

## **UC Merced**

### **TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World**

#### **Title**

Celebrity, Diplomacy, Documentary:Javier Bardem and Sons of the Clouds: The Last Colony

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2h403169>

#### **Journal**

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 5(3)

#### **ISSN**

2154-1353

#### **Author**

Robbins, Jill

#### **Publication Date**

2015

#### **DOI**

10.5070/T453029638

#### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2015 by the author(s).This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Celebrity, Diplomacy, Documentary: Javier Bardem and *Sons of the Clouds: The Last Colony*<sup>1</sup>

---

JILL ROBBINS  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED

**Abstract:** This article examines the ways in which *Sons of the Clouds: The Last Colony*, the 2012 documentary directed by the Spanish filmmaker Álvaro Longoria and produced by the Spanish actor Javier Bardem, makes use of celebrity activism and diplomacy in order to reach an international audience and directly pressure the United Nations to intervene in what the film frames primarily as a question of human rights and freedom from oppression. Despite Senator Edward Kennedy's sympathy to the Sahrawi cause and the attention devoted to it by the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, it was a little-known issue in the U.S. before Bardem began to talk about it on a variety of talk and news shows while promoting the James Bond thriller *Skyfall* (2012). Michael Renov has argued that, although we generally think of documentary in terms of social activism and the discourses of sobriety, desire and the unconscious may play an important role in this genre as well. In this case, Bardem's 'sex appeal' draws viewers to his viewpoint, and his considerable fame within the English-speaking media world, in which actors are expected to share personal tidbits as they pitch their latest projects, gives him a platform to present this issue as an extension of his charming persona.

Although the human rights and colonialist issues associated with the long-standing unresolved conflict over Western Saharan nationality and self-governance might bring to mind the excesses of apartheid South Africa, the struggle of Sahrawis has most often been compared to that of Palestinians.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, it has been argued, a stateless people is divided, living under the military authority of a foreign nation in what it considers its own territory or in a refugee area likewise subject to military intervention, and both occupations were carried out at least in part through the settlement of civilians in the disputed region. These cases have received international attention in recent years because the principal antagonists—Morocco and Israel—are strategic allies of the United States and key European countries. Faced with the unyielding positions of powerful nation members on both sides of the question, the United Nations has appeared powerless to create the conditions for a referendum on statehood in the Western Sahara, which was the aim of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), established by United

Nations Security Council Resolution 690 in 1991, some sixteen years after Spain withdrew from the region.

For complex reasons stemming from the recent colonial past, Europe is divided about the Western Sahara: France unequivocally supports Morocco; whereas in Spain, the former colonial power, many feel a moral obligation toward the Sahrawi people, even if the government itself supports Morocco.<sup>3</sup> There are numerous organizations and activities in Spain that raise consciousness about the Sahrawi cause, many of them organized by artists. *Hijos de las nubes: La última colonia* (*Sons of the Clouds: The Last Colony*), the 2012 documentary directed by the Spanish filmmaker Alvaro Longoria and produced by the Spanish actor Javier Bardem, was first conceived at one of these acts of solidarity, the 2008 Fisahara film festival. The festival, as Bardem explains in the film,

is organized by Spanish film people and humanitarian volunteers. It is set in the Sahrawi refugee camps in the deep of the Sahara desert, the Hamada, which is the desert inside the desert. You travel to a remote location, and show films in widescreen, but what is really important is what you get from the experience, what you learn from the people there.<sup>4</sup>

Although *Sons of the Clouds* represents a collaboration among many “Spanish film people” who are all responsible for its success—Bardem and Longoria, of course, but also narrator Elena Anaya and the many other prominent figures who appear throughout<sup>5</sup>—it is this narrative about Bardem’s growing understanding of the Sahrawis’ human warmth and political plight, as well as his attempts to intervene in defense of their human rights, that becomes the organizing axis of the film and the key to viewers’ sympathetic response. What is more, the film makes use of the growing phenomena of celebrity activism and diplomacy in order to reach an international audience and directly pressure the United Nations to intervene in what the film frames primarily as a question of human rights and freedom from oppression.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, it also aims to distance the Sahrawi dilemma from stickier issues: the territorial dispute in which powerful UN member states have allies; the battle for natural resources (especially phosphorus); or the struggle between a national armed force (that of Morocco) and a guerrilla group (the Polisario Front) that might become associated in the Western mind with jihadists.

## Celebrity Activism and the United Nations

The figure of the celebrity as an international activist is a familiar one. UNICEF appointed Danny Kaye as a Goodwill Ambassador in the early fifties, and since that time “the UN has employed celebrities to raise funds, affect international policy agendas and draw attention to development causes” (Wheeler 51). Celebrities have been instrumentalized specifically as a tactic for accomplishing humanitarian goals without drawing the wrath of the most powerful nation members. The number and type of these activists has proliferated in recent years, so that by “[Kofi] Annan’s departure in 2007, there were over 400 UN Goodwill Ambassadors, and the Secretary-General had established a new tier of celebrity activists known as Messengers of Peace” (Wheeler 52), whose functions begin to approach diplomacy.

