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Understanding Regional Spanish Politics Through Film

Before I watched *Ocho apellidos vascos* (*Eight Basque Last Names*) in my Spanish film class in Madrid, I never had thought that a rom com could teach me a deeper lesson about regional politics. However, this lighthearted love story between a man from Andalucía and a Basque woman indeed provided me with a more complex picture of the diverse regional identities of Spain's cultural landscape.

Spain is divided into *comunidades autónomas*, which are roughly comparable to U.S. states. While most of these regions align with a general Spanish national identity and speak Castilian Spanish (the language mostly referred to as just "Spanish" elsewhere,) a few of them have distinct national identities, largely tied to language— such as the Basque Country. The Basque people have historically maintained a cultural identity distinct from Spain's; indeed, the Basque language is an isolate, unrelated to any living language. This differentiated national identity has sparked prolific independence movements, which often define the Basque Country in the eyes of the rest of Spain.

Ocho apellidos vascos is directed by Emilio Martínez-Lázaro, who was born and raised in Madrid and therefore approaches both regions from an outsider's perspective. In the film, Rafa, a man from Sevilla in the region of Andalucía, falls in love with a Basque visitor, Amaia, and follows her back to her hometown in the Basque countryside. After a series of comically unfortunate events, Rafa finds himself committed to pretending to be Amaia's fiancé— under a false identity. Rafa builds a Basque persona, "Antxon," around stereotypes. He sports a caricatured style, complete with fake piercings, plenty of plaid, and denim-on-denim; swears copiously in a thick accent; and brings up Basque independence whenever he's unsure of what to say.

Although the film is straightforward about the fact that these are just stereotypes-– "Antxon's" rendition of Basque culture is usually over-the-top compared to those around him— I found that observing stereotypes is actually a valuable way of understanding how regional cultures relate to each

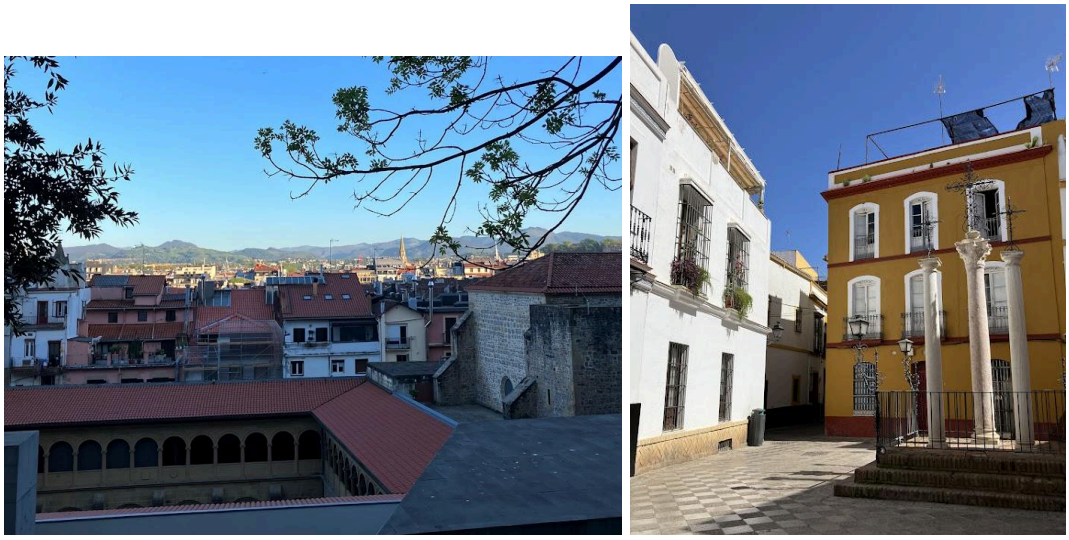
other. While some of this knowledge may be dismissed as "surface-level," such as insights into how Basque people (are believed to) dress, eat, drink, speak, and view dating, I believe all cultural context is worthwhile. Beyond the caricatured components of "Anxton's" false identity, however, one of my deepest takeaways was how much the Basque Country's history of militant separatism affects the way it is perceived by the rest of the country. The Basque Country is associated with the notorious ETA separatist terrorist group, which originated during Franco's dictatorship and engaged in violence across Spain from 1959 to 2010. The film was released in 2014, only a few years after the group declared a permanent ceasefire in 2011 and a few years before it officially ceased operations and disarmed in 2018.

