fantasies that cater to popular prejudices, sustain patriotic myths, and trivialize political and moral issues.¹⁴

Needless to say, misunderstandings are reciprocal because, as DiGirolamo says:

12 This is the insightful title of an exhibit produced by the Basque Museum and Cultural Center of Boise, Idaho, that was first inaugurated at the Ellis Island National Museum on February, 2010. See <http://www.basqueexhibit.com/default.asp>

13 *The Maltese Falcon*, 1941.

14 Richard Oestreicher (2003); "How Should Historians Think about 'The Gangs of New York'", *History Workshop Journal*, 56, p. 210.

The sad truth is that our expertise [*of historians as movie critics*] is of a dubious value. Moviemakers and moviegoers alike often regard historians as clueless know-it-alls who insist on holding auteurs to absurd standards of accuracy. And they're right to a degree.¹⁵

Nevertheless, during the last few decades there has been a growing interest among some historians to deal with the issue of integrating cinematic productions into the historical analysis, from different perspectives of approach. Navarro Martínez, in her 2009 paper on the images of Europe in classic American cinema, summarizes the most important of these perspectives:

Scholars have approached cinema from different disciplines and with different purposes. One of the most popular approaches is the study of film as an historical and ideological document, by focusing, on the one hand, on the period or event that a concrete film portrays, and, on the other hand, on how movies reflect the culture, the political circumstances and society in which they are made and distributed. (...) Another frequently used approach to film is to study the effects that specific movies have on their spectators. Furthermore, film is a very valuable source for studying how different nations, groups or individuals are seen or represented at a given moment and from a certain perspective. In this sense, cinema is a wide and attractive field for Imagology: the study of the representation of others.¹⁶

Representation of the “otherness”, in cinematic language, used to be accompanied by another interesting concept: stereotype. Leerssen defines stereotype as: those "images that simply reproduce commonplaces."¹⁷ Filmmakers, to a certain extent, limit themselves to the use of the images and stereotypes that have previously been noticed as they are widely accepted by the public they are addressing in order to facilitate the communication of the visual meanings of their work and to ease their acceptance by mainstream filmwatchers. People would far more easily understand if someone is Italian if we see him/her cooking pasta or pizza; but, on the other hand, the same people would not accept an Italian character if (s)he is cooking anything else but pasta or pizza. As Kracauer stated, cinema plays a double-direction role, in which:

Hollywood, and any national film industry for that matter, is both a leader and follower of public opinion. By portraying foreign characters it reflects what it believes to be the popular attitudes of the time, but it also turns these often vague

15 Vincent DiGirolamo (2004); "Such, Such Were the B'hoys...", *Radical History Review*, 90, p. 123.

16 Eva Navarro Martínez (2009); *Images of Europe in American films, 1921-1962*, Amsterdam, Opleiding Europese Studies - Universiteit van Amsterdam, p. 4.

17 Joep Leerssen (2007); "Imagology: History and Method", in Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen, eds.; *Imagology*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, pp. 17-32.

attitudes into concrete images.¹⁸

Immigration has been a recurrent topic of American cinematic industry¹⁹ when speaking about the representation of foreign ethnic communities and the idea of the "cultural otherness". Immigrants, as such, have developed into veritable icons, and have conformed to a standardized set of features (the physical, cultural and behavioural attributes being the most relevant ones).

This paper, therefore, intends to be no more than a first reflection, together with some preliminary conclusions, on the way Basques and, more specifically, Basque-Americans, both immigrants and their descendants, have been depicted by American film production from the inception of this industry in the United States, up to the latest and some forthcoming releases.

