Conquering the Conquerors: Ricardo Darín's Rise to Stardom in Spanish Film Culture.¹

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With his jacket hanging from one hand over his shoulder, Ricardo Darín walked through one of the many photocalls at the 2012 San Sebastian International Film Festival looking relaxed, as if he were strolling alone smoking a cigarette. The constant shouting of: 'Ricardo! Ricardo!' received a quick answer back: 'Sorry, I'm in a hurry. I have to meet Dustin Hoffman! Ahhhh!' (TVE 1: daily news, September 2012). Mirroring the same fan-frantic reaction of the public shouting his name, Darín positioned himself as just another fan about to meet a movie star. This ordinary-guy aura he emanates is part of the constructed on-and-off screen character that has captivated Spanish audiences since the end of the 1990s.

Darín's appeal in Spain is not only due to the 'guy-next-door' charisma, but also to a mixture of the strong influence of a large migration of Argentines to the Iberian Peninsula after its incorporation into the European Community, and later due to the 'crisis of 2001', as well as the growing connections between the local Spanish institutions and the representatives of the Argentine film industry. Bearing this in mind, this article will explore the reception of Darín in both specialized film literature and general public media, taking into consideration not only the films that have been shown in Spain, but also his participation in major cinematographic events, such as the Goya awards and the San Sebastian film festival. By analyzing the treatment of Darín's public image, this text aims to question how the impact of socio-economic circumstances and

¹ I would like to thank Dr Marina Díaz López, for her invaluable comments on earlier drafts. Thanks are also due to Dr Alberto Elena, not only for his precious suggestions to this text, but also for being an excellent colleague and role model. This article is dedicated to his memory and aims to continue his outstanding legacy in Hispanic and Latin American Film Studies.

the dynamics of the cinematographic industry on the reception of foreign actors reflects and refracts the collective Spanish imaginary at times of intense migration on both sides of the Atlantic.

A rising star

Darín appeared for the first time in the Spanish theatres in 1994 with a film called *Perdido por perdido/Nothing to loose* directed by Alberto Lecchi. At that time, Argentine films were slowly starting to gain more attention, thanks to the huge success of *Un lugar en el mundo/A Place in the World* (1992), a film by Adolfo Aristarain which attracted an outstanding number of half a million spectators in commercial theatres (Colmena 2013; Elena 2011: 42).² Inspired by those figures, and considering that Lecchi was one of the scriptwriters of Aristarain's film, *Perdido* was destined to be one of only two Argentine films that made it to the big screen that year. Although Darín's presence in this film was not singled out by the critics at the time, who preferred to focus on the plot and the connections between Lecchi and Aristarain, the seed of Darín's Spanish stardom was being sown in every positive review of the film's performances (such as Torreiro's in 1994). Moreover, his character, an ordinary middle-class fellow in crisis who cleverly manages to run away with the money and the girl, marked a precedent for his future lovable characters.

Four years later, a co-production with Spain, *El faro del sur/The Lighthouse*, brought Darín back to Spanish shores. On that occasion, the 1997 Goya Award-winning director Eduardo Mignogna and the promising young Spanish actress Ingrid Rubio caught the press's attention (Villena 1998; Rivera 1998; Torreiro 1998). Highly

² Please see also online the official box-office figures published by the Spanish Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (ICCA).

favoured by the presence of renowned cast and crew from both sides of the Atlantic, *El faro* increased the number of spectators of *Perdido* by almost sevenfold and in 1999 won what was Mignogna's second Goya Award for Best Foreign Film in Spanish. Overshadowed by the presence of Norma Aleandro and the popularity of Rubio, Darín's work eluded the headlines once again. Nonetheless, his sympathetic middle-aged character stayed in the Spanish audience's imaginary not only thanks to the film's success and its large presence in the media, but also because of his role as a soap opera heartthrob in *Rebelde/Rebel* (shot in 1989), which was shown on local TV at that time (shown on Channel 5 from 1997 to 1998). This was a role that placed him among the *galán* actors who were rising in the 1980s and 1990s Spanish film industry, like Imanol Arias, who was also working in both countries and who contributed to the implementation of a shared star system.³ Accordingly, Darín's third appearance in Spanish film theatres proved to be the charm. *Nueve reinas/Nine Queens* (2000), by Fabián Bielinsky, represents for many film historians and critics the turning point in Darín's Spanish career (Herbera 2012). Released at the end of August 2001, it was accompanied by the increase of Argentine migrants to the Iberian Peninsula and the constant presence of Argentina in the news, due to its deteriorating socio-political circumstances. Two months later, in October 2001, another film by Mignogna put him back in theatres: *La Fuga/Escape* (which won yet another Goya); and in November came the overwhelming success of *El hijo de la novia/The Son of the Bride*, arguably the true turning point in Darín's rise to stardom in Spanish film culture.

