



## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF MIGRANTS IN SPANISH CINEMA (2021–2024)

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### KEYWORDS

*Migration  
Cinematic  
representation  
Spanish cinema  
Stereotypes and  
prejudice*

### ABSTRACT

*The representation of immigration in post-pandemic Spanish cinema shows that, despite the increase in narratives about migration, these continue to be anchored in stereotypes and paternalistic ideas that strip immigrants of their real identity. This research proposes a specific taxonomy to analyse a sample of fiction films (2021-2024) featuring migrant characters. Applying the taxonomy shows that, although migrant diversity in Spanish cinema has grown, its centrality, complexity and prominence continue to lack representation in line with the demographic composition of today's society, maintaining obsolete narratives that are unrepresentative of reality.*

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Received: 29/ 10 /2025

Accepted: 04/ 12 / 2025

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the representation of diversity in the audiovisual media has become a key line of research in cultural studies, especially with regard to how cinema and television reflect—or distort—social reality. Although there are numerous studies that have addressed the treatment of diversity in Spanish cinema from the perspective of gender, sexual orientation or functional disparity, the specific representation of immigration—and particularly the racialisation of migrant characters—has received uneven attention, despite its growing relevance in the public sphere.

Since the late 1990s, Spanish film production has shown a gradual openness to themes that reflect contemporary social concerns (Raya Bravo, 2019). In this context, the representation of immigration has been incorporated, albeit to a limited extent, into plots and characters, and is often associated with situations of marginalisation, conflict or exclusion (Castiello, 2006).

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO, 2002) defines diversity as a structural principle of humanity, encompassing dimensions such as ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and disability, among others. This definition sets an ethical and political standard that directly challenges audiovisual production, especially in countries with growing cultural plurality such as Spain.

Despite progress, the most recent reports from the Observatory of Diversity in Audiovisual Media (ODA, 2023) reveal that the representation of migrant characters in Spanish films and series remains marginal and stereotypical. Although the number of productions incorporating diverse characters has increased by 20%, only 12.3% of the main characters are racialised, and they often lack narrative depth or are displaced by white protagonists. Furthermore, only a minority of these narratives really focus on the integration or life experience of these people.

Based on this diagnosis, the following article proposes to analyse how immigration is represented in Spanish cinema between 2021 and 2024, a period marked by tensions around national identity, border management and the growing visibility of anti-immigration discourse (Buraschi, y Aguilar-Idáñez, 2023; De Lucas, 2025; García González, 2022; Jubany y Lázaro, 2020).

The aim is to produce a critical analysis of these representations, examining both their presence and their quality—the construction of the physical, psychological and personality traits of migrant characters—as well as their role within narrative structures. The initial hypothesis suggests that, although there are a greater number of productions that include migrant characters, their construction remains anchored in stereotypes and paternalistic narratives, without giving them prominence or real agency.

To test this hypothesis, the objectives of this research are set out. The main objective is to analyse the representation of minorities in Spanish cinema after the pandemic, by measuring the importance of migrant characters in cinematic diegesis and taking into account whether the number of migrant characters is stable. In addition, a distinction will be made between the different ethnic groups that make up migration in Spain.

The following secondary objectives are proposed:

- To analyse the inclusion of migrant diversity in Spanish cinema.
- To review the evolution of representation regulations in Spain, with the introduction of diversity clauses or open castings, among other measures.
- To present the taxonomy chosen for the study of the representation of minorities and use it to analyse the films in the sample.
- Present the results of the analysis of the representation of diversity according to the chosen methodology, taking into account the importance of the characters in the story or the chosen film genre, among other issues.
- Propose conclusions about the evolution of diverse reality in Spanish cinema after the pandemic.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Evolution of the Inclusion of Diversity in Spanish Fiction

The representation of diversity in Spanish audiovisual fiction has evolved slowly since the 1990s, although it continues to suffer from structural deficiencies in terms of the real and non-stereotypical inclusion of racialised groups and social minorities. For decades, the dominant narrative has perpetuated homogeneous imaginaries, privileging white, cisgender, normative characters belonging to

the urban middle classes. Despite the consolidation of an increasingly multicultural society, Spanish audiovisual production has not accurately reflected this complex reality.

Research such as that by Argote (2003) already warned that only one in four Spanish films released in Madrid between 2000 and 2002 included foreign characters. Shortly afterwards, Castiello (2006) identified three recurring themes surrounding migrant characters in Spanish cinema: the phenomenon of migration, rejection/violence, and coexistence. All of these themes generally focus on conflict rather than integration or plurality of identity.

Despite some narrative and aesthetic advances, migrant characters continue to appear in marginal or secondary roles. Authors such as Van Dijk (2007) warned of the prejudicial and negative nature of their representation, generally linked to crime, marginalisation, or job insecurity. These characters are often portrayed as being in an irregular situation, without a voice of their own in the plots, or instrumentalised as a dramatic resource to highlight social or political tension.

The case of immigrant women deserves specific mention. According to studies such as that by Castagnani and Colorado Román (2009), their representation is inscribed in stereotypes of passivity, victimisation or normative transgression. More recent research, such as that by Marcos-Ramos, et al. (2022), shows that migrant women in mainstream Spanish series have little narrative weight and suffer double marginalisation: for being women and for being foreigners. When they do appear, they tend to perform unskilled jobs (cleaning, caregiving, street vending) and in many cases are portrayed as passive beneficiaries of the "goodwill" of the host society.

As noted in the report by the Observatory of Diversity in the Audiovisual Media (ODA, 2023), only 12.3% of characters in Spanish films and series are racialised, and most of them are white Latinos. An analysis of television series reveals a greater presence of male migrant characters, while films include more female migrants. By ethnicity, Latino characters are the most represented (44.6%), followed by Arabs (33.7%) and Blacks (18.4%). The Roma and Asian communities remain virtually invisible in Spanish audiovisual media.

These data reveal a partial, biased and polarised representation, where stories featuring racialised or migrant characters continue to be marginal or subsidiary to the central plots, which feature white and native characters. Furthermore, the narrative of social integration is conspicuous by its absence, perpetuating an exclusionary and unrepresentative view of the real diversity of today's Spanish society.