In order to select which films were to be included in our research, it was decided that they have to meet the following criteria:

a) They have to be fictional films. Actually, there are some interesting documentary films on Basque immigration to the US from the end of the 80s; and it has been an increasing interest by both people from outside the Basque community and some Basque-Americans themselves to produce some quite remarkable pieces of documentary work in the last decade. Even though, to a certain extent, the divide between fictional and documentary films as a debate between pure fantasy and pure reality can no longer be admitted, the main reason for excluding documentaries is due to the different degree of impact each of these cinematic genres has enjoyed. In fact, how many times have we gone to a movie theatre to watch a documentary film?

b) Movies must be produced in the United States by American companies, even though there are, of course, very interesting films on the Basque migratory experience produced in Spain, France, or other countries that received Basque immigration during the same period.

c) As the main interest of my research is the way Basque characters and cultural attributes are depicted on screen in relation to their immigrant experience in the U.S., we have limited ourselves to analyse films presenting either Basque people living in the U.S., or the relationship between Americans and Basques and, more importantly, the way these American characters describe and categorize Basque people.

So far we have collected about 53 *films* that fit these characteristics, starting at 1919

18 Siegfried Kracauer (1948); "National Types as Hollywood Presents them", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 13, pp. 53-72. Quoted by Navarro Martínez (2009).

19 Carlos E. Cortes (1987); "Italian-Americans in Film: From Immigrants to Icons", *Melus*, XIV:3/4, pp. 107-126.

and including in this category, not only movies released for the "big screen" in theatres, but also and, maybe more remarkably, the huge production of TV movies and series that began appearing from the 1950s.²⁰ It is indeed a relatively small number of items, especially if we compare it with other better known immigrant groups like Irish or Italians, but on the other hand the quantity reflects the small number and low presence of Basque immigration in the U.S. In any event, as this is still a research in the making, the films I will present and examine cannot be considered as a complete inventory of all the films produced in the US about Basque immigratory experience and Basque Americans.

Some questions arose from the beginning about the content of these films and their scrutiny. First of all, how the Basques are represented, this is, what kind of stereotypes are usually applied to Basques. Secondly, if this image (or images) have somehow evolved during this almost-a-century of presence of Basque immigrants in American cinema; and if affirmative, why did it happen? Afterwards, we should refer to the way this image was constructed and therefore try to determine the sources filmmakers and scriptwriters used to create and characterize the Basque characters they drew, the links between the stereotypes reflected on screen and the social image of Basque Americans in the local societies in which they lived. Additionally, the impact of the changes on the perception of these Basque American communities and the Basques of the homeland in the rest of mass media, together with the consequences of the stereotypical images fixed by such a powerful machine of image creation as the American film industry has been, and still is, not only in the US, but throughout the world. In this paper I will focus on some aspects related to the first two questions.

²⁰ We have actually collected 54 different movies, but one of them is no more than the Spanish speaking version of the original English version of the same film, that were shot at the same time during the short period after the arrival of the first talking movies in the late 20's and early 30's. These films used to play the same script with a different set of actors, according to their proficiency in the languages they would be put in the market.

Sheep and Bombs: stereotyping Basque Americans.

One of the first tasks we got involved in at the very beginning was to try get some meaning out of this ostensible mess: first of all, trying to find if there were any common trends in the way all these films presented Basque Americans. Actually, there are. The very first remarkable conclusion, after reviewing the different Basque characters depicted on them, is that they can be easily reduced to only four main categories or stereotypes, some of which have lasted on screen for almost the whole period of the research. Basque-Americans have mostly been represented either as shepherds, as winemakers, as jai-alai players or, more recently, as terrorists. These four categories in fact comprise about a 87% of all the films.²¹

However, these four categories have not been equally present throughout the decades. Until the 1970s, Basques are above all shepherds. From the very beginning of their presence in American films, Basque-American characters have been mainly related to the industry of sheep husbandry. Basqueing equals shepherding. From the mid-80s, the image of Basques and even Basque-Americans as terrorists quickly emerged as the dominant view of this ethnic community according to filmmakers, notwithstanding that shepherding will still be closely linked to the Basque-American identity (as, for example, in the blockbuster *Brokeback Mountain*, 2005). After 1985 the date of release of the first film in which there was a clear statement of Basques as being "a fighting people"-²² there has been a double-sided image of the Basques: when depicted in "historical" films, that is, in a film whose timeline is set years or even decades before the film is actually shot, Basque-Americans are still concealed under the umbrella of shepherding. But when both timings, of the plot and of the filmmaking, are contemporary, terrorism is the main attribute of Basques, even for those living in the U.S.²³