In the beginning of the film, Rafa's roommate automatically distrusts Amaia, joking that she shouldn't have been allowed to sleep over because "could have a bomb" — a joke which I actually heard a Spanish guy make about his Basque friend a few months later in real life. One of Rafa's go-to impersonation tactics is talking about Basque independence, revealing his preconceived notions of what Basque people care or talk about. Played off for comedic effect, the more serious sides of separatism's position in Basque society lurk in the film's shadows; Rafa discovers this tension when police officers assume his accidental cigarette-fire is an act of domestic terrorism, and he later ends up accidentally leading a protest in the street. I had learned about ETA in an academic context, but these details, although undeniably unreliable, gave me a sense of some of the ways this history is perceived and portrayed.

Funnily enough, the class's study of the film lined up with my back-to-back weekend trips in Sevilla and the Basque Country. When comparing my experiences to the film, it's important to note that I didn't have many conversations with local people, making it difficult to draw deeper conclusions. However, it was interesting to compare my surface impressions with the film (which may be ironic when thinking about a movie critiquing stereotypes.)

Out the window of my train to Sevilla, I saw the same gold-toned landscapes that Rafa sees on his bus from Andalucía to the Basque Country; the same horse-drawn carriages clacked through the street; and the buildings were the same shades of yellow and white. In the Basque Country, I was thrilled to see the same lush green mountains, beautiful sea, and white buildings with red roofs. I was surprised and

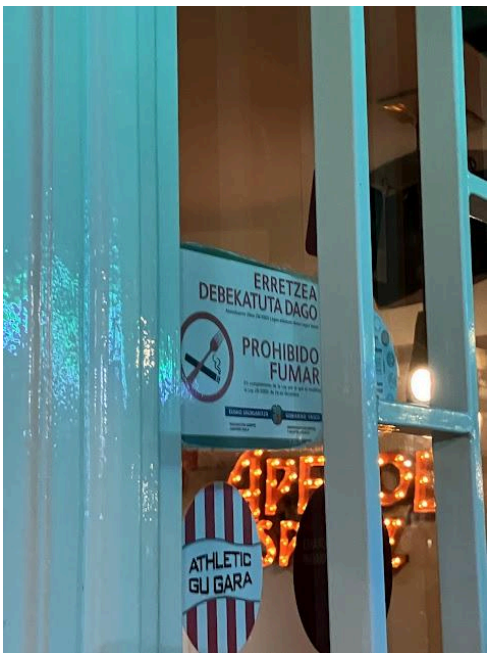
amused by the accuracy of the film's portrayal of Basque fashion: I was indeed greeted by an abundance of denim, flannel, piercings, and "alternative" haircuts, although this of course wasn't universal.



Rooftops of Donostia/San Sebastián and streets of Sevilla, taken on my trip

The ambiance of Sevilla felt closer to what was portrayed in the film than the ambiance of the Basque Country did. Flamenco had a strong presence (even more so because Sevilla's yearly fair was happening,) there was a lively feeling in the streets, and a laid-back vibe. The Sevillians I ended up chatting with were outgoing and generous. In my opinion, the film caricatures the Basque country more than it does Sevilla. The Basque Country still has a politically active reputation, but this isn't limited to separatism; I did see a protest during my weekend there, but it was unrelated. In fact, the Basque Country's leftism and advocacy for non-separatist issues is a strong part of its culture that is absent from the film. I didn't notice much nationalism on a surface level during my brief time in either San Sebastian or Bilbao, although Basque identity is traditionally stronger in smaller towns. Basque legally has "co-official" status, which means public signage must appear in both Basque and Spanish, so the language

was certainly present, including in private institutions. It was usually written first on signs and menus, but people tended to initiate interactions in Castilian Spanish.



In the film, someone asks Rafa to prove that he's Basque by speaking the language. He panics and reads a "no smoking" sticker printed on the back wall. I was amused to see the same bilingual sticker there myself, and snapped a picture.

From my brief experience, a lot about Basque Country wasn't reflected in *Ocho apellidos vascos.* The film depicts Basque people as heavy eaters and drinkers, but I learned that the most distinctive feature of Basque cuisine is pintxos culture, small pieces of bread with toppings such as meat or fish (but many places get inventive) eaten standing up at a bar. In contrast to a closed-off lifestyle, I noticed a huge group of people socializing and drinking at a small bar in a park at sundown, and the beach in San Sebastian was full of people hanging out and kids playing soccer.

This experience reinforced my belief that cultural learning takes so many different forms, including "unsophisticated" forms of media like rom coms. Learning about shallow stereotypes can yield deeper value; I learned so much about how people from different regions of Spain view each other– including how this is informed by more "serious" topics like history and politics– that I likely wouldn't have been taught in a formal context. Although I'm aware that a weekend spent visiting tourist sites is far

from a well-rounded cultural immersion, my glimpse into these regions has already supplied me with food for thought about the relationship between stereotypes and reality; something that has not only deepened my thinking around Spanish stereotypes, but American ones as well.