

# The Spanish Civil War in Cinema

David Archibald

University of Glasgow

Departments of Theatre, Film and  
Television and Hispanic Studies

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I present a case study of the Spanish civil war in cinema. I examine how this period has been represented in cinema through time, in different countries and in various cinematic forms. I reject the postmodern prognosis that the past is a chaotic mass, made sense of through the subjective narrativisation choices of historians working in the present. On the contrary, I argue that there are referential limits on what histories can be legitimately written about the past. I argue that there are different, often contradictory, representations of the Spanish civil war in cinema which indicates a diversity of uses for the past. But there are also referential limits on what can be legitimately represented cinematically. I argue that the civil war setting will continue to be one which filmmakers turn to as the battle for the future of Spain is partially played out in the cinematically recreated battles of the past.

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## Introduction

This thesis consists of a case study examining how the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) has been represented in cinema.<sup>1</sup> Over sixty years after its conclusion the civil war still provokes considerable interest, both within Spain and abroad. It is generally recognised as one of the key political battlegrounds of the twentieth century. Yet knowledge about the event is usually restricted to the idea that it was a war between democracy and fascism. A cursory reading of some of the history books surrounding the conflict is sufficient to dispel this idea and indicates its complexity. It is a history that, even to this day, is keenly contested. The thesis explores theoretical issues surrounding the possibility of truthfully representing the civil war. Is it possible sixty years after the event to unearth what really occurred during the war? Is it possible to arrive at objective historical accounts of the past or can we only have conflicting, partial perspectives? In attempting to answer these questions, I look at one of the most complex historical periods and ask how it is represented in popular cinema. I use six case studies to investigate different ways that the civil war has been represented in fictional cinema through time, in different countries and in various cinematic styles.

In chapter one I look at arguments surrounding the epistemological status of historical enquiry and outline recent attacks by Keith Jenkins and Hayden White on conventional historiography. I reject their arguments about the inability of historians to adequately access the past. In the process I draw on the work of

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I use lower case letters to write 'civil war', at any point where it appears in upper case it is only when I am quoting others.

Karl Marx and the writings of Marxist critics, Terry Eagleton and Alex Callinicos, in addition to the writings of Richard J. Evans. I proceed to outline the key developments in the Spanish civil war before recounting recent developments in the civil war's complex and contested historiography.

In chapter two I turn to the relationship between history and cinema, examining arguments concerning how film, and different film forms, represent the past. I proceed to provide a general overview of cinematic representations of the civil war, both inside and outside Spain. I suggest that under the Franco dictatorship the civil war was initially represented as a just and righteous crusade, but I also outline how oppositional filmmakers struggled in the latter years of the dictatorship to present alternative views. I proceed to detail the key non-Spanish films set during the civil war before discussing how the conflict was represented in post-Franco Spain. The subsequent six chapters represent specific case studies of the different ways that the civil war has been represented cinematically.

Chapter 3 examines how American cinema represented the civil war during the second world war, focusing primarily on the Hollywood blockbuster For Whom the Bell Tolls (Wood/USA/1943), but also touching on Blockade (Dieterle/USA/1938) and the documentary film The Spanish Earth (Ivens/USA/1937). This chapter outlines how Hemingway's original novel was appropriated as part of a move to adapt the Spanish civil war to suit the needs of wartime America.

Chapter 4 examines Julio Medem's Basque-set historical drama Vacas/Cows (Medem/Spain/1992), an arthouse film that places the civil war within the context of the Basque country's violent past. Through an analysis of Vacas I examine the ability of alternative film forms to represent the past. I also explore the cyclical view of history presented in the film, contrasting it with the historiographical view of Jenkins and White. Finally, by analysing the film in relation to the national conflict in the Basque country, I outline another example of the appropriation of the past for the needs of the present.

Chapter 5 explores how the civil war is represented in a number of Spanish feature films that were produced in the 1980s and 1990s that utilise aspects of comedy: ¡Ay Carmela! (Saura/Spain/1990), Belle Époque (Fernando Trueba/Spain/1992), La vaquilla (Berlanga/Spain/1985) and Libertarias/Libertarians (Aranda/Spain/1996). I examine whether it is possible to narrativise the civil war as a comedy. I reject the position put forward by White in chapter one that representations of the past are determined solely by the subjective interpretations of those in the present.