## **2.2. Immigration in Spanish Fiction: Evolution and Limits**

Since the release of *Letters from Alou* (Montxo Armendáriz, 1990), considered a pioneering work in the thematisation of immigration in Spanish cinema, the phenomenon of migration has been intermittently present in national fiction, but almost always from a problematic, welfare-oriented or paternalistic perspective. The predominant narrative tends to portray migrants as passive subjects, victims of the system or sources of conflict, and rarely as active protagonists of their own stories or agents with narrative autonomy (Argote, 2003; Castiello, 2006).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, many films addressed immigration from the perspective of cultural shock or marginalisation, as in *Bwana* (Imanol Uribe, 1996), *Poniente* (Chus Gutiérrez, 2002) or *Return to Hansala* (Chus Gutiérrez, 2008), where migrant characters are often linked to contexts of violence, poverty or administrative irregularity.

This type of cinema was called "immigration cinema" (Basu, 2011) and reflected the emergence of the phenomenon of mass immigration in Spain, a shocking issue in a country that had historically been a massive expeller of migrants, not a receiver. An event of this nature, but above all of this magnitude, could not fail to be told by documentary or fiction cinema and, moreover, it was linked to the existing inertia in the most relevant European filmographies on this type of story (Elena, 2005).

One fact is worth noting: the narratives always addressed different aspects of immigration as their central theme, also reflecting, albeit to a lesser extent, the immersion of migrants as an active part of society (Elena, 2005). In other words, there was much talk about migrants arriving, but not so much about migrants who had already settled. Obviously, the epic journey is much more cinematic and exciting.

What did seem to be missing was the appearance of migrant characters in more *mainstream* storytelling, in films that were far removed from these themes, which is a relevant issue for the research at hand. However, a paradoxical fact emerges: this type of cinema sought to reflect the multiculturalism and diversity of new societies but had the unexpected consequence of repeating stereotypes about migration (Tello Díaz, 2025).

It is also worth considering the characterisations of migrants reflected in this type of cinema. Although there are notable works on female immigration, such as *Return to Hansala* (Chus Gutiérrez, 2008) and *Flowers from Another World* (Icía Bollaín, 1999), stories with male protagonists are predominant with a lower Female representation (Corral Rey y Sandulescu Bulea, 2022; López, 2023; Yébenes Cortés, 2022).

Furthermore, the way in which migrant women are represented reveals a double subordination: by gender and by origin, according to a recent analysis by Tello Díaz (2025). As Castagnani and Colorado (2009) have pointed out, their presence in Spanish cinema is often reduced to stereotypical roles as carers, domestic workers or victims of trafficking, with little narrative development or psychological depth. In many cases, these women are subject to the gaze and redemptive action of the white, native character, who acts as a saviour or intermediary for their integration. Recent studies such as that by Marcos-Ramos et al. (2022) confirm that migrant women rarely achieve a position of autonomy or leadership within the plots, being represented as passive or dependent figures. As analysed by Cvetkovic and Pantic (2018), racialised women tend to be associated with reproductive tasks (care, cleaning, domestic work), experiences of victimisation (violence, trafficking, poverty) or functional roles in the main protagonist's plot, rarely with their own agency or narrative voice.

With regard to stereotypes, the variable "Presence of negative or positive stereotypes" requires clarification. A negative stereotype is understood to be the repetition of simplified and harmful images about a group (e.g., criminal, passive victim, servant). A positive stereotype is understood to be the representation of socially valued characteristics which, although associated with a specific group, reinforce desirable attributes such as solidarity, generosity, perseverance or intelligence. However, a positive stereotype is still simplistic and can limit the complexity of the character if used as the only form of characterisation.

A critical element to bear in mind is that many of these characters are constructed from a logic of exotic otherness or functional otherness. In other words, their presence serves more to heighten tension or enrich the plots of white and Spanish characters than to develop their own story arcs. This narrative instrumentalisation reinforces a model of symbolic but not substantive inclusion, where diversity is presented as a 'decoration' of reality.

The diversity represented does not yet reflect the complexity of today's Spanish society, either in terms of cultural plurality or narrative agency. Significant challenges remain in the construction of authentic, diverse characters that are far removed from stereotypes, as well as in the real incorporation of actors and actresses from migrant backgrounds in the roles that represent them.

### 3. Methodology: Taxonomy and Sample

The proposed methodology has been developed specifically for this work, focusing more on qualitative issues regarding the relevance of characters in the narrative than on quantitative issues, although some questions of this nature are included, but always to reinforce the information obtained from the qualitative variables.

The qualitative variables chosen and the reason for their selection are presented below:

- Geographical/national origin of migrant characters. A broad geographical categorisation will be used to facilitate quick identification, avoiding specific nuances of nationality which, although they would add richness to the analysis, would make the study excessively complex and exceed the limitations of the publication. Thus, terms such as Maghreb, Latin American, sub-Saharan or Eastern European will be used, which will allow the diversity of origins to be examined in a manner appropriate to the objectives of the study.
- Roles and professions of migrant characters. In this area, we also use more or less general characterisations that encompass most of the professions and roles present in the films. Categories such as manual labourer, student, skilled professional, criminal, and victim or victim are established. This typology allows for an examination of stereotypes, perceptions constructed in the collective imagination through Spanish cinema, and the diversity of roles assigned to characters.
- Main language spoken by migrant characters. This item seeks to determine whether there is room for migrants' mother tongues if they are not Spanish, and whether there is contempt or discrimination due to different accents.

- Social and political context of the representation. The aim here is to find out whether the films address issues of racism, xenophobia, migration or reception policies, dissecting social reality through film representation.
- Narratives associated with migrant characters. This item allows us to explore whether diegetic narratives address issues related to migration, such as integration, cultural conflict, labour exploitation, the search for opportunities, or return to the country of origin. It is also possible that these themes do not appear, either because the films are not interested in addressing them or because the migrant characters do not play a relevant role in the development of the action.
- Narrative perspective. This point delves into the question of how the story of migrants is told in the action, that is, whether they narrate their own story or are the subject of the narration. This allows the characters to be constructed from either an internal or external perspective.
- Depth and complexity of migrant characters. In line with the previous point, the aim here is to examine the importance of migrant characters themselves, through their motivations and backgrounds. It is a question of observing the quality of the character, so to speak, noting whether their characterisation is flat or multidimensional.
- Relationships between migrant characters and other characters. Continuing with the idea of integration, this section analyses the relationship and degree of integration between migrant and non-migrant characters, observing social interaction. This allows us to determine whether migrant characters are isolated or integrated into the plot.
- Presence of negative or positive stereotypes: This variable identifies the repetition or subversion of common stereotypes associated with migration and migrants.
  - 1) Negative stereotype: simplified and harmful images that reinforce prejudices (e.g., criminal, passive victim, servant).
  - 2) Positive stereotype: socially valued characteristics that, although associated with a specific group, reinforce desirable attributes such as solidarity, generosity, intelligence, or perseverance. It should be noted that, although positive, these stereotypes also simplify reality and can limit the complexity of the character.
- Agency and voice of migrant characters: An assessment is made of whether the characters drive the narrative through their decisions and actions. From a narrative perspective, agency is understood as the character's ability to:
  - 1) Make their own decisions that affect the plot.
  - 2) Influence the development of the story and other characters.
  - 3) Express their own voice or perspective within the narrative.
  - 4) This allows us to distinguish characters with active roles from those who simply react to the decisions of others.
- Representation of diversity within the migrant community. This variable aims to see if there is a single representation or several within the film. It also allows us to see if there are stereotypes based on place of origin, gender or social class. To do this, differences in gender, age, socioeconomic status, etc. within the migrant characters are taken into account, studying the homogenisation or heterogenisation of the community.