As the film scholar Alberto Elena has pointed out, Campanella's film *El hijo de la novia* changed the history of cinematographic relations between Spain and Argentina (2011: 43). With over seven million euros in box-office earnings and with more than 1.5

³ In order to comprehend the complexities of the term *galán* and how it is connected to different star constructions in Spain please refer to Chris Perriam (2003).

million spectators, the film enjoyed an uninterrupted run in theatres for an entire year (González Acevedo 2005: 17). The enormous success of *El hijo de la novia* made possible the release of a former Campanella film starring Darín *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia/Same Love, Same Rain*, a few months later (Ginart 2002). Along with the constant presence of Darín's face on the billboards came the local awards, accompanied by critical acclaim: for three years in a row he received the Sant Jordi Award for best foreign actor (for his performances in *Nueve reinas*, *La fuga* and *El hijo de la novia*), and he also won the Leading Character of the Year Award (granted by *Onda Cero* in 2002). From then on, he had a spot reserved on the big screen almost every year (see 'Table 1' for further details on the films released and the box-office figures), and his public recognition continued to grow. He won the Best Actor Award at Valladolid's International Film Festival for *Luna de Avellaneda/Avellaneda's Moon* (2004) and was nominated twice for the Goya Awards in 2009 -for Best Leading Actor in *El secreto de sus ojos/The Secret in Their Eyes* (2009) and Best Supporting Actor in *El baile de la Victoria/The Dancer and the Thief* (2009).

Darín himself likes to say that his privileged position among Spanish filmgoers makes him feel, in his forties, reborn in Spain - 'an enormous blessing because I'm at the right time in my career, without all the "horrible" roles I had to play to get here in Argentina' (interviewed by García in 2005). Even though this 'blessing' was due to an important dose of fortune, how he came to work in Spain and how he has now achieved the status of an A-list celebrity (into his fifties) is due to various factors. The British film theorist Richard Dyer, following Edgar Morin's argument in *New Trends in the Study of Mass Communications*, stated that stardom originates 'at the point of intersection of public demand (the star as a phenomenon of consumption) and the producer initiative (the star as a phenomenon of production)' (2011: 10). In Darín's

case, the dialectical relationship established between production and consumption should be considered, as Dyer has suggested for the star phenomenon in general, in connection to the ‘cultural, historical and ideological context to understand where the producers’ ideas and images of stardom and of specific stars themselves come from’ (Dyer 2011: 17). In this sense, it is vital to consider the Spanish socio-political and cultural context as informed by the constant emigration of Argentines from the turn of the century onwards and by the shared past of good social, political, cultural and economic relationships, in order to understand the phenomenon of Darín’s stardom (on this common history see: Aznar and Wechsler 2005).

Migration played a central role in the increased representation of Latin American characters in Spanish cinema and in the arrival of foreign films to the peninsula’s coasts. The exodus caused by the various dictatorships throughout Latin America during the 20th century was followed by the incorporation of Spain into the European Union in the mid-1980s, with the subsequent freedom of movement of European citizens. The Argentine crisis of 2001 also played an important part in this equation, bringing hundreds of Argentines to the country (Schmidt 2010; Actis 2005). As mentioned by Elena in his review of the migratory flows that have contributed to an on-going presence of Latin Americans in the Spanish film industry, the relationships between Spain and its former colonies confer upon the national audiovisual productions a certain specificity that is yet to be properly analyzed (2005: 111). Darín’s growing presence in films directed by Spanish filmmakers, such as *La educación de las hadas/The Education of Fairies* (Cuerda 2006), *El baile de la Victoria* (Trueba 2009), *En fuera de juego/Offside* (Marqués 2012), *Una pistola en cada mano/A Gun in Each Hand* (Gay 2012) and *Séptimo/Seventh* (2013) by Navarre Patxi Amezcua, shows an increased transnational flow of cast and crew members that speaks to a common, mixed

imaginary community which, as Elena has correctly pointed out, still needs proper academic attention.

The Spanish and Argentine film industries were both transformed not only by this ongoing circulation of people but also by the development, deeply connected to that flow of migration, of industrial collaborations in the form of co-production programs such as Ibermedia, founded in 1998 (Lara 2011: 274-286). The configuration of Darín as a star in Spain depended a great deal on this industry's dynamics. Co-production was one of the reasons for getting more job offers and visibility on both sides of the Atlantic, but it was not the sole reason. Good networking between actors and their representatives and the expanding interest of key Spanish distribution companies in the Ibero-American market opened up a field of possibilities for foreign actors like Darín. Additionally, good casting choices allowed Spanish audiences to recognize certain desirable characteristics in specific Latin American actors, thus associating Darín with sensitive middle-class Argentine characters in crisis easily recognized in everyday life.