Chapter 6 explores how the civil war is represented in the ghost story El espinazo del diablo/The Devil's Backbone (del Toro/Spain/Mexico/2001). In this chapter I examine the relationship between the figure of the ghost and the past. I also discuss the extent to which allegorical storytelling can adequately deal with the complexities of past events, in this specific instance the Spanish civil war.



In Chapter 7 I explore how the revolutionary dimension of the conflict has been represented, primarily focusing on Land and Freedom/Tierra y Libertad (Loach/UK/Germany/Spain/1995) but also touching on Libertarias. I return to issues dealing with the possibilities of various film forms to adequately represent the past and I defend non self-reflexive cinema against the charge that it is unable to foster a historical consciousness in audiences.

In Chapter 8 I focus on one of the most recent films that represents the conflict, Soldados de Salamina/Soldiers of Salamis (David Trueba/Spain/2002), a film that problematises the ability of accessing the past. I argue that although the film suggests that all that can be accessed are small-scale narratives about the past, nevertheless it also contends that the civil war needs to be re-visited by a younger generation of Spaniards. In this chapter I return to the theoretical issues raised in chapters one and two and, in some way, offer a theoretical conclusion to these questions.

In the conclusion I pull the different threads of the thesis together in a general restatement of my position. I argue that the ghosts of the civil war may only be finally laid to rest when the social antagonisms that created it cease to exist. We may wait some time for that yet. Therefore, the civil war setting will continue to be one which filmmakers turn as the battle for the future of Spain is partially played out in the cinematically recreated battles of the past.

## Chapter One

### History and The Spanish Civil War

#### Introduction

I begin this chapter by examining debates surrounding the epistemological status of history and its ability to both make and substantiate valid claims about the past. I examine conflicting theoretical approaches towards the study of history, starting with postmodern critiques by Keith Jenkins and Hayden White. In rejecting the approach of Jenkins and White I draw on the work of Karl Marx and Marxist critics Alex Callinicos and Terry Eagleton. I also utilise the recent work of Richard J. Evans in his defence of history. In the second half of this chapter I outline the key events of the Spanish civil war and the complex and controversial historiography that surrounds it.

#### Guernica and the truth of the past

On the afternoon of 26 April 1937, church bells signalled an impending aerial attack on the small Basque market town of Guernica.<sup>2</sup> Over the next few hours, forty-three assorted aircraft from the German Luftwaffe dropped approximately 100 000 incendiary, high explosive and shrapnel bombs on the town. Messerschmitt BF-109 fighters followed up, strafing low-level machine-gun fire across the civilian population. Although it is not possible to be precise, Hugh Thomas estimates that somewhere in the region of 1000 people died in the

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<sup>2</sup> The horror of the violence is symbolised in Pablo Picasso's vast canvas, *Guernica*, currently hanging in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. Picasso's painting was the inspiration for a short experimental film, also titled *Guernica*, (France/1955) by the French director Alain Resnais.

attack.<sup>3</sup> Ernest Hemingway once commented that ‘In Africa a thing is true at first light and a lie by noon.’ But, as the controversy surrounding the bombing of Guernica would come to illustrate, it is not only the case in Africa. For the next thirty-three years a generation of Spaniards were brought up with an official version of these events that asserted that Republican arsonists had attacked the town. Only in 1970, when those responsible had died or faded from power, did the Franco dictatorship admit that the Luftwaffe was responsible.<sup>4</sup>

This event is a useful starting point because the conflicting histories of what happened on that day have now been replaced by a consensus about what generally took place. The totality of the event may not be known in full, there is no absolute truth about the history of the bombing, no precise figure of the number of bombs that were dropped, no exact count of fatalities or casualties is known; but there is now agreement on the broad detail and no one now asserts that Republicans were to blame. The existence of different accounts of the bombing of Guernica can be utilised to illuminate questions about the possibility of making truth claims about the past, points I return to later in this chapter. If the written history of Guernica appears to be settled, the events of the wider conflict, and their subsequent interpretation, remain hotly contested. The ongoing battles over the history of the Spanish civil war, which I outline below, can also help to illuminate questions about the epistemological nature of historiography, questions to which I now turn.