As celebrities have encroached on their territory, politicians and diplomats have begun to employ many of the strategies associated with media celebrity. Indeed, Riina Yrjölä argues that:

To a great degree, political authority is today constructed through emotional attachments, making aesthetic stylization a central feature of mass politics in its mediated form. Politics, entertainment and media have become intricately interwoven affecting both the representation practices as well as legitimation processes of western political systems making media visibilities, issues of style, image management and authenticity the key forms of how a political persona is constituted and maintained. (178–79)

At the same time, high-powered celebrities like Bob Geldof, Angelina Jolie, or Bono have been accorded the same respect as traditional political figures because they “are taken to have some intrinsic attributes that provide them not only with status in their own realm of activity but credibility outside it” (Cooper 10). Andrew Cooper even argues that celebrities have a unique advantage over traditional diplomats:

At the cutting edge of the morphing of diplomacy in the twenty-first century is a greater emphasis on dialogue with diverse audiences through myriad channels. Yet, as in standard areas of diplomacy, most of the official mechanisms remain truncated by the need for protocols, etiquette, the subordination of delivery to process, a continued fight for resources, and claims of the national interest. Unofficial public diplomacy—epitomized by celebrity diplomacy—suffers from none of these deficiencies. (11)

Celebrities, then, may arguably act with greater freedom than diplomats because they do not represent particular nations, even if their interests are often inflected by their national or even personal experiences.

Some theorists have gone so far as to argue that celebrities are more effective than traditional diplomats. As Cooper explains, “Celebrities can be agile, contradictory, outrageous, and insulting. They also have an individual capacity to raise money and, in some cases, a store of backroom talent who can micromanage events and initiatives” (11). They also have an array of resources at their disposal that are not available to professional politicians. As one of the most prominent members of the Spanish cultural world, for example, Bardem was able to draw on a cadre of highly talented filmmakers, resulting in the exceptionally high production values of *Sons of the Clouds*. Bardem’s stardom also gave him access to a global marketplace (not to mention the United Nations): thus, unlike films designed for a Spanish audience, *Sons of the Clouds* was distributed not just as a region 2 DVD, which cannot be played on most machines in the United States and Canada, but also as both a multi-region DVD available on Netflix and an Amazon Instant Video.

Despite the advantages that celebrity diplomats arguably have in a media-oriented global world, their efforts have sparked criticism and caused tensions. Wheeler points out that politicized celebrities often manifest “a certain naivety in understanding the processes of political diplomacy” (58), and sometimes employ an emotional rhetoric, as in the case of Angelina Jolie’s 2007 film about the kidnapping and murder of journalist Daniel Pearl, *A Mighty Heart* (56). At times, they harshly criticize traditional diplomats, state leaders, and the United Nations, and thereby “indicate how a gulf exists between celebrity and political expectations in which popular political ‘narratives’ uncomfortably clash with the realist policies that have defined international power. It has led to criticisms that while star power may bring public attention to international affairs, it is limited in affecting real change” (Wheeler 58). The problem is especially acute in Africa, to the degree that “debate has broken out about the manner in which hub celebrity diplomats have branded Africa” (Cooper 99). Yrjölä takes this argument further, claiming that the actions of celebrity activists and diplomats, particularly on the African continent, are not politically neutral because their work “can be seen as the cultural part of the ways in which the power and authority of northern governments are put to use to reassert their authority along a North-South axis (Duffield 2001: 8)” (186). The contributions of celebrity diplomacy to the resolution of entrenched socio-economic and political problems are clearly ambiguous, but there is no doubt that they have influenced the style and perception of diplomatic work, bringing once-hidden compromises into the public view.

### Celebrity and Desire: Promoting the Project

Javier Bardem has stepped up as one of the first non-Anglo celebrity to have an impact on international politics. Bardem is a familiar figure on the red carpet, though he is perhaps most recognized by the English-speaking general public for his roles as villains in the Coen brothers' film *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and the James Bond thriller *Skyfall* (2012), as well as the "Latin Lover" in Ryan Murphy's *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) and Woody Allen's *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008). Despite Senator Edward Kennedy's sympathy for the Sahrawi cause and the attention devoted to it by the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, it was a little-known issue in the U.S. before Bardem began to talk about it on a variety of talk and news shows while promoting *Skyfall*. Without his considerable fame within the English-speaking media world, in which actors are expected to share personal tidbits as they pitch their latest projects, Bardem would not have had a platform to present this issue as an extension of his charming persona. A case in point is his October 7, 2011 interview with Christiane Amanpour on ABC's *Nightline*, a segment of which would later appear in the documentary. The interview itself centers on the Bond franchise, but the Spanish actor is clearly most eager to discuss his appearance as a witness at the United Nations on October 4, 2011, and his work on *Sons of the Clouds*, which would come out the following year. As he chats amiably with his host, Bardem offers cultural motivations for his interest in the "hot potato" issue of the Western Sahara, a topic with which Amanpour seems entirely unfamiliar: he was moved, he tells her, by a sense of guilt for how Spain abandoned its former colony. This explanation does not seem too radical or out of place in this fluff piece; rather, it exemplifies Annika Bergman Rosamond's claim that a personal narrative is often used to explain the celebrity's commitment to a specific cause: "such decisions are subjective and are framed within the practices and values of the celebrity's personal experiences and cultural specificities" (68).

The *Nightline* piece also constructs Bardem as an object of desire. Cynthia McFadden introduces the segment thus: "Fair to say that even among the most gorgeous men in Hollywood, Javier Bardem stands out. Audiences simply swoon for those dusky good looks and that accent" (n.p.). In the transition to the interview, we see a sultry clip from *Eat, Pray, Love* that drives the point home, and then Amanpour sets up her interview with Bardem by saying that "just the sound of his voice has women swooning all over the world" (n.p.). This attention to Bardem's sexiness might seem to trivialize the important topic he has come to discuss. Indeed, Paula Rabinowitz asserts that desire in documentary is generally "directed towards the social and political arenas of everyday

experience as well as world-historical events shaping those lives and away from the purely psychosexual manifestations of lack and plenitude, differentiation and identification, which characterise the fetishistic forms of narrative desire” (23–24. qtd in Smaill 8). Still, Michael Renov has argued the contrary, asserting that, although people generally think of documentary in terms of social activism and the discourses of sobriety, desire and the unconscious play an important role in this genre as well.<sup>7</sup> Given that Bardem offers information about the documentary and the problem of the Western Sahara in an interview that so insists on his sex appeal, one could argue that desire for the actor himself becomes one of the factors that attract viewers to the topic of the actor’s interest.