This filmic linkage between Basques or, more precisely, Basque-American communities and terrorism, is quite surprising, and even more astonishing if we take into account the fact that no ETA member has ever been known to live in the United States, or ever to attempt to take refuge in this country²⁴. Police tracks usually point at some European

21 Regarding the rest of the characters, Basques have been represented as peasants or landowners (2), boxers (1), gardeners (1) or weightlifters (1). Only in one of the films (NYPD Blues, TV series, 2005) the Basques present no other feature than to be a resident in the city of New York. In the rest of the cases, it is still possible to find the actual sources that can serve as a basis for the attribution of such a set of features to a Basque character.

22 McGyver TV series, "Trumbo's World" chapter.

23 Another of the consequences of the attacks against the Twin Towers for the image of the Basques in American films, is that Basque terrorism have become more closely linked to Muslim terrorism, integrated within a kind of underground network of international terror.

24 William A. Douglass, the former head of the Basque Studies Program at the University of Nevada, Reno,

countries, France and Portugal because of their proximity, and also Belgium or the United Kingdom, as places where ETA members are more likely to be found. Furthermore, crossing the Atlantic, there are some well-known small groups of refugees in Venezuela, Uruguay or Argentina, under the support of a fraction of their local Basque communities, and in Cuba, because of ideological affinities. But the U.S. has always been a black hole for escaping ETA members. But not for the filmmaking industry, that has repeatedly presented us with Basque terrorists or ex-terrorists trying to perform attacks on American soil²⁵, transforming their murdering abilities for their own service²⁶, or simply trying to hide away from a forgettable past²⁷. In *Grosse Pointe Blank*, the protagonist, a mercenary killer himself, is given such an appealing description of one of these expatriate Basques:

SECRETARY.- They were supposed to catch you in the act, but I guess they weren't quick enough, right?

BLANK.- Who's the ghoul?

SECRETARY.- Whoa. This guy is a bad ass. Felix LaPoubelle. An accomplish amateur with the Basque nationalists. Few odd jobs with the Algerian separatists. Went pro with a stunning debut aboard an elite Caribbean cruise liner.

BLANK.- Oh, that what I know. He's an asshole.

SECRETARY.- A lone ass. Enjoys Native American art, ballroom dancing, pornography...

BLANK.- Yeah, yeah, yeah, what is here for?

SECRETARY.- It's part of that Oregon snafu with that dog, Budro. So, you're gonna get out of there, right.

Grosse Pointe Blank, 1997. 52:35 - 53:33. *Start: 3150.*

Unlike terrorism, the relevance given by American films to shepherding is totally consistent with what we know about the historical development of Basque immigration to the Western U.S. states. Although the very first wave of Basque migrants that disembarked at the port of San Francisco during the Gold Rush were attracted, as many others were, by the glitter of an easy enrichment, some of them realized early that gold could be effortlessly attained by

remembers how in the late '70s, two members of ETA came to the U.S. in order to get some funding from Basque American communities, but all their attempts were spoiled because of the reluctance of the addressees to have anything to do with terrorism. William A. Douglass (2010); *Terrorista nere baitan*, Donostia, Erein, pp. 45-46. No further presence of ETA members has even been documented in the U.S.

25 As it happened in the chapter "The Spanish Connection", from the TV Series *Dangerous Curves*, released in 1992. In this film, a group of ETA militants attempt to kidnap the ministry of Defence of Spain, during a trip he is taking to Dallas, Texas, with the aim of buying some weaponry for the Spanish Army.

26 The character named "Felix LaPubelle" in the 1997 film *Grosse Pointe Blank*: a former ETA terrorist turned into a mercenary in Detroit.