When thinking about the production/consumption dialectics that form the base of the star system, we should also remember that 'stars are images in media texts' (Dyer 2011: 10). In Dyer's words, 'a star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films and criticism and commentaries' (2011: 60). Therefore, in the following sections, different media texts will be analyzed, along with the ways in which they contribute to forming the particular star image of Ricardo Darín within contemporary Spanish film culture. It should be noted that, although they will be mentioned in the course of this article, an actual analysis of his appearances at local film festivals, television programs and alternative circuits would require further special attention, particularly because the stress here will be on his film productions and what they have generated.

The road to success: co-production, distribution, publicity

As stated by Dyer, 'the image is a complex totality and it does have a chronological dimension' (2011: 63). Indeed, it was briefly shown in the previous paragraphs how Darín developed his star image in Spain diachronically, thanks to cultural, historical, socio-political and industrial factors. His role in *Nueve reinas* and, shortly after, his performance in *El hijo de la novia* marked a turning point for Spanish audiences. Throughout 2002, one could go to the cinema and choose between five different films starring Darín -an unprecedented situation that put him right in the spotlight (González Acevedo 2005: 41). Despite not living in Spain, in contrast to other Argentine actors who found success in the country, such as Federico Luppi or Héctor Alterio, he managed to shine by taking careful advantage of this sudden public exposure.

Towards the end of 2002, when the impact of *El hijo* in the press and public opinion was starting to disappear, two more films were released in theatres. The first one, *Un tipo corriente/Sammy and Me* (released in Argentina as *Samy y yo*), portrayed a Woody Allen-esque character that has an unlikely romantic venture with the sexy Colombian actress Angie Cepeda, quite famous in Spain for her participation in popular soap operas like *Luz María* or *Pobre Diabla/Poor Crazy Girl* (according to the Spanish soap opera forum,⁴ these are two of the most successful soap operas shown on Spanish TV in the last decade). A month later, the story of a family living clandestinely due to the arrival of the Argentine military regime, *Kamchatka*, brought Darín back to the big screen once again, together with two actors well known to Spanish audiences, Cecilia

⁴ Please, for further details on these soap operas' success go to: www.network54.com/Forum, accessed on 30th March 2013.

Roth and Héctor Alterio.⁵ This established transnational star system was certainly crucial in the reinforcement of his Spanish star status. As Paul McDonald (2000) has rightly specified when reviewing the tendency of Star Studies since Dyer, the film industry should also be taken into consideration. In this respect, even though there is not sufficient evidence that they played a significant role in his success at this time, his representatives (the agency Pedro Rosón & Facundo Rosón) also worked with many other actors who were part of the cast in various Argentine films released in Spain, demonstrating a thriving network of actors that undoubtedly contributed to Darín's continuous ability to draw a crowd.

As mentioned above, the co-productions between Spain and Argentina have also contributed to the expansion of his visibility and, therefore, to the building of Darín's star image. Such co-productions have tripled in number since the beginning of the new millennium. If Mexico has historically been the Latin American country with the highest number of releases on the Spanish peninsula, Argentina has been gradually challenging those numbers since the end of the 1990s, acquiring 'first place' in the first decade of this century by doubling the number of Mexico's productions (see the charts made by Elena 2011: 46-49). At the time of writing this article, twenty one films starring Darín have made it into Spanish theatres: fourteen are co-productions, five are Argentine productions and two are Spanish (see Table 1). That is to say that almost seventy per cent of the films that crossed the ocean managed to do so thanks to co-production entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, as Darín has pointed out, while co-productions have accelerated and facilitated the process, it was tried in the past and did not influence the success of any specific star, 'por eso me gusta creer que está directamente relacionado con la simplicidad de las historias...me parece que se ha

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of Cecilia Roth's acting career in Spain, please refer to Ciller and Palacio (2011).

conseguido llegar un poco más lejos, al corazón de la gente [that's why I like to believe that it is directly linked to the simplicity of the stories...I think these films have gone a bit further, to people's hearts' (quoted in González Acevedo 2005: 43).