To the above, some quantitative questions have been added, such as:

- Frequency of appearance of migrant characters (and their nationality of origin, for example) in both leading and supporting roles.
- Percentage of migrant characters in leading roles in relation to the total cast of leading characters.

Once the criteria for analysis have been defined, the sample is presented. Twenty films, five per year, have been taken from the list of Spanish productions released between 2021 and 2024, just after the pandemic.

The films were selected based on box office and audience figures in Spain recorded by the Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (ICAA) during those years. For each year, the five films with the highest box office takings that include migrant characters have been chosen, starting with the film with the highest takings and working down the list. The aim is to create a sample that is as objective and unbiased as possible.

The following criteria were taken into account in the selection:

- The decision was made to focus on fictional films, excluding series, documentaries and animations. In the first case, this was due to the difficulty of objectively measuring their impact

given the diversity of platforms; in the second, because they are different modes of representation that would make comparison difficult.

- In the case of films that appear on the list in two consecutive years, they have been considered within the year in which they achieved the highest box office takings.
- Period films have been excluded, even when they include migrant characters, as they are considered to offer a portrayal that is far removed from the contemporary perspective that guides this article.
- A migrant character has been considered to be a person who is a newcomer or was not born in Spain. In the case of characters adopted at birth, they have been considered Spanish citizens regardless of their ethnicity or origin.
- Films depicting Spanish migrants in other countries, such as *The Blue Star* (2023) and *Upon Entry* (2022), have also been excluded.
- On the other hand, *Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea* (2021) and *A Moroccan Affair* (2023) have been included. Although they take place almost entirely on the island of Lesbos and in Morocco, respectively, both films begin in Spain and are approached from a Spanish perspective.
- As an exception, *Father There is Only One 3* (2022) —the highest-grossing film of its year— has been replaced by the fourth instalment of the saga, released in 2024, which is also among the highest-grossing films. It was considered that both share the same elements in terms of migrant characters and that it was sufficient to include one of them.

**Table 1.** Sample of selected films

Year	Films	Directors	Revenue	Genre
2021	<i>Adú</i>	Salvador Calvo	Box office takings: €6,130,931.92 Audience: 1,048,253	Drama
	<i>Way Down</i>	Jaume Balagueró	Box office: €6,048,845.32 Audience: 953,369	Thriller
	<i>The Good Boss</i>	Fernando León de Aranoa	Box office takings: €4,229,812.97 Audience: 676,233	Comedy
	<i>García y García</i>	Ana Murugarren	Box office takings: €985,208.15 Audience: 174,380	Comedy
	<i>Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea</i>	Marcel Barrena	Box office takings: €510,132.90 Audience: 86,208	Drama
2022	<i>Alcarràs</i>	Carla Simón	Box office takings: €2,364,788.04 Audience: 403,161	Drama
	<i>On the Fringe</i>	Juan Diego Botto	Box office: €1,122,686.67 Audience: 183,376	Social drama
	<i>Code Name: Emperor</i>	Jorge Coira	Box office: €975,593.00 Audience: 159,365	Thriller
	<i>Vasil</i>	Avelina Prat	Box office: €254,685.77 Audience: 45,739	Drama
	<i>Suro (Cork)</i>	Mikel Gurrea	Box office takings: €155,004.39 Audience: 27,309	Drama
2023	<i>A Moroccan Affair</i>	Álvaro Fernández Armero	Box office takings: €12,892,220.33 Audience: 1,895,663	Comedy
	<i>The Beasts</i>	Rodrigo Saragoien	Box office: €7,022,837.25 Audience: 1,112,098	Thriller
	<i>All the Names of God</i>	Daniel Carpasoro	Box office: €961,175.21 Audience: 169,816	Thriller
	<i>Chinas: A Second-Generation Story</i>	Arantxa Echevarría	Box office takings: €497,019.55 Audience: 83,783	Drama
	<i>The Maid</i>	Pablo Moreno	Box office takings: €105,999.50 Audience: 18,577	Drama
2024	<i>Father There is Only One 4</i>	Santiago Segura	Box office takings: €13,278,669.15 Audience: 2,154,754	Comedy
	<i>I Hate Summer</i>	Fer García Ruiz	Box office takings: €5,158,277.77 Audience: 810,766	Comedy
	<i>Unce Trouble</i>	Joaquín Mazón	Box office takings: €4,052,551.71 Audience: 622,006	Comedy
	<i>Checkmates</i>	Nacho García Velilla	Box office: €2,512,606.78 Audience: 384,524	Comedy

<i>Tell Me What You Want</i>	Lucía Alemany	Box office takings: €2,104,438.40 Audience: 306,903	Drama
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Source: Prepared by authors (2026).

#### 4. Quantitative Analysis

The corpus of films released between 2021 and 2024 allows us to identify quantitative patterns in the representation of migrant characters. In order to systematise the observation, three main variables have been used:

1. Number of migrant characters in secondary and leading roles, a key indicator for assessing whether migrants access central positions in the narrative or remain relegated to secondary roles.
2. Percentage of migrants in leading roles compared to the total number of protagonists in the film, which will allow us to detect the presence of migrants in terms of point of view.
3. Nationality of migrants—both protagonists and secondary characters—a necessary piece of information for detecting the presence of migrants in Spanish productions.
4. Genre of the films (see Table 1), a necessary piece of information for assessing the differences in the representation of migrants and nationality depending on the nature of the productions.