27 Isabella Zanconia, in the 1997 American remake of *The Jackal*, as an impossible supposed-to-be Basque name for a former ETA member and ex-fiancée of The Jackal, which turns her into the only person capable of recognizing him.

selling food to the miners. Cattle was the first business some of the most prominent Basque pioneers in California got involved in, in order to be able to move subsequently to other inner territories close to California, and to a new business model following the collapse of the growing market of gold-rushers and trading their cows for sheep flocks to provide wool for the increasing textile industry of the East.²⁸ These two changes determined both the geographical extent and job specialization of Basque immigration to the US in the following decades.

There have been two sets of explanations for the extreme degree of specialization of labour among Basque Americans when we focus on the first generation of Basques coming to America as immigrants. Most scholars agree to believe this specialization as being a mere outcome of the process of social and economic integration of Basque immigrants. So it would, to a certain extent, be a pure matter of chance enhanced by the power of chain migration: Basque pioneers managed to find an empty job niche that could successfully be filled, turning shepherding into a virtual monopoly in Basque hands in the places where no other ethnic group was competing with them: e.g. the Mexicans, that had traditionally controlled the sheep industry in the southern part of the region, near the Mexican border.

Popular explanations were quite dissimilar. According to what most of the new fellow countrymen believed, Basques were natural born shepherds. Their proficiency in shepherding would have surely come from their previous expertise in the same job back at their homeland. Douglass highlights the internal logic but external inaccuracy of this statement:

(..) in the twentieth century American West to say "Basque" is to mean "shepherd." The implication is that Basque emigrants herd sheep because of their Pyrenean background in sheep husbandry. The stereotype hides the fact that animal husbandry practices in (..) the American West differed markedly from their Pyrenean counterpart, and that few professional herders in the Basque Country entered the ranks of the emigrants. It also ignores the fact that in Australia to say "Basque" is to mean "cannecutter" despite the fact that Australia is the leading sheep producer in the world!²⁹

Filmmakers rank -or should we rather say, want to rank?- among those who ignore. When, after first introducing a Basque character in the plot, scriptmakers try to explain what they are (shepherds) and more specifically, why they are involved in this business, the most commonly used explanation is, of course, the popular one. For instance, in the TV series "Tales of Wells Fargo" (1957), two Basques start talking with the main protagonist and agent of the

28 William A. Douglass and Jon Bilbao (1975); *Amerikanuak...*, pp. 298-302.

29 William A. Douglass (2006); "Factor in the Formation of the New World Basque Emigrant Diaspora", in *Global Vasconia*, Reno NV, Center for Basque Studies, p. 36.

company, Jim Hardie, and the reason they have come to the States is fully explained:

MANUEL.- *Este país... ¡qué grande! ¡Si está grandísimo!*

PABLO.- *¡Qué grandísimo, sí!* [addressing to Hardy] He says this country...

HARDIE.- I can understand that much. He says it's big.

PABLO.- It's more than big, *señor*. It's *magnífico*!

MANUEL.- *Sí, sí, magnífico.*

HARDIE.- Takes a lot of courage, to leave your home and come to a strange country. Do you think you'll have to teach him a little more than the language before you leave him on his own?

PABLO.- *Señor Hardie*, we are Basques from the Pyrenees, and there we are the best shepherds in the world. Sheep are sheep, and the mountains are mountains. My brother Manuel, he knows that. In time he will learn the language.

HARDIE.- Not with the sheep, he won't.

Tales of Wells Fargo: "The Lynching", 1957. 00:40 - 01:23

Even more "serious" films also reflected the same idea. In 1957, Paramount Pictures released "Wild is the Wind," a film directed by George Cukor and starring Anthony Quinn, Anna Magnani and Tony Franciosa. The latter plays the role of a Basque shepherd, "Bene," working for his Italian master, Gino. After a short trip to Italy to get married to the sister of his recently dead wife, Gioia, he has to explain her why Bene became his right-hand:

GINO.- Hey, Bene. Remember when you came around? You only said a few words, eh? Oh, Gioia. Gioia. You know? Bene comes here when he was eight... nine years old. You know? A little *bambino*. No?