The Spanish actor, however, is not as easily reduced to a sex object or a celebrity as his Anglo counterparts. In part, his political interests can be attributed to the deeply-rooted characteristics of his “Latin” identity: that is, although as a Spanish-speaking actor, Bardem is recognized, as I mentioned above, as a “Latin lover” (one of the Hispanic stereotypes that Charles Ramírez Berg outlined in *Latin Images: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance*), that image can also connote other types of fervor. In *Vicky, Cristina, Barcelona*, for example, both Spanish actors (Javier Bardem and Penélope Cruz) embody hot-blooded artists, and Bardem has played political roles in other films (*Before Night Falls, The Dancer Upstairs*). It is not surprising, then, that the *Nightline* piece should identify Bardem’s political commitment with passion, as we can see even in the title “Javier Bardem’s Passionate Cause.”<sup>8</sup> Despite his seemingly passionate nature and his “dusky good looks,” Bardem also seems to fit the stereotype of ‘Latin’ men as devoted husbands and sons, which allows Amanpour to counter the ‘Latin lover’ Hollywood image with Bardem’s ‘real life’ role as a family man. He is married to another darling of the red carpet, Penélope Cruz, with whom he had just had a child at the time of the interview.<sup>9</sup> And, as Amanpour points out, “He dedicated the [Oscar] award to his mother. That’s right, he’s a heartthrob who loves his mama” (n.p.). The following minutes of the interview imply that he carries both acting and political commitment in his blood, an inheritance from his mother, Pilar Bardem, who introduced him to the theater and inspired him to dedicate himself to those less fortunate, as the piece highlights.<sup>10</sup>

There is also something about his Spanish, as opposed to Latino, identity that produces resistance to the model of Hollywood superficiality. Americans simply expect more sophistication and intellectual depth from Europeans than from Latino or even Anglo movie stars. As Angharad Valdivia points out in an article comparing media representations of Jennifer López and Penélope Cruz, “within Latinidad, Europeanness . . . signs in for culture, . . . and the natives, whether Latin

American or U.S. Latina/o continue to sign in for nature and the working class” (145). Some European tendencies, however, are less admired in the United States: for example, there is a crucial difference between the dissident Left in the anti-Communist United States and the left in Europe, where the Communist Party remains a viable political option for voters. It is significant, then, that most discussions of Bardem’s politics do not mention that his mother’s brother, director Juan Antonio Bardem, was not simply a dissident but also a member of the Communist Party under Franco. The focus on the Bardem family’s passions, rather than details of their political affiliations, then, allows the U.S. mainstream viewer to identify emotionally with the sympathies of the Spanish actor.

### ***Sons of the Clouds: Documentary and Celebrity Diplomacy***

*Sons of the Clouds: The Last Colony* makes the case that Javier Bardem is a legitimate diplomat quite literally. Three and a half minutes into the film, the audience is presented with a framing shot in the UN of a receding line of the portraits of former Secretaries-General, with the portrait of Kofi Annan closest to the camera. Bardem wanders into the frame and appears next to the portrait, so that his head is exactly the same size as that of Annan. This shot would not work, however, and Bardem would not be an effective spokesperson for the Sahrawi people, if he had not already crossed over as an actor to the Anglo-sphere, given that, “built-in Anglo-sphere bias exists within the allocation of celebrity diplomat status. Even celebrities from non-English-speaking western countries seem to be neglected” (Cooper 9).

*Sons of the Clouds* draws not only on Javier Bardem’s fame but also on his human warmth in order to advance its political agenda. The actor appears throughout the film in the various roles of sincere artist, activist, frustrated film producer, and naïve world citizen who comes to knowledge about the oppressed other. These are all recognizable to global audiences as standard movie characters, and their familiarity allows viewers to engage emotionally with a complicated political dilemma. But it is Bardem’s role as the documentary author that most allows viewers to become part of a Sahrawi social collective along with him.

The film begins rather conventionally with a sequence narrated by Elena Anaya arguing that the Arab Spring really began with the Sahrawis, but most of the diegesis is bookended by Bardem’s testimony in the United Nations on October 4, 2011. In between these two points, the actor guides viewers through an argument about dignity, freedom, and self-determination that parallels the story of the film’s own conception and elaboration. After the initial U.N. sequence, some four and a half

minutes into the film, the camera zooms out of New York, seems to travel through space halfway around the globe, offers a bird's-eye view of Africa, and zooms into the Sahara, where the audience witnesses nomads and camels against a soundscape of military training, an allusion to the activities of the Polisario Front, represented later in the film as freedom fighters and legitimate representatives of the Sahrawi people in their quest for statehood.<sup>11</sup> The sound of boots on the ground quickly gives way to camel noises and then to the voice and image of a young Sahrawi woman jokingly offering her interlocutors some frothy camel milk in perfect Spanish.