The following table summarises this data, providing a comparative overview that allows us to appreciate both the frequency of appearance and the level of narrative centrality of migrant characters in recent Spanish cinema. For this study, a "protagonist" will be considered, according to David Bordwell's definition (2008:33), to be the character whose actions and goals organise the dramatic arc of the film; the narrative tends to privilege their point of view, and the outcome is measured by their fate. The percentage of migrant protagonists has been calculated in relation to the total number of protagonists in the film, without considering secondary characters.

**Table 2.** Quantitative analysis of the representation of migrant characters in 20 Spanish films with the highest box office takings (2021–2024)

Film	Frequency of appearance		Representation as a percentage of total protagonists	Nationality of migrants
	Migrant protagonists	Secondary migrants		
Adú (2021)	1	2	33	Cameroon
Way Down (2021)	2	1	40	England
The Good Boss (2021)	-	1	0	Morocco
García y García (2021)	-	2	0	China, Brazil
Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea (2021)	-	2	0	Syria
Alcarràs (2022)	-	1	0	Mali
On the Fringe (2022)	-	2	0	Morocco, Argentina
Code Name: Emperor (2022)	-	2	0	Philippines, Ukraine
Vasil (2022)	1	1	50	Bulgaria, England
Suro (Cork) (2022)	-	1	0	Morocco
A Moroccan Affair (2023)	1	10	25	Morocco
The Beasts (2023)	2	1	100	France
All the Names of God (2023)	1	3	33	Morocco
Chinas: A Second-Generation Story (2023)	2	2	66	China
The Maid (2023)	1	1	50	Ukraine
Father There is Only One 4 (2024)	-	1	0	Peru
I Hate Summer (2024)	-	1	0	Philippines
Uncle Trouble (2024)	-	8	0	China, Morocco, Mali, Colombia, Mexico.
Checkmates (2024)	-	1	0	China
Tell Me What You Want (2024)	1	4	50	Germany

Source: Prepared by authors, (2025)

#### 4.1. Analysis of the Estimated Percentage of Secondary Migrant Characters and Protagonists

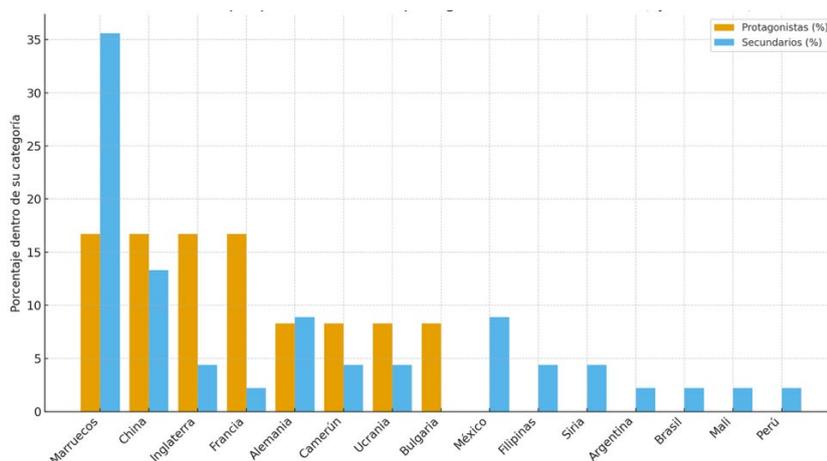
Based on the data collected in Table 2, there are 59 migrant characters: 47 secondary and 12 protagonists. This means that only 1 in 5 migrant characters with representation occupy a leading role—20.3% of the total— while 79.7% appear in secondary or supporting roles. More than half of the corpus does not give prominence to migrants: 11 out of 20 films have 0% migrant protagonists. Even so, half of the set—45%, corresponding to 9 films—does include a migrant protagonist; the average percentage of protagonists per film is 22.4%, but this figure is skewed by a few titles with high centrality.

In terms of narrative configuration, two patterns predominate. On the one hand, there is an accumulation of migrant supporting characters in comedies/family films with large audiences (*e.g.*, titles with 8–10 migrant supporting characters, such as *A Moroccan Affair* and *Uncle Trouble*) that do not transfer this volume to the dramatic centre. On the other hand, there is a minority of works that do shift the point of view towards migrant characters, with high percentages of protagonism: 100% in *The Beasts*, 66% in *Chinas: A Second Generation Story*, 50% in *Vasil, The Maid* and *Tell Me What You Want*, 40% in *Way Down* and 33% in *Adú* and *All the Names of God*.

In short, the representation of migrants in recent Spanish cinema exists and is visible, but it is mostly peripheral: migrants appear frequently, but they are not usually the ones who drive the narrative. When they do, the impact is notable, but still discontinuous and dependent on a few titles.

#### 4.2. Analysis of the Presence of Migrant Protagonists and Secondary Characters by Country

Image 1. Origin by country: protagonists vs. secondary characters



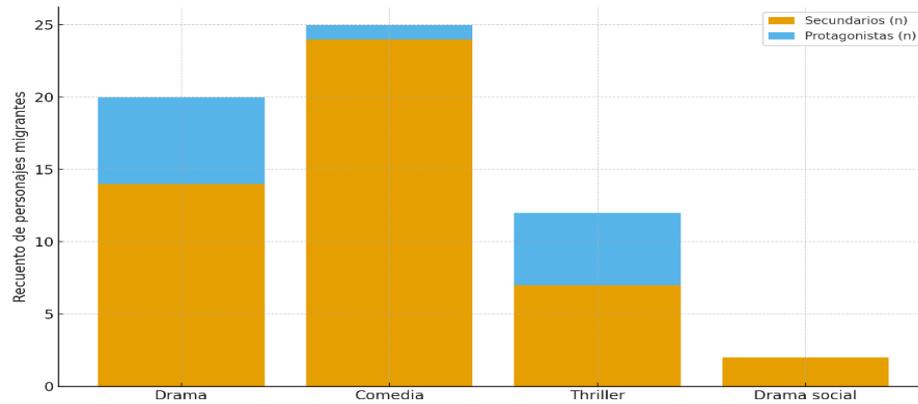
Source: Elaborated by the authors (2025).

Image 1 reveals that when the point of view shifts to a migrant, it is usually a case of "close" migration or migration perceived as equal (white, Western European), as in *The Beasts* (France), *Way Down* (England) or even *Vasil* (Bulgaria). This centrality occurs in conflicts "between equals" and with narrative agency. There are notable exceptions—*Chinas: A Second-Generation Story*, *The Maid*, *Adú*—but they confirm the exceptional nature of the case.