GIOIA.- *Io non capisco, Gino...*

GINO.- *Te spero, te spero*. No, you have to learn English. *Si*. He was a little boy when he came here, *si?* I write to a church in Spain. A church, *vuol dire chiesa*.

GIOIA.- Write, *che vuol dire?*

GINO.- *Escribere*. I write a letter to a church, *chiesa*, in Spain, *Spagna*.

GIOIA.- *Si, si*. OK. *Io capisco...*

GINO.- I said them: Send me a little boy, to live with me...

GIOIA.- *Bambino...*

GINO.- ...A Basque. A Basque. Because the Basques, they've a sheep in the blood, you see?. So...

Wild is the Wind, 1957. 15:42 - 16:24

But shepherding was not the dominant job specialization of the Basques before they went to America. Moreover, the sheep industry does not exist in one of the regions immigrants were coming from (Eastern Biscay); and even in the other case, as Douglass also states, the job of a shepherd in the Pyrenes area was radically different from the tasks he would have to do in the Western States. So any expertise they could have learnt was almost useless. Sheep flocks in this part of the Basque Country used to be of no more than a few

hundred head, while once in America they had to herd droves of not less than several thousand. Other conditions were also totally different: climate, grazing conditions, even the huge distances of the open range they had to move and, therefore, the extreme isolation shepherders had to endure during the long months of summer, from mid-spring to the first colds of late autumn.

Representing the other: race, clothing and language.

The second aspect we will draw our attention to is the visual depiction of Basques, including not only external aspects like the race, physical features or clothing, but also the selection of actors/actresses to play Basque roles and other elements linked to them³⁰.

There is indeed a common ground on how Basque-Americans have mainly been represented by American cinema, reinforcing the process of stereotyping a formal visual language for depicting Basque identity. However, this stereotype was not static, as it evolved during the time into, at least, three main types of sequential phases, that we will label as the periods of "Mainstream Basques," until the 1940s; the period of the "Folkloric Basques," until the mid-80s, and finally, the period of the "Exotic Basques" up to the present.

Mainstream Basques.- At the beginning, Basque characters that appear in the films are described with a kind of "neutral ethnicity." I.e., they are, from a visual point of view, totally indistinguishable from the rest of the "European" or "White" characters also represented in the plot. This means that, unless being previously made aware of the Basqueness of a specific character, there is no way to deduce his/her ethnicity, and even less his/her Basque origin with the only help of the visual representation as it can be seen in the film. Basques are mainstream people, wearing normal clothes without anything clearly identified as "ethnic" and, after sound was integrated into the cinema, without a specific marker of their national foreign background. The only ethnic marker -or element that could be considered like that- is their labour affiliation (see, for instance, the "Basque Landowner", a secondary character in the 1938 Warner Bros. film *The Valley of the Giants*). We know they are Basques because they are shepherders.

30 As Navarro Martínez (2009) says, "Important elements to be taken in account in an imagological film analysis are spaces and time (both as physical and as symbolic elements) (Thomas 2001); as regards the characters, we deal with factors such as social class, job, clothing, hairstyle, make-up, posture; what the characters say and how they act, how they speak and which language (and with which accent). Finally, we cannot forget the very important role of music in representing cultures, specially, when used as a symbolical and imagological element".

Only in a few examples can we notice a sort of visual depiction of ethnicity, but not as Basques but as French (*Call of the Wilderness*, 1932) or Spaniards (*Rin-Tin-Tin: The Night Cry*, 1927). In both cases, along with several external features such as the "typical French moustache", ethnic identification is made through naming. So Basques will either have Spanish or French names and surnames: "Pierre LaPlant" in the 1932 film; John Martin in the 1927 film. This way of labelling Basque people with Spanish and/or French names got turned into a long-standing practice, as even in the latest films, it is still uncommon to see Basque characters not only with Basque given names, but also with real, phonetically approximate, Basque family names³¹.