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller description and analysis of the bombing of Guernica see Hugh Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, pp. 624 – 629.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



## The Status of History

The status of history as an objective discipline grounding itself in ‘the facts’ as it strives to reach the truth of past events has become increasingly problematised under the weight of an onslaught from postmodern historians such as Jenkins and White. Jenkins offers the following definition of history

History is a shifting, problematic discourse, ostensibly about an aspect of the world, the past, that is produced by a group of present-minded workers (overwhelmingly in our culture salaried historians) who go about their work in mutually recognisable ways that are epistemologically, methodologically, ideologically and practically positioned and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal spectrum.<sup>5</sup>

Jenkins appeals to readers to see history, or histories, as positioned pieces of writing, which, although not fictitious, are nevertheless inventions. He rejects the possibility that historians can make objective truth claims about the past. For Jenkins the ability of history to access its referent unproblematically is an approach best left to a quaint past practice, perhaps epitomised by Geoffrey Elton who suggests that the study of history amounts to a search for truth. Elton writes that ‘the truth we seek is the truth of the event and all that surrounds it, not the possibility that a truth abstracted from the event is being proclaimed and can be teased out by the techniques of the critic.’<sup>6</sup> Elton suggests that history is a continuous accumulation of knowledge aimed at arriving at objective accounts of the past that can successfully surpass the subjective desires of the individual

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Elton, *Return to Essentials*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 30.

historian. Thus he argues that ‘historical study depends on discovering meaning without inventing it.’<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, Jenkins asserts that all that can exist are conflicting perspectives on the past, perspectives that cannot be more valid than any other.

For Jenkins, the past is always moulded by forces at work in the present writing that ‘History is never for itself it is always for someone.’<sup>8</sup> This position is not necessarily a new one; Friedrich Nietzsche strove to undermine the objective status of historical enquiry by arguing that history is a construct, the meaning of which is determined, not by objective analysis, but by the subjectivity of historians. For Nietzsche, the past represents a chaotic mass of events that is only attributed meaning by those writing in the present, thus he argues ‘you can explain the past only by what is most powerful in the present.’<sup>9</sup> The conflicting histories of Guernica illustrate that the writing of history is tied up with power structures; but it is another thing to suggest that all that can be achieved are partial accounts of the past, accounts that are imposed by the subjectivity of historians.

Jenkins comments, ‘The past has gone and history is what historians make of it when they go to work.’<sup>10</sup> Jenkins adds that ‘History (historiography) is an inter-textual, linguistic construct’<sup>11</sup>, thereby suggesting that what historians study when they go to work is written, or textual accounts of the past, a past that can

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, 1991, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, Routledge, New York and London, 1988, p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Jenkins, 1991, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

only be accessed through other texts. Jenkins's position is part of what has been described as the 'linguistic turn' in historiography, a development that asserts that language plays a pivotal role in the construction of historical meaning. Of this textualism, Jenkins writes

What textualism does is to draw attention to the "textual conditions" under which all historical work is done and all historical knowledge is produced. What textualism does is to allow all the various methodological approaches, be they Marxist, or empiricist, or phenomenological, or whatever, to continue just as before, but with the proviso that none of them can continue to think that they gain direct access to, or "ground" their textuality in, a reality appropriated plain, that they have an epistemology.<sup>12</sup>

White also joins the postmodern critique of history when he argues that attempts to impute a definitive meaning to the past through the imposition of narrative order only work to deny the possible open-ended nature of history. As he puts it, 'the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite...the "context" of any singular event is infinitely extensive or at least is not objectively determinable'.<sup>13</sup> For White, narrative discourses close down possible interpretations of the past in a monolithic fashion. He suggests that 'The historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it. On the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption and chaos is our lot.'<sup>14</sup> White argues that through a process of emplotment and narrativisation history is injected with ideological meaning; in

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<sup>12</sup> Keith Jenkins, On 'What is History?': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Hayden White, 'The Modernist Event' in The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event, Vivian Sobchak (Ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Jenkins, 1995, p. 145.



his view, the form employed by the historian has less to do with the content of the past than with the historian's ideology and emplotment choices. Like Jenkins, White suggests that all history is textualised, thus allowing the possibility of numerous interpretations of the past but denying the objective status of any one specific interpretation.