Thus, also forming the basis for the construction of his star image are simple stories that have captured the audience's attention due to their proximity and emotional identification (as stated by Miret 2001: 40 when reviewing *El hijo*) and, when it comes to Darín's own personal success, charming characters that speak to people's emotions. The Argentine researcher Carolina Rocha, when discussing masculinities in contemporary Argentine cinema, asserted that 'the cinematic representation of middle-class masculinities in crisis is related to the inception of neoliberalism in Argentina, a change that had significantly modified the Argentine State' (2012: 2). Following the arguments of Hearn (1987), Horrocks (1994) and Harris (1995), she further explained that 'it has become *de rigueur* to refer to masculinities as experiencing a crisis resulting from the expansion of global capitalism, which undermines patriarchy and men's status in society' (2012: 11). Hence, the inner struggles generally experienced by the male characters played by Darín are not related exclusively to an Argentine context, but to the global crisis of masculinities that affects the 'Spanish macho' equally. If we add to this shared broken patriarchy the common language and cultural background between Argentina and Spain, we can fully comprehend how these 'Argentine' characters and stories are 'mediators between the real and the imaginary' (Hayward 1996: 344) that reflect not only particular elements of Argentine nationhood, but also the concomitant construction of desires and identifications in contemporary Spanish popular culture. This common socio-historical male figure can be perceived, for instance, in the description that Darín himself made of his character in *El secreto de sus ojos* to the Spanish film magazine *Imágenes de actualidad*: 'es un hombre común con principios,

con criterio, con ideales' [he is an ordinary guy with principles, with common sense, with ideals] (interviewed by Boquerini 2009: 108), just like any other middle-class man.

This 'guy-next-door' charisma portrayed in the films seems to be, for the Spanish audience, Darín's own likeable off-screen personality. According to Christine Gledhill in her anthology on stardom, 'actors become stars when their off-screen lifestyles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in importance. Stardom enacts the power and material success of individual lives' (1991: xii). This is not entirely the case for Darín in Spain. In contrast to what happens in Argentina, where his personal life appears constantly in the tabloids, on the other side of the Atlantic this private aspect is rarely mentioned in the press. On the very few occasions that his lifestyle surpassed his acting ability in importance, such as in 2008 when the news that a group of burglars had broken into his house in Buenos Aires received much media attention, Spanish newspapers and magazines covered this information not as a way of showing his private drama or of focusing on his personal matters in a voyeuristic vein, as they would in the case of any other star, but rather as a means to describe the socio-political context of Argentina. That notwithstanding, this media emphasis on external issues instead of his persona, when he appeared in the headlines for reasons other than promoting a new film, has slowly been changing over the past year. As we will discuss in the following section, the symbolic on-screen characterization of the friendly Argentine chap is beginning to pervade his off-screen life and, as a consequence, it is diverting attention towards his private life and driving speculation about this .

Certainly, as Gledhill suggested in her analysis of the construction of Hollywood's star system, stardom has the possibility to narrativise the real lives of stars. In Darín's case, the actor has been turned into a character, which is also an aspect of his star image that has developed over time. Moved by the warmth of the Spanish

people, he relocated temporarily to Spain between 2004 and 2005 to perform on stage (González Acevedo 2005: 42). During that time, his play *Art* was regularly in the news thanks to the active presence of famous personalities in the audience (including members of the royal family, politicians, and distinguished celebrities from the arts and culture). Likewise, he started to appear steadily on TV chat shows like *Buenafuente*, *Salvados*, *El hormiguero*, and specific programmes dedicated to cinema such as *Versión Española* and *Días de cine*. The fact that this last television program selected Darín as one of ‘the best Spanish actors of 2012’ demonstrates the high level of acceptance he has gained within Spanish film culture, up to the point of being considered one of Spain’s own actors. This situation was partly triggered by the ‘special circumstances’ mentioned in the royal decree that in 2006, after a few more successful releases that followed *El hijo*, such as *Luna de Avellaneda* (2004) and *La educación de las hadas* (2006), granted Darín, in conjunction with director Juan José Campanella and the producer Jorge Eliécer Estrada Mora, Spanish citizenship (*El País* 2006). Those ‘special circumstances’ then shifted the focus from his characters to Darín himself, someone worthy of distinction for his work as a cultural promoter.

In addition to the audience’s desires and identification with his characters on and off the screen, distribution has also been an essential element of his public recognition. Eight out of twelve films that managed to reach the million-euro mark in box-office earnings were distributed by Alta Classics S. L. Unipersonal (see Table 1 for further information on these productions). The company is not only in charge of distribution, but also owns more than one hundred film theatres in six different Spanish cities, thus guaranteeing that its chosen films will be shown. This theatre chain, called *Renoir*, is known for its screenings of original versions and art-house titles, which are quite uncommon in a country with a strong dubbing tradition, thereby monopolizing an

important market area. The company's owner, who is now the president of the Spanish Film Academy, has also invested in online platforms such as *Filmin.es*, making a wide variety of Argentine titles that are commercially unattainable elsewhere available to the Spanish spectator.⁶ The expansion of alternative means of distribution and consumption show how box-office figures are becoming less appropriate to measure a film's impact and, because of this, Darín's influence on the mass Spanish audience is surely bigger than what can be imagined.