Folkloric Basques.- Two main changes happened during the decade of the '50s. In a time when ethnicity got strongly into Hollywood and many majors started introducing more ethnically-stained characters for a public no longer members of a melting-pot but structured by several types of hyphenated Americans (Irish-, Italian-, German- and even African-). The spread of TV broadcasting and its conversion in the main open window to both reality and fiction cinema in most American homes, Basques characters grew in American cinematic production. And so a formally stereotyped depiction of Basques emerged. From now on, Basques would be easily recognisable from the first sight.

Two main complementary ways were used for creating a typical Basque character. First of all: clothing. Basques should have a recognisable distinct way of dressing, unlike their American countryfellows. The Basque cinematic clothing is, at the same time, fictional and based on real sources.

It is fictional, because no Basque immigrant in the U.S. ever used any kind of traditional Basque clothing after arriving to the country. Different sources (photographs, letters, descriptions from outside the Basque community) inform us about the quick transformation newcomers suffered in their clothing customs, abandoning as soon as they could any visual element that could identify them apart from the average American of their new environment. Maybe only the Basque beret or "txapela" could enjoy a higher degree of attachment by Basque immigrants, but it was far more usual to see Basque shepherders

31 There are exceptions like the famous *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), one of its characters if called Joe Aguirre -the owner of the sheep, a Basque-, being Aguirre a quite common family name in the Basque Country. Nevertheless, there are few attempts that have turned into funny jokes, because of the inability of scriptmakers and their advisers to deal with the task of where to find a "real" Basque name. (One of the most remarkable examples is the character of "Izzy", a secondary role in the 2007 film *Georgia Rule*). In his only appearance during the film, Izzy explains to the protagonist of the movie -played by Lindsay Lohan- that Izzy is no more than they way Americans say their real name for short: Iztegui Argitxaletxe Sarrionaindia. A phrase whose translation from Basque language is something like "Dictionary Publishing Company".

wearing cowboy hats than Basque berets.

The stereotypical Basque clothing in the films would always include the Basque beret, the short jacket and the *gerriko* (a band of woven wood or line, usually red or green, fastened around the waist), and eventually a handkerchief around the neck and some kind of Basque espadilles called *abarka*. In fact, all the Basque characters from 1950 to 1982 -with the only exception being *Wild is the Wind* (1959)- are presented wearing some or all of them. Anyway, none of them is pure invention, made up by the imagination of scriptmakers. In fact, all these clothes taken together constitute the representation of the folkloric clothing of Basque males. Folkloric can be understood as traditional, but for the time that Basques were migrating to America, an even more as we enter farther into the 20th century, this was not the usual way Basques used to dress; neither in the Basque Country nor, of course, in the Americas.

Along with this, language gains in importance when trying to create a stereotypical ethnic identity. Apart from English, the language of the nation in which Basque-Americans are living, what do Basques speak? A very few of the films give the apparently most logical answer: Basque. This is the case, for instance, of the Basque family from the 1953 film *Titanic*. Richard Sturges, an American that needs to get into the ship in a hurry, convinces the Uzcuduns to sell him a 3rd class passage, a request followed by a husband-wife discussion in Basque -the first time this language ever appears in a fiction film-:

STURGES.- Pardon. Your are Spanish?

MR. UZCUDUN.- We are Basques.

MRS. UZCUDUN.- From wine country. We go to California, Oregon perhaps. Start grapes. Make good wine.

STURGES.- Have you land there?

MR. UZCUDUN.- We buy little piece.

STURGES.- It needn't be such a little piece... You give me that ticket and... there's enough here to buy five times as much as land.

[The Uzcuduns turn and chatter incredulously among themselves in their native language]

STURGES.- There's nothing to discuss. He can take the next boat and join you in a week or so. One boat's as good as another.

[The Uzcuduns turn to each other excitedly, babble some more in Basque. Mr Uzcudun finally turns back and makes a gesture of rejection. At this moment, there is a second whistle blast from the tender.]