The work of White has fuelled discussion on the nature of historiography. Frank Ankersmit, for example, argues that 'Like a dike covered with ice-floes at the end of winter, the past has been covered by a thick crust of narrative interpretations; and the historical debate is as much a debate about the components of this crust as about the past hidden beneath it'.<sup>15</sup> Callinicos suggests, however, that what White 'at times at least, seems to be saying is that, to use the fashionable parlance, it's crust all the way down.'<sup>16</sup> Eagleton, while acknowledging that the past may be a discursive construct of the present, suggests that 'it is not, of course, merely an imaginary back-projection of it.'<sup>17</sup> Eagleton rejects the textualist approach of Jenkins and White when he writes, 'Materialism must insist on the irreducibility of the real to discourse; it must also remind historical idealism that if the past itself – by definition – no longer exists; its *effects* certainly do.'<sup>18</sup> Thus, for Eagleton, the traces of the past in the present still make it possible to access Ankersmit's dyke.

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Alex Callinicos, Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, New Left Books, London, 1981, p. 51

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

Many historians have sidestepped the epistemological problems raised by the linguistic turn; perhaps it is not too difficult to speculate why. The assertion that everything is a linguistic construct is, of course, a linguistic construct. Rather than becoming locked in un-winnable epistemological battles about linguistics and the ability to access or acquire knowledge about the past, most historians have carried on with the task of writing history. Other historians have responded negatively to postmodern critiques. The approach of some academics un-swayed by postmodern critics is encapsulated in the comments of Willie Thompson who asserts, somewhat facetiously, that ‘it is never possible to disprove the claims embodied in the notion that it is impossible to achieve concrete knowledge about actual events and situations – any more than it is possible to disprove the claim that human destinies are controlled through sub-space vibrations by little green persons located on a galaxy far away.’<sup>19</sup>

It is not the first time that the ability to access knowledge about the world has been under assault. Sextus Empiricus, for example, a philosopher of the late second and early third century A.D., developed a mode of thought named after the philosopher Pyrrho of Elis.<sup>20</sup> This philosophy came to be known as Pyrrhonism, an extreme form of scepticism that asserted that it was necessary to suspend judgement on whether it is possible to know true reality. Pyrrhonism does not suggest that reality can be known, or not known, but that it is not possible to assert a definite response to the question. It is a philosophical approach which has reappeared occasionally over the years; for instance, during the sixteenth century Pyrrhonists attacked history as both useless and inaccurate,

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<sup>19</sup> Willie Thompson, What Happened to History?, Pluto Press, London, 2000, p. 182.

<sup>20</sup> See Alan Bailey, Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.

suggesting that it was governed by the laws of literary composition. So we have been here before and, as Linda Hutcheon argues, ‘The provisional, indeterminate nature of historical knowledge is certainly not a discovery of postmodernism. Nor is the questioning of the ontological and epistemological status of historical ‘fact’ or the distrust of seeming neutrality and objectivity of recounting.’<sup>21</sup> Hutcheon proceeds to suggest that ‘the concentration of these problematizations in postmodern art is not something we can ignore’<sup>22</sup> Likewise, it is not sufficient to ignore the problematisation of history raised by postmodern historians.

### **Historical Patterns and Teleological Trajectories**

These epistemological questions can be explored through an exploration of Jenkins and White’s attack on the idea that there are patterns inherent within historical development. In contrast to Jenkins and White, other theorists suggest that there are patterns in historical development which exist beyond the subjective needs and desires of individual historians. As I outline in chapter four in relation to Vacas, there are those who suggest that the past contains a cyclical trajectory. Karl Marx also argued that the past has discernible patterns. The fullest statement of Marx’s position on history is contained in the preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859) where he writes

In the social production of their life, people enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum-total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of

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<sup>21</sup> Hutcheon, p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 88.