Viewers encounter Bardem again eight and half minutes into the film. He is at the 2008 Fisahara film festival, sleeping in a tent, where his hosts appear completely unfazed by the fame of their guest. One of the children crawls over the sleeping actor, whom they laughingly nickname “Fat Snoring Man,” and Bardem gets up to play with the child and interact warmly with the family. At this moment, the sympathy viewers feel for the charmingly disheveled Spanish actor is transferred to these specific Sahrawi people, a social collective with whom he shares an obvious emotional bond. Bardem’s voiceover about the Fisahara festival seals our connection, as viewers are fused with Bardem in the “you,” and through him, to the Sahrawis: “You live with them in their tents, you listen to them ..., and as the relationship grows, you feel more and more joined to them, to their dignity, and a strong sensation of rage invades you in the face of the injustice they suffer” (n.p.).<sup>12</sup>

Bardem tells this story in his role as producer in front of a storyboard showing the plotting of the project, including photos and sketches of the cartoon characters that will be used in the segments about colonialism. The documentary itself, then, becomes part of the plot about how to help the Sahrawi people. Its objective, Bardem states, is to gather opinions of all the participants, even if “many people do not want to talk” (n.p.). Bardem becomes a kind of intermediary, an affective entrance point for viewers that opens them up to the cognitive experience of documentary information. Indeed, Belinda Smail argues, in *The Documentary: Politics, Emotion, Culture*, that in this kind of dissent documentary “the authors are framed as agents who intend, through their film-making, that the collective will become the object of the viewers’ care” (97). In this sense, “emotion plays a potentially binding role; emotion circulates with the documentaries and binds viewers, film-makers, and the social collective” (97).

By narrating his own story, Bardem becomes one of the desiring subjects in the documentary. As Smail explains,

subjects in documentary may desire, for example, self-actualisation and success, social change, self-determination or sexual agency. Moreover, the creator—the film-

maker or doco-auteur—can similarly be cast as subject or object depending on how their point of view or motivation is signified and posed as part of a documentary’s address to the viewer. (18)

His initial empathy, his motivation to act, the frustrating process of trying to schedule interviews, the final success of his audience in the United Nations, provide a satisfying narrative arc, and, in the process of elaborating this tale, Bardem also comes to embody our desire to act. The story of how he translates sympathy into action is vital for combating what Susan Sontag calls the “passivity that dulls feeling” (102). This passivity can be induced by what viewers perceive as an “intractable situation” (Sontag 101). “Compassion,” after all, “is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers” (Sontag 101). The situation in the Western Sahara certainly seems intractable, and the Moroccans’ refusal to respond to Bardem’s numerous requests for interviews underlines this point, as do the images of the armed and mined barriers they have constructed around the territory. The narrative thread in *Sons of the Clouds* about the creation of the actual film viewers are watching, however, provides a model of activist intervention. Thus, the film shows how, after returning from Fisahara, Bardem creates a promotional video and circulates a petition with the help of Penélope Cruz, Pedro Almodóvar, Iciar Bollaín, Rosa María Sardá, and Pilar and Carlos Bardem. And that, Bardem says, is when they decided to make a documentary.

Bardem’s voice guides viewers’ understanding of the Sahrawis, as he appears and reappears in numerous sequences woven throughout the course of the film. Although one could argue that the repeated image and voice of Bardem simply help to maintain the viewers’ interest in a faraway tale of injustice, it is also true that he is an object of desire, as Amanpour points out. Smail believes that desire for the “other” is essential in this kind of documentary:

I am interested in how the figure of the cultural other—the individual who is defined by how far removed they are from the life world or subjectivity of the viewer—emerges as a particularly cogent object of desire in documentary. This may materialise in a range of different ways. The desire that is apparent as scopophilia is inevitably concerned with sexualised desire for the other. Alternatively, desire might take the form of an anticipation to possess or assimilate the other through gaining knowledge, or to observe/experience, as the narrative progresses, their triumph or failure. (17)

Sexual desire for Bardem and the desire to experience his success or failure, then, are two legitimate forms of desire for the other in the documentary, particularly in what could be described as the first

act of the film, which ends after some thirty minutes, with the image of Bardem speaking in front of the storyboard for *Sons of the Clouds*.

The documentary also engages spectators' desire in the form of "hope for some kind of transformation in the world of the documentary, and thus in the world of the social actor represented" (Smaill 17). The social actors, in this case, include not only Bardem, but also the sympathetic Sahrawi people of the first act. Just as Amanpour omitted the Bardem family's Communist leanings from her interview, *Sons of the Clouds* goes to great lengths to distinguish the Sahrawis, and especially the Polisario Front, from any association with *jihad* or Islamic terrorism. Soon after the first Fisahara sequence, some women in the film explicitly discuss their unusual role in Sahrawi society, which contrasts to that of most of the Muslim world, in which women tend not to enjoy the full rights of citizenship. Other women also emphasize their former recognition as citizens of a Western country, Spain, and they have the papers to prove it, even if they are now confined to rudimentary tents in refugee camps. A scene with two unescorted women dancing happily in the desert underscores their joyful distance from hardline expressions of Islamic law, and their difference from other Muslims is punctuated by a voiceover from Bardem, who notes that they are surprisingly not resentful toward Spaniards (or implicitly other Westerners), who abandoned them to the harsh rule of the vastly more conservative state of Morocco. Another woman, activist Aminetu Haidar, likewise explains that Sahrawi women are respected as equals and never beaten, that they are free from harsh *shariah* laws and misogyny. Western women viewers can easily identify with the intelligent, graceful Haidar, who is filmed in a neutral setting, outside the camps. This identification heightens the impact of her own story, which she does not recount until some fifty-four minutes into the film, during the third act, focusing on human rights. It is the tale of an educated middle-class woman snatched away from her family, blindfolded for four years, beaten and most certainly raped (she mentions only "fighting off rapes"). Her story impacts viewers because they see her as a legitimate subject, and they have already connected emotionally with her. Indeed, Smaill argues that "emotion is key to the representation of filmic subjects and the construction of intersubjectivity in film. Because representations frame individuals as social agents, and as socially conditioned selves, they are presented as subjects in the text" (18). Even the Polisario soldiers appear as friendly, thoughtful people, reluctant warriors, motivated by quite reasonable desires to be free from a brutal police state and to pursue their futures outside of a refugee camp.