In contrast, the periphery focuses on origins associated with the working classes and racialisation, with Morocco and Africa in general as a large "pool" of secondary characters —*The Good Boss*, *Suro (Cork)*, *Alcarràs*, *All the Names of God*, *Uncle Trouble*— and China —*García y García*, *Uncle Trouble*, *Checkmates*— occupying the second tier. These characters sustain the diegetic world and rarely move the plot forward. In short, recent cinema combines visible diversity with selective centrality: prominence for "close" or "prestigious" migration, and an abundance of migrants in more precarious situations on the margins.

### 4.3. Representation of Migrants by Film Genre

Image 2. Percentage of migrants by film genre



Source: elaborated by the authors (2025).

Finally, the examination shows that the representation of migrant characters varies significantly depending on the film genre. The results confirm that genre distribution has a decisive influence on the representation of migrants.

Drama and thriller are the only genres that give migrant characters a relatively central narrative space, allowing them to take centre stage and thus offering them psychological depth. However, if we cross-reference genres with origin (image 2), differences emerge. In thrillers, migrant protagonists are associated with "close" European migration: of the five migrant protagonists in the genre, four are Western Europeans—the English in *Way Down*, the French in *The Beasts*—compared to one Moroccan in *All the Names of God*. Foreignness here functions as competitive parity—rival, accomplice, or antagonist capable of disputing power—rather than as a mark of precariousness.

Drama shows another logic: approximately 30% of its migrants are protagonists and almost two-thirds of the dramas listed include one, but—unlike the thriller—the centrality is distributed towards non-hegemonic experiences: *Chinas: A Second-Generation Story* (Chinese migration), *Adú* (sub-Saharan African migration) or *Vasil* and *The Maid* (Eastern European migration). In other words, drama shifts the focus to plots involving language, roots or class, where foreignness does imply structural inequality and emotional displacement.

At the opposite extreme, comedy has the highest number of migrant characters—25 of the total corpus—but almost all of them are on the periphery: only approximately 4% of migrants in the genre become protagonists, and barely 1 in 8 comedies gives them that role. These data reveal how comedy uses migrants in a peripheral way, which can easily contribute to stereotypes and cultural clichés without giving them a voice of their own.

Thus, quantitative analysis reveals that, beyond numerical presence, access to leading roles and role diversity remains severely limited and conditioned by the narrative codes of each genre.

## 5. Qualitative Analysis

### 5.1. Geographical/National Origin of Migrant Characters

As can be seen in the quantitative analysis, the sample of films reveals a certain limitation in the diversity of origins of the migrant groups represented. Most of the characters come from Africa—mainly Morocco or sub-Saharan Africa—and, as we will see below, their roles are usually limited to manual and subordinate work. The second most portrayed group is Latin American migrants, followed by characters of Chinese, Filipino and Ukrainian origin. As in the case of Africans, Latin American characters tend to perform precarious jobs linked to labour exploitation.

In contrast, characters from the United States and Western Europe (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria) constitute a minority group, characterised by non-forced migration and generally represented in less problematic terms.

Although narratives of new arrivals or those in transit predominate, there is a significant number of films that include second-generation characters. This is the case with the descendants of Moroccan families in *All the Names of God* (2023), the three protagonists of *Chinas: A Second-Generation Story* (2023), the children of Chinese and African descent in *Checkmates* (2024), and the children of different

origins—Mexico, Colombia, China, Morocco, and Mali—who make up *Uncle Trouble* (2024), whose place of birth is not specified.

## 5.2. Roles and Professions of Migrant Characters

Maghrebi and Latin American characters appear as labourers in the scale factory in *The Good Boss* (2021) or in the anchovy cannery in *A Moroccan Affair* (2023). While the men work in construction, factories or seasonal fruit picking, the women tend to work in cleaning and domestic service. Rosaura (Wendy Ramos), of Peruvian origin, is employed by the main family in *Father There is Only One 3 and 4* (2022, 2024). Similarly, the Filipino characters in *Code Name: Emperor* (2022) and *I Hate Summer* (2024) are domestic workers in wealthy households, as is Lera (Carolina Aller), the central character in *The Maid* (2023).

These jobs are not only precarious, but often lack contracts and any labour protection, especially among the African community. Such is the case of Badia (Somaya Taoufiki) in *On the Fringe* (2022), forced to take time off due to irregular hours and on the verge of losing custody of her daughter Selma (Salma Naim Annaassi). The manager of the nightclub where she works refuses to recognise her as an employee, highlighting her irregular situation.

The absence of a contract is also central to the seasonal workers in *Alcarràs* (2022), where Quimet (Jordi Pujol), after receiving the news that he will have to leave the land his family has farmed for generations in order to save costs, fires the seasonal workers—mostly North Africans—in the middle of the street and without documentation. The same problem is accentuated in *Suro (Cork)* (2022), where Ivan (Pol López) discovers that the foreman has subcontracted five Maghrebian day labourers who are not registered. The normalisation of this situation reveals the workers' fear of losing their jobs if they report it.

Chinese migration is represented through work in two contrasting ways. In *Chinas: A Second-Generation Story*, the protagonists' parents work fourteen hours a day in a bazaar that becomes a space of identity from which their daughters seek to escape. In *Checkmates*, Yao's parents (Tuoxin Qiu) also work in a bazaar. In contrast, *García y García* (2020) presents a Chinese executive—accompanied by a Chinese translator—who embodies globalisation and foreign capital capable of rescuing a Spanish airline.

In the case of Europeans and Americans, skilled professions predominate. In *Father There is Only One 4*, American director Dennis Dugan plays himself in a meta-cinematic nod—Dugan's light American comedy is a direct influence on Santiago Segura's cinema. In *Way Down* (2021), the British characters Thom (Freddie Highmore) and Klaus (Axel Stein) are, respectively, a brilliant computer engineer and a logistics specialist. Likewise, Antoine (Denis Ménochet) and Olga (Marina Foïs), in *The Beasts* (2022), represent two French intellectuals who have voluntarily chosen to devote themselves to organic farming in a rural Galician setting that soon proves hostile and contrary to the values that, in a similar way to the protagonists of *Suro (Cork)*—Ivan and Helena (Vicky Luengo)—, they bring with them from the city. Similarly, in *Tell Me What You Want* (2024), the main migrant character, Eric Zimmerman (Mario Ermito), is German and has no employment problems as he is the owner of the company where the Spanish protagonist, Judith Flores (Gabriela Andrada), works.