material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of people that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression of the same thing – within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas White posits a view of the past as one of ‘discontinuity, disruption and chaos’, Marx suggests that there are patterns that govern historical development which can be uncovered across different social formations and in different historical periods. For instance, Marx argues that in pursuing their own interests different classes come into conflict across all social formations. This struggle acts as the motor-force of historical development, thus he famously asserts ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.’<sup>24</sup> Despite concentrating on the role of economics in his analysis of historical change, Marx is not an economic determinist and he recognises the role of human agency in historical development when he writes,

History does nothing; it does not possess immense riches, it does not fight battles. It is men, real, living men, who do all this, who possess things and fight battles. It is not “history” which uses men as a means of achieving - as if it were an individual person - its own ends. History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends.’<sup>25</sup>

A Marxist view of history which suggests that there are discernible patterns in the past is also evident in the more recent work of Eagleton when he argues that

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Works Vol. 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969-70, pp. 503-4.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party,’ in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Marx/Engels: Selected Works in One Volume, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1980, pp. 35-63, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1956, p. 125.

history manifests itself as a constant tale of exploitation and oppression. Echoing Marx's 'history as class struggle' thesis he suggests that 'History for the great majority of men and women who have lived and died, has been a tale of unremitting labour and oppression, of suffering and degradation.'<sup>26</sup> Eagleton convincingly argues that history 'has displayed a most remarkable consistency - namely the stubbornly persisting realities of wretchedness and exploitation.'<sup>27</sup> He rejects the position of White when he adds 'if history really were wholly random and discontinuous, how would we account for this strangely persistent continuity? Would it not loom up for us as the most extraordinary coincidence - that a human history which according to some is just the ceaseless chance twist of the kaleidoscope should again and again settle its pieces into scarcity and oppression?'<sup>28</sup>

By promoting the idea that there are patterns in historical development Marxist writers have been open to the charge that their view of history is teleologically loaded. Teleology has figured in the work of many historians, E. H. Carr, for example, suggests that 'history properly so-called can only be written by those who find and accept a sense of direction in history itself. The belief that we have come from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that we are going somewhere.'<sup>29</sup> A similar approach is also suggested by Theodor Adorno when he asserts that 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb...the One and All

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<sup>26</sup> Terry Eagleton, The Illusions of Postmodernism, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1996, p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Jenkins, 1995, p. 59.



that keeps rolling on to this day - with occasional breathing spells - would teleologically be the absolute of suffering',<sup>30</sup>

The concept of history as both linear and teleological is one of the main targets of recent postmodern critiques. Brenda Marshall, for instance, suggests that

History in the postmodern moment becomes histories and questions. It asks: Whose history gets told? in whose name? for what purpose? postmodernism is about histories not told, retold, untold. History as it never was. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, eradicated. It's about the refusal to see history as linear.<sup>31</sup>

The former part of Marshall's statement provides the positive side of postmodern historiography. Marxist commentators are highly critical, however, of theoreticians who simplify Marxism as viewing history as both linear and teleological. Ellen Meiksins Wood argues that one of the most common criticisms of Marxism in the past was that it, supposedly, 'subscribed to a mechanical and simplistic view of history according to which all societies were predestined to go through a single, inexorable sequence of stages from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism, and finally to capitalism which would inevitably give way to socialism.'<sup>32</sup> Eagleton counters this postmodern critique when he argues that

History, as opposed to *history* with a small h, is for postmodernism a teleological affair. It depends, that is, on the belief that the world is moving purposefully towards some predetermined goal...there may be set-backs here and there, but generally speaking history is unilinear, progressive and deterministic. There is no need to worry about how best to confront people who hold this belief, because there aren't any.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Eagleton, 1996, p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Jenkins, 1995, p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'Marxism and the Course of History', New Left Review, Number 147, September/October, London, 1984, pp. 95 – 107, p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> Eagleton, 1996, p. 45.