Other features of the documentary are likewise designed to seduce the viewer. The historical background for the conflict is illustrated with harmless-looking cartoon figures and narrated by a

Spanish actress (Elena Anaya). Most of the sequences last less than a minute (though Haidar speaks for two minutes): it is just enough time to engage the *pathos* of the viewers without losing their interest. What is more, the narrating voice often overlaps a video sequence in such a manner that only before or after viewers see the images do they know who is speaking. This technique interrupts the unconscious process by which viewers might form judgments about the narrative due to prejudices about the enunciator.<sup>13</sup> Bardem's recognizable voice, like his image, has the effect of a subconscious suggestion.

The 'talking head' authorities are also carefully selected to make the case that justice has not been served and human rights continue to be violated. We hear, importantly, the voices of warm Sahrawi people telling their stories in Spanish, French and Arabic, along with a variety of authorities sympathetic to their cause, many of them from the Anglo world. These include a University of San Francisco Professor (Stephen Zunes), the Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch (Eric Goldstein), the advocacy director of RFK Partners for Human Rights (Marselha Gonçalves),<sup>14</sup> and a former United States Ambassador to the United Nations (John Bolton). In contrast, the French come off badly, as they seem to coldly value loyalty to their former colony over sympathy for oppressed people. At best, this is portrayed as a problem with traditional diplomatic channels, as Roland Duma, the former French Minister of Foreign Affairs, explicitly states in the film: this is how *realpolitik* works, "we should do nothing so as not to stir up antagonism. Wait for things to evolve" (n.p.). This assertion is immediately refuted, as John Bolton replies that maintaining the status quo is the worst possible solution.

Finally, the film ends with a list of those who declined interviews, a list that includes all of the Moroccans, as well as the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, whose portrait we saw next to Javier Bardem at the beginning of the film. By the end, however, viewers have witnessed Bardem demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO); appear on U.S. television promoting this documentary project (in a clip from the Amanpour interview); and testify before the Fourth Committee of the United Nations, which addresses decolonization. Just before the credits, the audience is told that the United States froze aid to Morocco pending a human rights investigation, and that the European Union canceled fishing agreements with Morocco because the exploitation of resources violated Western Saharan rights. *Sons of the Clouds* has forcefully argued that Bardem has earned a place among the portraits of the Secretaries-General.

### Other Films about the Western Sahara

*Sons of the Clouds* is not the first attempt by filmmakers to draw the world's attention to the plight of the Sahrawi people since Spain withdrew its troops in 1975. It is not even the first to use the filmmakers' own consciousness-raising as a model for educating viewers. The same trope exists in *El rumor de la arena* (The Rumor of the Sand, 2008), which was conceived by a group of novice Spanish filmmakers after one of them, the journalist Daniel Iriarte, traveled to the Western Sahara in 2003 and observed the living conditions in the refugee camp near Tindouf, where the majority of the Sahrawi population currently lives. This rather conventional but informative documentary is advanced primarily by what Bill Nichols calls "discourses of sobriety" (3), and in particular economics, politics and foreign policy, but it is structured around the narrative about a Sahrawi family that has been separated by the Moroccan occupation.<sup>15</sup> In addition to this human interest story, the film relies heavily on three mechanisms: 1) 'talking head' explanations from exclusively male authorities representing Spain, Morocco and the Polisario Front; 2) footage of Spain's colonial past in the region; and 3) interviews with former military personnel and their families, who evidence nostalgia for the area and its people. It should not be surprising, then, that the film, which is directed at a Spanish viewing audience, taps deep-seated fantasies, fears, and denials at the heart of Spain's relationship with Africa and Islam.<sup>16</sup>

Another short documentary, *Hijos de las nubes* (Children of the Clouds, 2007), by Carlos González, presents itself as a piece of investigative journalism that attempts to offer evidence in favor of intervention to protect Sahrawis. The live footage of human rights abuses in that film represents the only sequences that González was able to salvage after the Moroccan police forced him to leave the country, alleging that he was a spy for the CIA and/or Hugo Chávez (González has dual citizenship in the U.S. and Venezuela). These clips are interspersed with photographic evidence of abuse and recorded testimonies of torture victims. For the viewer, the photos underscore Susan Sontag's point that "Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us" (89). More importantly, however, they function in the film as physical evidence supporting the oral testimony of tortured subjects, some of them minors. They provide documentation of human rights violations that could be used in a possible trial of Moroccan authorities in international courts for crimes against humanity, much as the outtakes from Pamela Yates's 1983 documentary *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983) were used in Guatemala as evidence in the genocide trial of former military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, a process documented in *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (2012), directed by Yates as well.