Finally, publicity, understood as a technique or process of attracting public attention to certain products, is also undoubtedly at the core of Darín's star-image construction. For the sake of argument, a distinction will not be made, as Dyer proposes, between promotion, publicity, criticism and commentaries, but will rather consider all of these together as media texts aimed precisely at attracting public attention to the films starring Darín and, therefore, which have also contributed to his star status and visibility. Among these texts, critics' written responses to the films' performances, whether writing in specialized or general public media, have crystalized Darín's image in Spain by distinguishing him as someone we should notice. A good example of this is Carlos Boyero's commentaries in the newspaper *El País*. He is one of the key journalists who admires Darín's work and who has contributed to his success by continually emphasizing his virtues on screen. When Boyero wrote in July 2012 about the release of *Elefante blanco/White Elephant*, he started his article by describing for the Spanish spectator some of the distinctive features of Argentine cinema and said:

Es habitual la aparición de películas que tienen la coherente facultad de enganchar a todo tipo de público como *El hijo de la novia*, *Nueve reinas*,

⁶ There has been quite a lot of controversy in the past months regarding the future of Alta Vista due to the Spanish economic crisis. See further information on this issue in EFE (2013), and Díaz Caviades (2013).

Kamchatka, *El secreto de sus ojos* y *Un cuento chino*. Hay algo común en esa lista, una de las razones de que el cine argentino actual desprenda tanto atractivo como veracidad y es el protagonismo de Ricardo Darín, un actor que está adquiriendo categoría de género, alguien cuya presencia garantiza casi siempre interés, que vas a encontrarte con historias y personajes que desprenden vida, que el precio de la entrada está justificado ante un tipo en posesión de magnetismo, matices, credibilidad y registros muy variados.

The emergence of films which consistently have the ability to hook all kinds of audiences, such as *El hijo de la novia*, *Nueve reinas*, *Kamchatka*, *El secreto de sus ojos* and *Un cuento chino/Chinese Take-Out*, is commonplace. There is a common element in this list, one of the reasons why contemporary Argentine cinema gives off so much attractiveness as well as sincerity, and that is Ricardo Darín's presence, [Darín is] an actor who has almost become a genre category himself, someone whose mere presence almost always guarantees the public's interest and guarantees that you will get stories and characters full of life, that the value of the ticket is justified by this captivating guy with a variety of registers, credibility and nuances.

We find another suitable example of Darín's consolidation as a 'trending topic' in the local press in the words of another well-known Spanish film critic and historian, Mirito Torreiro, in the film magazine *Fotogramas*. When reviewing *Luna de Avellaneda*, he further emphasized Darín's importance by saying:

Vuelve a estar aquí Ricardo Darín, que tan bien se mueve con personajes entre derrotados y portadores de esperanzas, desarbolados por la vida pero no dispuestos a hacer demagogia con sus debilidades. A él, y al resto de su portentoso elenco de actores, debe el film su tersa honestidad, su capacidad de diagnóstico, su desarmante y, por una vez, conmovedora sentimentalidad. Para espectadores interesados en la sociología argentina y amantes de Darín (2004).

Here we have the return of Ricardo Darín, who is so skillful with defeated yet hopeful characters uprooted from life yet unwilling to demagogically stress their weaknesses. This film owes its smooth honesty, its capacity to draw conclusions, its persuasive and touching sentimentality, to him and the rest of the superb cast. This film is for those spectators interested in Argentine sociology and who are Darín lovers (2004).

Likewise, Eulália Iglesias analyzing *Carancho* in *Cahiers du Cinema España*, stated: ‘Darín no hace más que confirmarse como uno de los mejores actores contemporáneos en un registro diferente a los que nos tiene acostumbrados [Darín continues to prove himself to be one of the best contemporary actors in a different register than the one in which we are used to seeing him]’ (2010: 29). In this way, she highlights his performance and encourages the audience to go and see this film simply to appreciate how versatile he is as an actor, thus demonstrating how critical attention has moved from the film’s plot and the director’s ability to highlight Darín’s presence and skills.

It is interesting to observe how, when a particular film is not a critical success, as in the case of *El baile de la Victoria*, there is almost no mention of Darín’s role in it or, when mentioned, Darín’s performance is highlighted as the only good thing about it.

This was the case of M. Torreiro (2009) himself in *Fotogramas* and Luis Martínez (2009) in *El Mundo*. The newspaper *20minutos.es* (2009) stated that ‘al final es la solvencia infalible de Darín y el desparpajo contagioso del joven Abel Ayala lo que evita el total y absoluto colapso [in the end, it is Darín’s infallible solvency and the young Abel Ayala’s contagious ease that prevents this film’s total and absolute collapse]’. Carlos Boyero (2009) in *El País* similarly says of this film: ‘Sólo consigo meterme ligeramente en esta aventura supuestamente trágica cuando aparece Ricardo Darín, ese actor superdotado que clava siempre sus diálogos, sus gestos, sus miradas [I only manage to slightly get into this supposedly tragic adventure when Ricardo Darín appears, that exceptionally gifted actor who always nails his dialogues, his gestures, his looks]’. It seems that the critics try not to damage his reputation by associating his name and image with less accomplished cinematographic productions like this one.