STURGES.- All right, I can always get someone else... But stop and think how many years it'll take you to get a hundred acres. Now go into one of your tribal huddles and convince your wife.

[There is another babble of Basque, Mr. Uzcudun using all ten fingers to show his wife how much land they cant get. Mrs. Uzcudun finally nods assent. Sturges quickly hands Uzcudun the money and untwines the ticket from his coat.]

STURGES.- Thank you, Mr...

MR. UZCUDUN.- Uzcudun.
STURGES.- You've done me a great favor.

Titanic, 1953³².

But *Titanic* is no more than an exception. Even in this film, Basques are also using Spanish to communicate to each other. Spanish, and less usually French, is the language Basques are supposed to be most proficient in. But not any kind of Spanish: with no exception, their accent when using Spanish is always Latin American, often Mexican³³. It seems that, according to most scriptmakers, the Basque Country must be located somewhere in Latin America. Or, maybe, somewhere between Mexico and Paris.

The logical process of this deduction is wrong but consistent. First: if, as most of the available primary sources of information about Basques says, this is a people located between France and Spain, so its culture must surely be something in between, a mix of stereotypical features usually assigned to both French and Spanish. Maybe the best example of this idea is the first American film that tries to present "the Basque adventure in the conquest of American West", *Thunder in the Sun*, a failed 1959 road movie that narrates the trip of a group of French Basques crossing the United States from Independence, Missouri, to California, in 1849. They speak no other language but French, and one of them wears an anachronistic uniform of the Imperial Napoleonic Army; but on the other hand, when amusing themselves, they play and dance pure flamenco³⁴. Regarding their names, all the characters have Spanish given names but French family names (Pepe Dauphine, Fernando Christophe...) And, needless to say, all of them wear Basque berets, jackets, *gerrikos* and the complete folkloric clothing.

Second: looking from Hollywood, Spanish is a word that refers, not to a distant country back in Europe, but to a cultural world that starts only a few miles southwards, just on the other side of Mexican border or even closer, in East Los Angeles. The academic distinction between Spanish and Spaniard is there more necessary than anywhere else. But it does not apply in films. As Basques are Spanish, there is no problem to present them with the physical features of the Latin American race, whatever it is. So Basques are represented often like short, fatty, dark-skinned, mixed-race people, just like Mexicans. This identification is

32 Unlike the rest of transcriptions of this paper, this one has been directly taken from the original script, at the Library of the UCLA, Los Angeles, California.

33 Unfortunately, I am not able to make the same statement about the accent Basque-Americans in film have when speaking in French, because of my own limitations.

34 In the last episode of the TV series *Gunsmoke* ("Manolo", 1975), Basques also play a kind of flamenco music during their traditional fights between sons and fathers, a rite of passage for young Basques to become adults. Of course, both the flamenco dance and this bizarre fight ritual are unknown in the Basque Country.

reinforced by the actors that are given Basque characters to play, that used to be Latin Americans³⁵.

Exotic Americans.- The above mentioned 3rd chapter of the first season of the TV series *McGyver* marked the transitional point between the old and the new set of characterization of Basques in the last decades. As we have quoted before, that was the first mention of Basques linked to terrorism but, at the same time, it was the last time the Folkloric version of Basques was depicted on the screen.

But it did not mean a return of Basques to the mainstream, but a somewhat more complex situation. Basques are still something different, but with a kind of differentness difficult to manage. The impact of mass media and the growing presence of the topic of Basque nationalism and its epigonic terrorism in news broadcasting services has been, of course, high. First of all, ethnic clothing has almost disappeared from the visual depiction of Basque characters. But, to a certain extent, there is still a tension between Basques as enjoying a separate identity -and, so, as a people in search of its own stereotype-, or as a mere regional variation of the Spanish one -links to French identity are lesser nowadays-. Basque characters are still played by Latin Americans, but there is also a growing tendency to use actors geographically or ethnically closer to the Basque Country, being Spaniards (like in the 1992 TV series *Dangerous Curves*, or in the 1988 Columbia Pictures film *A Time of Destiny*³⁶) or even Basque-Americans (*Georgia Rule*, 2007; or the 2004-2005 TV series *Judging Amy*³⁷). There are some cases from the last decade (NYPD Blue, 2005; or NCIS, 2007, both TV series) in which ethnically Arabic actors have been selected to play Basque roles; maybe a side effect of the increasing attribution of a leading position in international terrorism to Muslims -an identification that once seems to have been enjoyed by the Basques. If anything, Basques are still exotic... and dangerous.