The case of *Vasil* (2022) is unique. Its Bulgarian protagonist, Vasil (Ivan Barnev), decides to migrate to Spain to find a better life and take his daughter, who remains in Bulgaria, with him. Vasil is a cultured man who is well known in his country, but in Spain he only finds precarious employment as a cook without a contract. Although Bulgaria is part of the European Union, the film highlights how the European periphery also faces stigma and employment barriers, in contrast to the more "visible" migrations from Africa or Latin America.

## 5.3. Languages Used by Migrant Characters

The use of the mother tongue is a recurring narrative device in the sample. In many cases, the migrant characters communicate with each other in their own language, and the language barrier serves as a metaphor for misunderstanding and social distance. In *Suro (Cork)*, Ivan does not understand the complaints of the Maghreb seasonal workers; in *Adú*, communication between Adú, who speaks French, and Massar, who speaks English, is incomplete, but both develop a body language that transcends words. In the comic register, the language barrier is used as a gag, as in the case of the Filipino worker repeatedly insulting her boss in *I Hate Summer* or the Chinese executive who does not speak Spanish in *García y García*.

However, language also operates as a space for intimacy and affection. In *The Maid*, Lera prays in Ukrainian, introducing the language as a spiritual refuge. In *Code Name: Emperor*, Wendy sings to Juan in Filipino after an intimate encounter, revealing her vulnerability. In *Suro (Cork)*, Karim (Ilyass El Ouahdani), the young migrant whom Ivan takes home after seeing the conditions in which he lives, shares a song with Helena, which she repeats after the boy's departure, highlighting the emotional weight of the memory. Language also serves as a bridge between generations in *Alcarràs*, where Boubou teaches little Iris a few words in Bambara, or in *Vasil*, when Alfredo learns Bulgarian terms at the encouragement of his daughter Luisa (Alexandra Jiménez).

It is significant that some films completely ignore the migrants' language of origin, such as *The Good Boss* or *On the Fringe*, where communication takes place exclusively in Spanish, rendering linguistic diversity invisible. In *Tell Me What You Want*, the non-Spanish characters speak Spanish with a strong European accent.

#### **5.4. Social and Political Context of the Plots**

The films in the sample address, to varying degrees, the social and political contexts linked to migration. In *Adú*, the story refers to the dynamics of the border between Africa and Europe, and the violence inflicted on those who try to cross it. In *Vasil*, the difficulty of accessing basic rights highlights the bureaucratic obstacles that prevent integration even within the European Union.

Some productions explicitly set their stories in recent social contexts. *All the Names of God* is inspired by the 2017 attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils; *Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea* recreates the 2014–2015 Syrian refugee crisis in the Aegean Sea; *On the Fringe* addresses the issue of evictions in contemporary Spain, highlighting their impact on the most vulnerable groups, including migrants; *The Maid* deals with recent Ukrainian migration following the war with Russia.

#### **5.5. Narratives Associated with Migrant Characters**

Although in many of the films the phenomenon of migration is not the central plot, the presence of migrant characters reveals recurring narratives linked to labour exploitation and abuse of power (*The Good Boss*, *Alcarràs*, *On the Fringe*, *Code Name: Emperor*, *The Maid*, *I Hate Summer*, *Father There is Only One 3* and *4*). In *Suro (Cork)* and *Vasil*, job insecurity fuels the dramatic conflict and defines the protagonist's arc. The latter also emphasises the difficulty of institutional integration: Vasil repeatedly goes to the authorities without managing to regularise his situation, which highlights the rigidity of Spanish bureaucracy.

Another common narrative in the films in the selection is cultural conflict and associated racism. In *The Beasts*, the confrontation with the local Galicians is exacerbated by the French opposition to the installation of a wind farm. In one of the encounters between Antoine and Xan (Luis Zahera), the latter makes it clear: "It's not fair that your vote is worth the same as mine, because my mother is from here and you're not from here, you're from outside, from France. [...] It's not fair, because you've been here for two years and I've been here for 52." The film shows racism that arises, in this case, both from feelings of inferiority among the locals and from a sense of belonging linked to family and cultural history.

In *Tell Me What You Want*, director Lucía Alemany seeks to present an almost social conflict in which the Spanish working-class protagonist is seduced by her German superior, who takes her on a journey into a much more sophisticated and refined world. If in *The Beasts* there is the aforementioned underlying racism, here it is the very diegesis of the story that has racist connotations, contrasting the simplicity and freshness of the Spanish Judit Flores with the worldly and exquisite German Eric Zimmerman.

In the comedy, these clashes are exploited through stereotypes: *A Moroccan Affair* resorts to clichés about language, religion, customs and gender roles; *Uncle Trouble* perpetuates clichés about migrant children—the Chinese girl who is an expert in technology, the girl from Mali with a voodoo doll, and the troubled Colombian boy—while its protagonist, Toni (Leo Harlem), embodies an everyday racism that the film repeatedly turns into gags.

In other cases, racism is experienced as an internal conflict. *Chinas: A Second-Generation Story* shows three teenagers caught between their parents' culture and Spanish society, where they adopt "Western" names to facilitate their integration. In addition, one of them, Xiang (Ella Qiu), raises the conflict of international adoption, also present in *Uncle Trouble*.

The classic narrative of flight and survival appears in *Adú*, which follows a Cameroonian boy forced to emigrate after violence in his village. It is also present in *Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea*, which focuses on rescue work in the Aegean Sea, and in *Vasil*. In all three cases, the migrant is presented as a victim seeking protection in Europe.

Finally, some thrillers place migrant characters within the framework of international power relations. In *Code Name: Emperor*, Wendy (Alexandra Masangkay), a Filipino worker, is manipulated in a drug trafficking operation, embodying the equation between victim and social class within a system in which she only obeys. In *Way Down*, the British character Thom participates in the theft of the colonial treasure from the frigate *Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes*, which here becomes a symbol of the global circulation of wealth and the persistence of colonial disputes.