Human interest in González's film is created through the filmmaker's relationship to one Sahrawi in particular: Hamad Hamat, an activist who appears as well in *El rumor de la arena*. In the latter film, he spoke of the brotherhood between Sahrawis and Spaniards; here, he takes a human rights approach, as he insists that the Moroccans are practicing state terror, even in the schools. Hamat acquires the status of a second narrator in this short film, and crucially, it is through Hamat that González comes to directly experience repression and censorship shortly after he attempts to film a protest that erupts just outside the home where the interview takes place. This is a moment that gives tremendous credibility to Hamat's testimony, especially when, soon afterwards, the viewer is presented with a sequence of photos of torture victims and recognizes Hamat among them.<sup>17</sup> He becomes one of the story's heroes, willing to suffer pain to get the story out.

Other film and media projects about the Sahrawi people have used emblematic figures from the cultural world to advance their political cause. The short docudrama *Lalia* (1999), which won a Goya award in the category of Best Short Documentary, was written and directed by the Catalan actress Silvia Munt.<sup>18</sup> The promotional videos by todosconelsahara.com feature a series of figures from the Spanish film world who exhort viewers to add their names to the signatures on a petition for the Spanish government to recognize the diplomatic status of the Polisario Front. *Sons of the Clouds* includes a sequence in which Javier Bardem and his brother Carlos, along with Álvaro Longoria, attempt to deliver that petition to then-President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. Yet another media effort, *Mariem Hassan, la voz del Sáhara* (2007), is a short cultural film produced by a Spaniard, Manuel Domínguez, but it features the voice of a Sahrawi woman, the singer and activist Mariem Hassan. Her music also provides the backdrop to the *Sons of the Clouds*, although the only musician who appears in the footage is the Frenchman of Spanish origin Manu Chao, who attended the Fisahara festival with Bardem.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusions

All of these earlier films, along with the non-documentary feature *Los baúles del retorno* (1995), are virtually unknown, especially outside of Spain. *Sons of the Clouds*, in contrast, won the Spanish Goya in 2013 for the best documentary and has the potential to reach a much broader public. As Bardem wrote in his response to questions from the Spanish daily *El País* in February 2013, "In the coming months, we will hold viewings of the documentary at United Nations headquarters in Geneva and New York, in the U.S. Congress, in the Australian Parliament, and we will continue showing it at international festivals" (n.p., qtd. in Belinchón; my translation).

As these viewings suggest, Javier Bardem has also taken on a more explicitly political role since the film's release, and the documentary and its aftermath have changed his image in the American press. In February 2013, he held a joint press conference in Washington with Kerry Kennedy of the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, and he testified about the Sahrawi in the European Parliament on June 4, 2013. The congressional viewing attracted enough attention in the United States to warrant a second interview with Christiane Amanpour, this time on CNN in March 2013. This encounter was markedly different from the first in 2011. The original sequence about the Sahrawi conflict on *Nightline* took up only one and a half minutes of an interview that lasted over five minutes and, as stated, it was clear that Amanpour knew very little about the topic. In the 2013 interview, she allots nearly nine minutes to Bardem, and another twelve to the Moroccan Ambassador to the United Nations, Mohammed Loulichki, thereby establishing a parallel status between the two. In her introductory lead-up to the Bardem segment, she authoritatively discusses the Western Sahara from exactly the angle taken in the film, and while she talks, video sequences from *Sons of the Clouds* play in the background. Her interview with the Spanish actor never strays from the political issues raised in the film. In the second segment, Amanpour subjects Loulichki to a merciless grilling, using interviews from *Sons of the Clouds* with former Ambassador Frank Ruddy and Aminetu Haidar as evidence against him. The Ambassador had not viewed the film before the interview and seems therefore unprepared for Amanpour's line of questioning. Accustomed to realpolitik and to dealing authoritatively with both uninformed U.S. journalists and celebrity activists out of their depth, he is unable to articulate a convincing rebuttal, and his condescending attitude and defensiveness only reinforces the negative image of Moroccans as portrayed in Bardem's film. The CNN interview ends, not as the *Nightline* one did, with the image of the Latin lover, but with another Hollywood stereotype, via the film *Casablanca*, in a clip portraying Moroccan corruption. The Moroccan Ambassador is symbolically cast as Captain Louis Renault, and Bardem finds himself transformed from the suave and swarthy foreigner into the quintessential, if reluctant, American hero, Rick Blaine. This interview, then, provides some anecdotal evidence that desire for the Spanish actor Javier Bardem was effectively transferred to desire in the form of "hope for some kind of transformation in the world of the documentary" (Smaill 17) for at least one viewer, Christiane Amanpour, a spectator who herself holds some power in shaping the opinion of the American viewing public.

It would seem that *Sons of the Clouds*, bolstered by Javier Bardem's celebrity, has accomplished its objective of drawing the world's attention to the intractable Sahrawi problem and

particularly to the issue of human rights violations in the Moroccan-controlled territories. But is it a form of diplomacy? Although officials from the United States had been aware of the issue, outlined in the report prepared by the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights following its delegation's visit to the Western Sahara in August 2012, the film seems to have played a role in goading the United States to take action in April 2013, in the form of a draft U.N. Security Council resolution to add a human rights dimension to MINURSO's mandate in the Western Sahara (Charbonneau n.p.). Morocco immediately responded, threatening to cancel the joint military exercises, known as the "African Lion" war games. France and Spain likewise expressed their displeasure. On April 25, the U.N. extended the mission to Western Sahara, with language that "will encourage stronger efforts on human rights in the phosphate-rich territory," but the U.S. withdrew "a demand that the United Nations start human rights investigations" ("US Weakens" n.p.). Realpolitik seems to have the upper hand, and it is unclear, finally, whether the film will be able to generate real and lasting change along the lines desired by the Sahrawi people. Cooper has argued that "built-in Anglo-sphere bias exists within the allocation of celebrity diplomat status" (9), but the inverse also seems true: celebrity and film are powerful tools in the game of diplomacy, but primarily in the Anglo-sphere.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from “Celebrity, Diplomacy, Documentary: Javier Bardem and *Sons of the Clouds: The Last Colony*.” *African Immigrants and Contemporary Spanish Texts: Crossing the Straits*. Ed. Debra Faszter-McMahon and Victoria Ketz. Farnham: Ashgate/Gower, 2015. 115-30.