A similar reaction occurred with the film *La señal/The Sign*, which also received poor reviews from the critics. Although this case was slightly different, because they could not avoid acknowledging that Darín, who directed the film, was the one responsible for that outcome, they still did not mention a bad performance on his part and tried to minimize the damage to his image. In the film magazine *Dirigido por...*, for instance, it was suggested that: ‘Probablemente *La señal* no sea más que el homenaje que los colaboradores de Mignogna le han querido brindar a su desaparecido colega. De hecho, posiblemente Mignogna hubiera realizado un film muy parecido [*La señal* is likely not more than an homage that Mignogna’s contributors wanted to pay their lost colleague. In fact, Mignogna would have possibly made a very similar film]’ (Calvo 2007: 27). It all seemed to imply that Darín was not really at fault, since he was actually trying to finish one of his master’s works, respecting his traditional directives.

Accordingly, his social approval remained untouched as a respected actor inasmuch as it was again separated from a possible fiasco by the critics' commentaries.

However, these positive reactions on the part of the critics are not the only ones that have built Darín's star image. As is well known, 'bad' press is also 'good' press because it brings one's name back into the public arena. This is the case, for example, of Jara Yáñez's remarks on *El secreto de sus ojos* in the illustrious *Cahiers du Cinema España*: 'el mismo Darín de siempre, con sus aciertos, sus tics y sus errores ya de sobra conocidos [the same old Darín as ever, with his skills, his tics and his already well-known mistakes]' (2009: 47). The controversy that these words generate, especially when compared with other comments that appeared in the press about his performance in this Oscar-winning film, certainly locates Darín at the centre of public discussions. Nonetheless, these negative statements tend to be the exception within Spanish film criticism, which certifies his star type in Spain as the affable, clever fellow who is liked by everyone.

In general, all these written articles and statements, which promoted a specific film and which had gradually shifted their focus from the film text to Darín's performance and characterization, have been accompanied by specific images. How those images have also changed their focal point over time from general shots to images of Darín's face and body, in parallel with the progression of his star status, should also be considered when analyzing his rise to fame in Spain. Accordingly, in what follows not only will their function as visual aids of written film reviews be considered, but also their function as publicity in themselves which have helped to promote both the films and his persona equally.

An image to remember

It has been analyzed how Darín's star image was configured in Spain diachronically through various factors. This analysis followed Dyer and McDonald's parameters and, accordingly, it used the word 'image' not to refer exclusively to a visual sign, 'but rather a complex configuration of visual, verbal and aural signs' (Dyer 2011: 34). In this sense, film critics' commentaries and audiences' desires and identification with Darín's characters on and off the screen have constituted, as mentioned earlier, essential pieces of the puzzle of Darín's star status. Additionally, it should be considered that actual images are also key elements of his star configuration because a film star is above all an idealized visual representation. This is probably one of the most frequent areas analyzed in stardom studies. From the early days of the cinematographer, when the Edison Company put its actors' pictures in popular magazines as publicity for its productions (Staiger 1991: 2-17) through to the present, images have been at the centre of the star system.

The study of the pictures published in Spanish newspapers and magazines to promote a film that includes Darín as part of the cast, demonstrates a tendency to select a medium-shot frame of the actor's face and body. This is not only a common practice in general media but also in the specialized film magazines and journals (see Figure 1). Even though they do not have a sensationalist style whereby body postures and fashion are the main elements used to attract the reader's attention, Darín's image is still used to illustrate the texts because he has become the embodiment of certain social meanings and values which have come to characterize the productions he works on. By becoming an emblem of national celebrity that invites desires and identification, Darín has also become a brand that goes beyond the film texts. This is particularly evident in the activities in which he has been recently invited to participate.

In November 2012, the men's fashion magazine *Esquire* portrayed a close up of Darín in a 'total Armani look' on its front cover, with a subheading that read: 'Con este *chavón*, fijo que nos iríamos de cañas... [We would definitely go for a drink with this bloke...]' and then, on the folded interior cover appeared another close-up shot of Darín with a more cunning look on his face and the tagline: 'Y con este *gauchito*, se iría tu madre, tu hermana, tu chica, tu suegra, tu vecina... ¡y hasta tu ex! [And with this chap, your mother, your sister, your girl, your mother-in-law, your neighbour...even your ex! ...would go out, too]' (see Figure 2). The two pictures are also accompanied by two different quotations in very small letters from his character Marcos in *Nueve reinas*. These almost imperceptible excerpts are quite significant: they refer to the trickster's life lessons on how to bend the economy amidst a system in decay right at a time of profound economic crisis in Spain. In fact, one of the answers Darín gave in the short interview for the magazine involved how Argentines are accustomed to crisis and that one thing Spanish people had better learn quickly from them is not to be afraid (Maseres 2012: 188).