### **5.6. Narrative Perspective of the Migrant Character**

The analysis reveals a constant: migrant characters are often functional, if not directly instrumentalised, in stories featuring white Spaniards. In *Suro (Cork)*, the accusation against Karim is the catalyst for the conflict between the main couple, without his story having any development of its own. In *On the Fringe*, Badia's search becomes Rafa's mission, whose heroism completely overshadows the experience of the mother and daughter. The same is true in *Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea*, where the tragedy of the refugees is told from the perspective of the Catalan lifeguards, particularly Oscar, who embodies heroic sacrifice, especially after saving Haya, Rasha's daughter. In these two films, heroism is portrayed not in terms of survival from eviction or shipwreck, but in terms of the local people who devote themselves to a humanitarian cause that is greater than themselves.

This 'restorative do-goodism' is repeated in *Adú*: while the plot involving the Cameroonian boy sustains the emotional dimension, the film's other two narrative strands focus on Gonzalo (Luis Tosar), an aid worker with an NGO dedicated to protecting elephants, and Mateo (Álvaro Cervantes), a police officer who atones for his guilt after the death of a migrant who tried to cross the border at Gibraltar. In both cases, the heroism and narrative arc fall on Spanish characters.

The tendency to humanise the 'intolerant other' can be seen in *Uncle Trouble*, where Uncle Toni, presented as racist and backward, ends up redeemed thanks to the affection of the migrant children, reducing the complexity of structural racism to a conciliatory and simplistic gesture.

There are, however, exceptions. In *All the Names of God*, the viewer gains access to Hamza's subjectivity, which nuances the narrative of jihadist terrorism. In *Vasil*, the protagonist's point of view is the focus of the film, and migration is explored from within, avoiding its reduction to a narrative function of the native characters.

### **5.7. Depth, Complexity and Agency of Migrant Characters**

In most cases, migrant characters appear as flat figures, lacking psychological or narrative development. This lack of complexity is largely due to the fact that the stories do not focus on them but rather turn them into functional secondary characters within narratives centred on native characters. This dynamic is particularly evident in the comedy genre, where the migrant is reduced to a comic counterpoint or a mere token of diversity.

In *I Hate Summer*, Benlida (Yohana Yara), a Filipino domestic worker, is constantly belittled by the couple she serves. Her only response is to insult her boss in her own language, which the boss never understands, reinforcing the gag without giving the character any real agency. Similarly, in *Father There is Only One 3* and *4*, the domestic worker bears much of the burden of the family but lacks a narrative voice. In other films, the migrant presence plays a purely decorative role or serves to add diversity to the group, such as the second-generation teenagers in the high school in *Checkmates*, the friend of Chinese origin in *Father There is Only One*, or the Moroccan airport worker in *García y García*. Even when the films revolve around migration issues, as in *A Moroccan Affair* or *Uncle Trouble*, the narrative relies on cultural stereotypes rather than on a true development of characters with contradictions or nuances—although the character of Hamida in *A Moroccan Affair* does introduce greater dramatic depth. The same lack of depth is evident in the character of Eric in *Tell Me What You Want*. His character arc is practically non-existent, and throughout the film he seems more focused on satisfying his own desires, which contributes to the character's rigidity.

The lack of depth is also reproduced in some dramas. In *On the Fringe*, Badia and her daughter Selma are the narrative drivers of the action, but they lack their own voice: the focus is on Rafa (Luis Tosar) and his personal dilemma. In *Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea*, the migrant voice is reduced to Rasha

(Melika Foroutan), a Syrian doctor who cares for refugees while waiting to be reunited with her daughter. However, the narrative tension is concentrated on Oscar (Eduard Fernández), the Spanish lifeguard turned hero. Something similar occurs in *Alcarràs*, where the Maghrebian seasonal workers appear as a consequence of the central conflict—the loss of the Solé family's land. Only Boubou (Djibril Casse), the seasonal worker in charge of conveying Quimet's ideas about the harvest to his colleagues, acquires a certain presence through his connection with Iris (Ainet Jounou), who seeks him out after a family breakup. In *The Good Boss*, despite the centrality of the factory and, therefore, the possibility of giving voice to and developing storylines for its workers, the migrants remain silent and without narrative development.

However, some films in the selection do give migrant characters greater complexity, especially when migration is the central theme and the story is told from their point of view. In *Adú*, although the child protagonist is too young to exercise full agency, Adú's journey is sustained by the figures of his sister Alika (Zayiddiya Dissou) and Massar (Adam Nourou), who embody the need for survival and learning along the way. The viewer shares with them the emotion and harshness of the journey, which makes these characters decisive for the emotional charge of the film.

Other examples of characters with clear agency are the three teenagers in *Chinas: A Second-Generation Story*, whose experience between two cultural worlds articulates the narrative, and the French characters in *The Beasts*. After Antoine's murder, Olga takes on not only the legacy of their shared project, but also the search for justice and confrontation with a hostile environment. This is revealed forcefully in a discussion between Olga and her daughter Marie (Marie Colob). Marie fears that her mother will repeat her father's tragic fate, and the conversation is proof of the depth of a character who moves between obstinacy and vulnerability. In *All the Names of God*, Hamza (Nourdin Batan) is portrayed as a young man trapped by fanaticism and manipulation but also marked by family breakdown and a human background that turns the thriller into a duel between executioner and victim with ambiguous moral dimensions.

Perhaps the most successful example of complexity is found in *Vasil*. The Bulgarian protagonist escapes the most common stereotypes—the passive victim or the threat—and appears as a cultured, witty man with a complex past. The film insists on portraying him as a person rather than a migrant: a prodigy at the game who transforms the life of Alfredo (Karra Elejalde), who takes him in, and who pursues the dream of a better life with his daughter. Vasil faces precariousness with irony and resilience, which defuses clichés and endows him with a nuanced humanity.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that, although there have been advances in the inclusion of diversity in Spanish fiction, significant structural limitations persist in the representation of migrant characters. Quantitatively, migrant characters remain a minority, with a small percentage of the total number of characters and a scarce presence in leading roles. This coincides with data from the Observatory of Diversity in Audiovisual Media (ODA, 2023) and with previous studies such as those by Argote (2003) and Castiello (2006), which already pointed to the marginalisation of foreign characters in Spanish audiovisual narrative.

From a qualitative perspective, a double trend can be observed: on the one hand, some migrant characters are multidimensional and prominent, but these are exceptional cases; on the other hand, the assignment of stereotypical or functional roles predominates. Most migrant characters, especially women, are depicted in manual or care work, or linked to situations of victimisation, confirming previous findings by Castagnani and Colorado Román (2009); Marcos-Ramos et al. (2022) and Van Dijk (2007). Recent films such as *Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea* (2021) and *A Moroccan Affair* (2023) show that, although migrants participate in the plot, their narrative agency is limited: they rarely make decisions that significantly affect the story or influence other characters. This highlights the persistence of a narrative centred on white and indigenous protagonists, even in contemporary productions.