<sup>2</sup> Winnie Madikizela-Mandela argues that the case of the Western Sahara bears resemblance to both South Africa and Palestine (Martínez 183-84).

<sup>3</sup>At the 2009 congress held at the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM), José Taboada, the President of the State Coordinator for the Associations of Friends of the Sahrawi People, explained that, “There are other important conflicts in the world having to do with the struggle for independence, for freedom, but we live the conflict in the Sahara in our country because we are the ones who colonized them for a hundred years, we gave them part of our country, our language. . . . But we abandoned them, we escaped, we betrayed them, we didn’t fulfill our promises and we handed them over to the military invasion of two countries who were after their natural resources” (Martínez 16; my translation). Moved by this sense of guilt, Spaniards have organized a multitude of pro-Sahrawi events: summer vacations, blogs, a film festival, a marathon and other sporting events, concerts, and so forth. Susan Martón-Márquez notes, however, that “By contrast, there are no summer vacation programs in Spain for Equatorial Guinean children, and the only ‘caravans’ sent to Morocco carry undocumented immigrant workers who have been unceremoniously expelled from Spanish soil. Yet while there appears to be little postcolonial guilt over Equatorial Guinea and Morocco, many Spaniards evidently do feel intense shame for their country’s treatment of the Sahrawis” (Martín-Márquez 325). For the origins of this special ‘friendship,’ see Campoy-Cubillo (161-63).

<sup>4</sup> Except when otherwise noted, all English translations from the film are transcriptions of the English subtitles.

<sup>5</sup> The other figures include Penélope Cruz, Pedro Almodóvar, Iciar Bollain, Rosa María Sardá, and Pilar Bardem, who were responsible for todosconelsahara.com.

<sup>6</sup> When I informed the Sahrawi poet Bahia Awah about the article I planned to write on *Sons of the Clouds*, he told me that some years ago in the hallways of the United Nations, Nelson Mandela, who was then the South African representative to the body, told his Western Saharan counterpart, Bujari Ahmed, “your cause is legally just and the world is with you, but you need a Richard Gere.” Instead they got Javier Bardem, and this film was, in his opinion, “a great gift and the best support for the Sahrawi cause” (Bahia Awah, personal correspondence, March 17, 2013; my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Julián Gutiérrez Albilla discusses this process in his analysis of the documentary *Los niños de Rusia*: “This phenomenological, affective and cognitive encounter between the documentary image and the spectator is shaped by conscious motives and unconscious desires, driven by (historiographical) curiosity and by the spectator’s instincts, impulses, desires or fears (Renov, 2004, 101), even if those desires are often directed toward the social and political arenas of everyday experiences as well as towards world historical events (Rabinowitz, 1993, 129)” (132).

<sup>8</sup> The words “passion” and “passionate” appear in several online reviews of *Sons of the Clouds*.

<sup>9</sup> Cruz was linked romantically with Anglo leading men before marrying Bardem. [Is this endnote necessary? I would delete it. It does not add much]

<sup>10</sup> Rafael Hernando, a spokesperson for the conservative Popular Party (PP), in contrast, highlighted Bardem’s roles as a villain in American films in a tweet following the actor’s comments regarding the economic politics of Mariano Rajoy’s conservative government in an interview granted to Gregorio Belinchón of *El País* on October 31, 2012. The tweet read, “Hay q ser un ‘gran villano’ y no de película para sostener q al gobierno le va bien tanto paro. Frivolidades de millonario residente en Miami” (You have to be quite a villain, and not the film kind, to claim that the government is benefiting from so much unemployment. Frivolity from a millionaire who lives in Miami) (Huerta n.p.).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Spain hovers unnamed, although it is framed within the bird’s-eye perspective of Africa. In other documentaries, films, and novels by and for Spaniards about the Western Sahara, the relationship between Spain and its former colony is of primary importance. Here, since the intended audience is global—the target viewers are, in fact, the United Nations itself, and the citizens and governments of France and the United States—the story will be told differently, as part of a history of European colonialism of Africa, the Cold War struggles over the Third World, the U.N.’s failure to stop human rights abuses, and the violation of international law.

<sup>12</sup> My translation here differs slightly from that given in the subtitles, which ends, “you become more and more attached to their dignity, and a very strong sense of injustice fills you.” They have omitted the anger—*rabia*—in the Spanish, perhaps because there is a danger here that Bardem will fall into the same trap as Angelina Jolie, whose activism “has proven problematic, as she has intertwined her emotional rhetoric with her position as a celebrity diplomat” (Wheeler 56).

<sup>13</sup> This is important, given that “mental imagery has a more powerful impact on learning, decision making, and behavior compared with other methods of processing information” (Blair 828).

<sup>14</sup> It is not mentioned in the film that Gonçalves “oversees partnerships with 2008 RFK Human Rights Laureate Aminatou Haidar from Western Sahara” (Robert F. Kennedy Center website n.p.).

<sup>15</sup> The filmmakers comment in interviews included with the DVD version of the film that they added this storyline after completing the rest of the production in order to give the problem a human dimension.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the contradictions inherent in the concept of Hispano-Sahrawi ‘fraternity,’ see Martín-Márquez and Campoy-Cubillo.