If at the time when *Nueve reinas* and *El hijo* were released the stories represented for the Spanish spectator a way of grasping that distant reality, now that their socio-political and economic circumstances are closer to the ones portrayed in those films, Darín acquires a new dimension. For this reason, his star status continues to grow and consolidate. Along these lines, Gledhill's thoughts should be considered when she said that 'stars offer not fixed meanings nor role models but a focus in the continuous production and struggle to define and redefine desires, meanings and identities' (1991: xvii). Darín manages to keep reinventing himself amidst changing socio-political and economic realities on both sides of the Atlantic. This capacity to adapt to new situations has caused a diversion of the public attention from his fictional

roles to his persona, and that can be perceived in his stellar show in sites like *Esquire*. Moreover, in November 2012 he was also chosen to be the face of the marketing campaign ‘Selecta XV’ for the Spanish beer brand *San Miguel* (see Figure 3), which focused precisely on his off-screen character. His body posture and quoted phrase reflect Darín’s typical ease, taking advantage of his well-known ‘guy-next-door’ charisma.

Billboards are another particular case to consider when analyzing Darín’s images. For his first films shown in Spain, images of landscapes with allegorical connotations to the film’s plot were used. From *Nueve reinas* onward Darín himself became an essential element of the image composition on billboards, instead of such general shots. To understand the level of public recognition he has reached in Spain, the most significant case in recent years is the marketing campaign for *Una pistola en cada mano*. The billboards that appeared in tube stations, bus stops, and the printing press in general (see Figure 4) portrayed his face in the middle of a fragmented collage of pictures of all the cast members. His image was not only considerably larger than the rest, but also placed at a strategic focal point. This image composition was done in such a way that any passers-by would focus first on Darín’s face and then, if that caught their attention, right next to him appear other famous Spanish actors of the time, including one of the most popular, Luis Tosar, who completes the campaign and seals the attraction deal with potential spectators. Following this eye-catching-stars idea, most newspapers and magazines used a frame of Darín and Tosar chatting on a park bench to illustrate their film reviews. Nevertheless, it is quite peculiar that, in spite of basing a great deal of its advertising campaign on Darín’s image, the famous film magazine *Caimán Cuadernos de Cine* (formerly *Cahiers du Cinema España*) opted to illustrate the review of the film with an image of the five Spanish male protagonists and to

mention that ‘sus diferentes partes se construyen como duelos interpretativos, generalmente satisfactorios aunque no siempre del todo igualados, protagonizados en su mayoría por cómplices habituales de Gay, figuras consagradas del cine español [its different parts are constructed as interpretative duets, generally satisfactory although not always totally equal, principally starring Gay’s usual associates, acclaimed figures of Spanish cinema]’ (Estrada 2012: 52). The fact that those figures also included Argentine actors like Darín and Sbaraglia seems to be of no importance to them, perhaps due to these actors’ naturalization within the Spanish performing scenery. Needless to say, billboards have been a key element in the star system (Tranche 1994: 135-145) and for this reason they deserve further analysis in future articles on Darín’s Spanish stardom.⁷ This succinct survey only has the objective of giving a first look at another key component of his local success.

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Stars are products of mass culture and, as such, they are social signs that carry cultural meaning and ideological values (Gledhill 1991: xi). For this reason, it should be noted that talking about a film star is also talking about the system that produces and embraces this star (Sánchez-Biosca and Benet 1994: 5; McDonald 2000). Accordingly, this article has briefly mapped out how Ricardo Darín rose to stardom in Spanish film culture, and thus the analysis has looked at the host country’s socio-economic circumstances. By doing so, this article has examined how the achievement of that star status has reflected the peninsula’s social imaginary at a time of intense migratory flow. Additionally, the other aspects mentioned, which are intimately connected with that context, such as the industry’s dynamics, the strong network of actors, the characterization and the diegetic

⁷ Please see further analysis on this subject in Garavelli (2013).

stories, have also tried to demonstrate the complexities involved in Darín's star-image construction. Accordingly, this article serves as a first step towards further research on each of the themes involved in the study of this specific Latin American star. Now that a deep economic crisis is affecting Spain, resembling that of Argentina in 2001 when *El hijo de la novia* and *Nueve reinas* reached theatres, more similarities and empathic connections can be drawn between the two countries and more reasons can be given as to why Darín's image continues to grow stronger.