35 They are, of course, exceptions. Besides *Wild is the Wind*, it is also remarkable to quote a 1959 chapter from the TV series *Wagon Train*: "The Story of Estaban Zamora". Here the main protagonists are two Basques, a father and his son, played by Ernest Borgnine and Leonard Nimoy.

36 In this film the scriptmaker and director, Gregory Nava, himself of Basque descent, hired the renowned Spanish actor Francisco Rabal to play the role of Mr. Martin, a Basque immigrant who tries to govern his family with the same traditional rules of the old country.

37 Ignacio Messina is, in this series, a gardener "of Spanish-Basque family". This role is played by Cheech Marin, himself also from the same descent.

Conclusion: Will redemption come among dishes?

The evolution of the stereotype of Basque-Americans, and by extension of Basques themselves, in American cinema, has been fed by two major sources. The first one is local: the historical relevance of Basque immigrants in the American shepherding industry from the last third of the 19th century and, moreover, the virtual monopoly of this industry in the States Basques mainly settled in. The second one has its origin abroad, but its impact has been wider and larger because of the increasing power of the mass media: Basque terrorism, that was born in the early '60s but turned into a globally known media topic after the successful attack against the Prime Minister of Spain, Carrero Blanco, in 1973.

During the period of dominance of the identification of Basques as shepherders, American cinema developed a positive stereotype of this ethnic group. There could be bizarre interpretations about what a Basque was; but nevertheless, in this Manichaeic world of cinematic productions, Basques almost always used to be on the side of the "good guys" when the happy end arrived. The stereotype of Basque people could have some flaws or weaknesses, but in general it was not that bad. Unlike the one that started emerging during the '80s and exploded in the last decade of the century: the Basque terrorist whose involvement in deadly subversive international plots against Western society and American people, as presented in the films, cannot be further from the reality of a relatively small and locally focused terrorist group of nationalistic basis. Even though the fictional Basque terrorist was more fictional than ever, as a result of it, the cinematic stereotype of Basques have been drawn down to a negative one. In the 2005 film *Munich* by Steven Spielberg, one of the members of the Israeli Mossad group that is performing a series of attacks against the Palestinians that designed the murder of Israeli athletes during the Olympic Games of Munich, 1972, only needs to shout out "Basque, Basque" pointing at himself to present himself as a terrorist.

Inverting stereotypes is quite a difficult task to undertake, as the inertia of the social images of the otherness makes the change at the surface slower than the more profound transformations of a society. When presenting some of these ideas to an audience of Basque Americans in Bakersfield, California, several months ago, someone asked me: is there a possibility of changing this all? Is there any hope we Basques can be freed from this unpleasant stereotype?

Gastronomy. That was my answer. Redemption could come among dishes. In the last fourteen years, no less than ten movies and TV series have started presenting another side of

the Basque identity. These are films with no Basque characters, but with some interesting references to another aspect of the Basque American experience: Basque food and restaurants, the famous "home-style" for eating in Basque restaurants. In one chapter of the TV series *Boston Legal* ("Ivan the Incurable", aired in 2006), one of the protagonists invites a girl to have dinner in the most charming place in the city, of course a Basque restaurant.

In 2007 Warner Brothers released a film protagonized by Robin Williams, *License to Wed*. He is a priest trying to help a young couple in their marriage arrangements. When preparing the nuptial banquet, one of the friends recommends a very good cheese for the couple to taste; a Basque one, because it is "gonna change your life". I just hope it could simply change the image of Basques.