<sup>17</sup> The attorney Inés Miranda explains that Hamat (written in her text as Hmad Hamad) was “deprived of liberty for 27 years for being a Sahrawi” (Martínez 277; my translation).

<sup>18</sup> *Lalia* is more of a poetic tale with Sahrawi actors than a documentary film. Campoy-Cubillo notes that the story, which seems to be narrated by a young Sahrawi girl reading from her journal, was actually written by Munt and Ignasi Riera (178). Martín-Márquez also briefly discusses the film (333).

<sup>19</sup> The music for *El rumor de la arena* was composed by one of the producers, Diego Valbuena, and denotes very little Sahrawi influence. The sound design for González’s film *Children of the Clouds* includes only Sahrawi music. *Sons of the Clouds* walks a line between these points. The relative invisibility of African performers, however, reinforces the criticism of celebrity activism in Africa: “Individually, it has enhanced the status of stars from the North over the fortunes of those potential celebrity diplomats from the South—a gulf highlighted by the marginalization of African performers, even at an African-centered event such as Live 8” (Cooper 34).

---

**Works Cited**

- Belinchón, Gregorio. "Javier Bardem: 'Al Gobierno le viene bien tanto paro.'" *ElPais.es*. October 31, 2012. Web. March 11, 2013.
- . "Javier Bardem lleva el Sáhara a los Goya." *ElPais.es*. Feb. 3, 2013. Web. June 26, 2013.
- Bergman Rosamond, Annika. "The Cosmopolitan-Communitarian Divide and Celebrity Anti-war Activism." In *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics: Changing the World?* Ed. Liza Tsaliki, Christos A. Fangonikolopoulos, and Asteris Huliaras. Bristol: Intellect, 2011. 63–82. Print.
- Blair, Irene V., Jennifer E. Ma, and Alison P. Lenton. "Imagining Stereotypes Away: The Moderation of Implicit Stereotypes Through Mental Imagery." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81.5 (2001): 828–41. Print.
- Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Campoy-Cubillo, Adolfo. *Memories of the Maghreb: Transnational Identities in Spanish Cultural Production*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.
- Cooper, Andrew F. *Celebrity Diplomacy*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008. Print.
- El rumor de la arena*. Dir. Daniel Iriarte and Jesús Prieto. Cameo, 2008. DVD.
- Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*. Dir. Pamela Yates. ITVS, 2011. DVD.
- Gutiérrez-Albilla, Julián Daniel. "Children of Exile: Trauma, Memory and Testimony in Jaime Camino's Documentary *Los niños de Rusia* (2001)." *Spain on Screen: Developments in Contemporary Spanish Cinema*. Ed. Ann Davies. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. Print.
- Hijos de las nubes*. Dir. Carlos González. Web. Nov. 23, 2011.
- Huerta, Rocío. "El PP tilde a Bardem de 'gran villano' por decir que al Gobierno le va bien tanto paro." *ElPais.es* Oct. 31, 2012. Web. Accessed March 11, 2013.
- "Javier Bardem's Passionate Cause." *ABC's Nightline*. October 8, 2011. Web. Accessed Feb. 4, 2012.
- Lalia*. Dir. Silvia Munt. Bausan Films, 1999. VHS.
- Los baúles del retorno*. Dir. María Miró. Fígaro Films, 1995. DVD.
- Mariem Hassan, la voz del Sáhara*. Dir. Manuel Domínguez. 2007. Web. Accessed June 8, 2013.
- "Marselha Gonçalves Margerin." Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights and Justice Website. Web. June 29, 2013.
- Martín-Márquez, Susan. *Disorientations: Spanish Colonialism in Africa and the Performance of Identity*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008. Print.
- Martínez Lillo, Pedro, Juan Carlos Gimeno Martín, Silvia Arias Careaga, and Carlos Tanarro Alonso, eds. *Memoria y tiempo presente del Sahara Occidental. Política, cooperación y cultura*. Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2012. Print.
- Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. Print.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. London: Verso, 1994. Print.
- Ramírez Berg, Charles. *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion and Resistance*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2002. Print.
- Renov, Michael. *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004. Print.
- Smaill, Belinda. *The Documentary: Politics, Emotion, Culture*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Sons of the Clouds: The Last Colony* (original title, *Hijos de las nubes: La última colonia*). Dir. Alvaro Longoria. Prod. Javier Bardem, Alvaro Longoria and Lilly Hartley. Morena Films, Pinguin Films and Candescent Films, 2012. DVD.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2003. Print.

- “The Tragic Story You May Have Never Heard Of.” CNN Website. March 6, 2013. Web. May 15, 2013.
- “US Weakens W. Sahara Human Rights Demand at UN.” Globalpost.com. April 23, 2013. Web. June 29, 2013.
- Valdivia, Angharad. “Is Penélope to J. Lo as Culture Is to Nature? Eurocentric Approaches to ‘Latin’ Beauties.” *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*. 129–48. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2007. Print.
- Wheeler, Mark. “Celebrity Politics and Cultural Citizenship: UN Goodwill Ambassadors and Messengers of Peace.” In *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics: Changing the World?* Ed. Liza Tsaliki, Christos A. Fangonikolopoulos, and Asteris Huliaras. Bristol: Intellect, 2011. 45–62. Print.
- Yrjölä, Riina. “The Global Politics of Celebrity Humanitarianism.” In *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics: Changing the World?* Ed. Liza Tsaliki, Christos A. Fangonikolopoulos, and Asteris Huliaras. Bristol: Intellect, 2011. 175–91. Print.