Since the year 2000, Argentine cinema has been experiencing what many historians have recognized as its Golden Age within the Spanish film scene (Elena 2011: 31). By the time this article was written, the film *Tesis sobre un homicidio* was released in Argentina and had almost immediately a celebrated formal presentation in Casa de América in Madrid on 5 of March 2013. Its enormous box-office success in Argentina, mainly attributed in the local press to Darín's leading role (Clarín 2013; Bellón 2013), had an equal response in the Iberian Peninsula. All the elements analyzed in this article coincided here: co-production, distribution, publicity and Darín looking as sharp as ever. As it can be appreciated through the multiple projects he is currently working on between the two countries, Darín's stardom is conquering Spain.

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Release Dates in Argentina/ in Spain	Production	Title of Film	Director	Distributor	Box Office Results: Income/Spectators
1993/ 20 th of May 1994	Argentina	<i>Perdido por perdido</i>	Alberto Lecchi	VHERO FILMS S.A.	50.416,74 €/ 18.073
1998/ 22 nd of May 1998	Argentina, Spain	<i>El faro</i> (in Spain: <i>El faro del sur</i>)	Eduardo Mignogna	PRIME FILMS S.L.	464.740,55 €/ 123.591
1999/ 19 th of July 2002	Argentina	<i>El mismo amor, la misma lluvia</i>	Juan José Campanella	ALTA CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL.	2.804.629,26 €/ 609.566
2000/ 23 rd August 2001	Argentina	<i>Nueve reinas</i>	Fabián Bielinsky	ALTA CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL.	2.257.369,85 €/ 475.058
2001/ 11 th October 2001	Argentina, Spain	<i>La fuga</i>	Eduardo Mignogna	WANDA VISION, S.A.	50.103,09 €/ 12.432
2001/ 23 rd November 2001	Argentina, Spain	<i>El hijo de la novia</i>	Juan José Campanella	ALTA CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL.	7.231.323,19 €/ 1.575.039
2001/ 11 th October 2002	Argentina	<i>Samy y yo</i> (in Spain: <i>Un tipo corriente</i>)	Eduardo Milewicz	FLINS Y PINICULAS,S.L.	748.950,15 €/ 160.975
2002/ 29 th November 2002	Argentina, Spain	<i>Kamchatka</i>	Marcelo Piñeyro	HISPANO FOX FILM S.A.	2.983.604,50 €/ 628.099
2004/ 4 th November 2004	Argentina, Spain	<i>Luna de Avellaneda</i>	Juan José Campanella	ALTA CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL.	1.738.036,39 €/ 346.654
2005/ 21 st October 2005	Argentina, Spain	<i>El aura</i>	Fabián Bielinsky	ALTA CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL.	397.883,37 €/ 79.125
2006/ 21 st June 2006	Argentina, Spain, Portugal, France	<i>La educación de las hadas</i>	José Luis Cuerda	ALTA CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL.	1.865.842,40 €/ 353.923
2007/ 21 st December 2007	Argentina, Spain	<i>XXY</i>	Lucía Puenzo	WANDA VISION, S.A	237.209,70 €/ 43.840
2007/ 5 th October 2007	Argentina, Spain	<i>La señal</i>	Ricardo Darín y Martín Hodara	WANDA VISION, S.A	214.696,59 €/ 38.214
2009/ 25 th September 2009	Argentina, Spain	<i>El secreto de sus ojos</i>	Juan José Campanella	ALTA CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL.	6.306.339,97 €/ 1.033.740
2009/ 24 th September 2009	Spain	<i>El baile de la Victoria</i>	Fernando Trueba	VERTICE CINE, S.L.	1.415.112,12 €/ 234.708
2010/ 22 September 2010	Argentina	<i>Carancho</i>	Pablo Trapero	GOLEM DISTRIBUCION S.L.	660.119,18 €/ 105.211
2011/	Argentina,	<i>Un cuento</i>	Sebastián	ALTA	2.284.050,23 €/

17 th June 2011	Spain	<i>chino</i>	Borensztein	CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL	353.511
2011/ 1 st June 2012	Argentina, Spain	<i>En fuera de juego</i>	David Marqués	A CONTRA- CORRIENTE FILMS S.L.	179.643,65 €/ 33.270
2012/ 13 th July 2012	Argentina, Spain, France	<i>Elefante blanco</i>	Pablo Trapero	ALTA CLASSICS S.L UNIPERSONAL	1.002.614,81 €/ 156.999
2012/ 5th December 2012	Spain	<i>Una pistola en cada mano</i>	Cesc Gay	CASTELAO PICTURES, S.L.	1.911.285,51 €/ 265.558
January 2013/5th March 2013	Argentina, Spain	<i>Tesis sobre un homicidio</i>	Hernán Golfrid	TORNASOL FILMS S.A.	1.528.759,43 €/ 217.104

Table 1: Films starring Darín released in Spain. Further information on this is available online at the Spanish Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (ICCA). Accessed 9th September 2013.