In terms of stereotypes, the results indicate that negative ones—criminal, passive victim, servant—continue to predominate, although positive stereotypes associated with socially valued qualities such as solidarity, perseverance, or generosity do appear. However, these positive stereotypes do not compensate for the lack of complexity or grant true narrative agency, reinforcing Tello Díaz's (2025) observation about the symbolic rather than substantive inclusion of migrants.

Narrative agency emerges as a critical point: most migrant characters still lack their own voice in the story, and when they do have one, their influence on the plot is limited. This finding confirms the double

subordination described by Castagnani and Colorado Román (2009) and Marcos-Ramos et al. (2022), especially in the case of migrant women, who continue to be represented mainly as passive or dependent figures.

A relevant finding is the homogenisation within migrant groups. Characters from Latin America, the Maghreb or sub-Saharan Africa tend to be represented following similar patterns, while internal differences in gender, age or social class are barely explored. This coincides with the observations of Corral Rey and Sandulescu Budea (2022) on the lack of internal plurality in the representation of migrants, which limits the fidelity of Spanish fiction to contemporary social reality.

Compared to studies from previous decades, some progress can be seen: recent films include migrants in more mainstream stories, beyond documentary cinema or traditional immigration films, and there are isolated cases of more complex characters. However, the persistence of stereotypes, the lack of narrative agency and homogenisation suggest that inclusion remains partial and functional, more oriented towards meeting symbolic expectations than reflecting authentic experiences.

Overall, the findings indicate that true inclusion requires not only increasing the quantitative presence of migrant characters, but also ensuring:

1. Real narrative agency, where characters can drive the plot through their own decisions.
2. Complex characterisation, avoiding reduction to functional or stereotypical roles.
3. Internal plurality, showing diversity of gender, class, age and experiences within the migrant community.

Only then will Spanish fiction be able to convincingly reflect the multiculturalism of today's society and offer representations that transcend symbolic inclusion. This analysis opens up a space for critical reflection on the processes of writing, production and casting, suggesting that authentic diversity requires a deeper commitment at all stages of audiovisual creation.

## 7. Conclusions

The analysis carried out so far confirms the hypothesis of this study: migrant diversity in Spanish cinema (2021–2024) is growing in terms of presence but not in terms of centrality or complexity. In 20 films with 59 migrant characters, only approximately 20% are protagonists, and 11 of the 20 films with migrant representation do not give them any prominence.

These figures reveal a clear gap between the demographic composition of Spanish society and its representation in film. This asymmetry reinforces the initial hypothesis: the visibility of migrant minorities in post-pandemic Spanish cinema is more quantitative than qualitative. According to Spain's National Institute of Statistics (INE), as of 1 April 2025, there were 6,947,711 foreign nationals out of a total population of 49,153,849, representing 14.13% of the total (INE, 2025). This contrasts with the figures from the analysis carried out, both in terms of the under-representation of protagonists and the over-representation of secondary characters.

The underrepresentation may be due to the fact that, beyond films about migrants, there are no stories about migrants who are already integrated into society and leading lives that are more or less integrated with Spanish society, with a few minor exceptions, and that most works tell stories aimed at a Spanish audience.

The overrepresentation of secondary characters has two interpretations: the need to rely on the stereotypes already mentioned to drive the story forward or simply to perform a humorous gag, or that a large part of Spanish film production is dominated by the city of Madrid and, to a lesser extent, Barcelona, which have a much higher percentage of foreign migrants than the national average.

From a qualitative perspective, the findings show that the representation of migrants continues to be anchored in stereotypical and functional narratives. Migrants appear mainly as precarious workers, passive victims or comic/exotic figures, without agency or psychological depth. Access to leading roles occurs almost exclusively in social dramas focused on the migratory journey or the second generation—*Adú*, *Vasil*, *Chinas: A Second-Generation Story*—while comedies and thrillers perpetuate clichés associated with servility, marginality or criminality.

Likewise, the narrative perspective is rarely constructed from the migrant's point of view. In most cases, the story is told from the perspective of native characters—often heroic or redemptive—which relegates migrants to the role of catalysts of conflict or "human scenarios" of diversity, but not as subjects of enunciation. *Mediterraneo: The Law of the Sea* and *On the Fringe* are two successful films that exemplify this type of treatment. This trend reveals a narrative paternalism that limits the plural representation of contemporary Spanish society and reproduces a model of symbolic, but not

substantive, inclusion. The analysis also finds that when the point of view shifts to a migrant, it is usually a case of "close" migration (white, Western European)—*The Beasts, Way Down, Vasil*.

Another relevant finding is the persistent intersectional inequality. Migrant women appear to be doubly subordinated, both by gender and by origin, and are represented in roles linked to caregiving or victimisation. Migrant children, in titles such as *Uncle Trouble* and *Checkmates*, become a resource for conveying moralising or comical discourses, rather than autonomous narrative subjects.

In terms of social context, the films reflect contemporary tensions surrounding migration in Spain—from everyday racism to job insecurity and the effects of bureaucracy—but they do so mainly from a simplified or anecdotal perspective. Hence, Spanish cinema still has a long way to go in normalising the presence of migrants in mainstream stories that do not necessarily focus on migration but rather treat it as an integral part of social life.

Consequently, the results of this research allow us to affirm that migrant diversity in post-pandemic Spanish cinema remains in a phase of superficial inclusion, still far from achieving equitable, complex representation in line with demographic reality. The challenge ahead is twofold: to narrate from within—giving voice to migrant subjects—and to expand the genres and registers in which these characters are represented, breaking down the barrier between "migration cinema" and mainstream cinema.

In short, Spanish cinema has taken steps towards greater visibility of migration, but the construction of a plural and destigmatised imaginary that recognises migrants not only as "others" who arrive, but as citizens who participate fully in the social and cultural life of Spain, remains pending.

## 8. Acknowledgements

This article is part of the project "Support networks and discourse of resistance in the post-pandemic technological space: the case of the Roma people and migrant minorities" funded by the Centre for Studies in Humanities, Culture and Communication (HUMA) at the International University of Valencia (VIU) VIU23015.

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