Callinicos further defends Marxism against the charge of being teleologically loaded when he writes ‘there seems to be no good reason why one cannot postulate the existence of mechanisms responsible for historical change across the whole range of human societies without falling into the trap of teleology.’<sup>34</sup> There exists, however, a problematic teleological thread within Marxism, exemplified by the following quote from Lenin: ‘the great world-wide historic service of Marx and Engels lies in the fact that they proved by scientific analysis the inevitability of the downfall of capitalism and its transition to communism.’<sup>35</sup> This quote reveals a tendency towards historical inevitability that contemporary Marxists have been quick to deny, while still maintaining that history does contain discernible patterns. But there is clearly a difference, to use a cinematic metaphor, between forward and back projection. Thompson asserts that

it is necessary to distinguish teleology – the assertion that there are forces at work in history propelling it towards a predetermined outcome – from an explanatory principle which makes it possible to understand after the event why history has proceeded as it has from the emergence of the species but says nothing about it having followed any particular route.<sup>36</sup>

### **Textualism and Truth**

To return to the question of textualism, Frederic Jameson straddles the space between a conventional Marxist and a postmodern approach when he asserts that history ‘is inaccessible to us except in textual or narrative form...we approach it

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<sup>34</sup> Callinicos, p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> Marx, Karl et al. *The Marxist View of History*, Cambridge Heath Press, London, p. 1. It must be added that Marxism is a political project aimed at the emancipation of the working class rather than a philosophy of history. Therefore many Marxists, like prophetic politicians, have a tendency to argue that the future that they hope to see is inevitable, and, therefore, just. This has fuelled the accusation that Marxism offers a teleologically loaded perspective.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, pp. 128-9.



only by way of some prior textualization or narrative (re)construction.<sup>37</sup> In suggesting that history is only accessible through textualisation, Jameson does not go as far as White, indeed White himself highlights that ‘Jameson doesn’t believe history is a text with no referent.’<sup>38</sup> Callinicos warns of the danger of rejecting the referent in history when he argues that ‘once the referents of historical writing have been occluded, the boundary separating it from fiction is inevitably blurred.’<sup>39</sup> Citing the example of the Holocaust, Callinicos rejects what he regards as the inadequacies of White’s approach when he writes, ‘surely there are events which it would be simply outrageous to treat as constructs of the historical imaginary...which challenge theoreticians of historical relativism to face up to the corollaries of positions otherwise too easily dealt with on an abstract level.’<sup>40</sup> In drawing out the practical pitfalls of postmodern historians he exposes the weakness inherent in the following quote from White, ‘no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events.’<sup>41</sup> In another similar quote White states

Historical situations are not inherently tragic, comic or romantic...All the historian needs to do to transform a tragic into a comic situation is to shift the point of view or change the scope of his perceptions. Anyway we only think of situations as tragic or comic because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literal heritage. How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with meaning of a particular kind.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Frederic Jameson, ‘Marxism and Historicism’ in New Literary History, Vol. 11, No. 1, Autumn 1979, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, John Hopkins University Press, London, 1987, p. 148.

<sup>39</sup> Callinicos, p. 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>41</sup> White, 1987, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978, p. 85.

Applying this position to the Holocaust exposes its fundamental weakness; it is not simply the ‘imposition of a structure’ that determines that the Holocaust is ‘intrinsically tragic’. In response to White, Evans argues that ‘Auschwitz was indeed inherently a tragedy and cannot be seen either as a comedy or a farce. And if this is true of Auschwitz, then it must be true at least to some degree of other past happenings, events, institutions, people as well.’<sup>43</sup> In White’s later work on truth and the Holocaust he concedes that subjective narrativisation processes do not solely determine the past and that the past can be tested against evidence. Thus he writes

We can confidently presume that the facts of the matter set limits on the *kinds* of stories that can be *properly* (in the sense of both veraciously and appropriately) told about them only if we believe that the events themselves possess a ‘story’ kind of form and a ‘plot’ kind of meaning. We may then dismiss a ‘comic’ or ‘pastoral’ story, with an upbeat ‘tone’ and a humorous ‘point of view,’ from the ranks of competing narratives as manifestly false to the facts – or at least to the facts that *matter* – of the Nazi era.<sup>44</sup>

White’s concession on this point is welcome. However, it consequently calls into question the application of his theories to other events. It seems clear that the past should not be interpreted as simply accidental or chaotic, perhaps it is not linear, but that does not preclude that there exist definite patterns in the past which do not need to be emplotted to be uncovered.

If all that exists are conflicting perspectives on the past, then it would be necessary to equate the validity of any one interpretation of the past with any

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<sup>43</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, Granta, London, 2000, p. 124.

<sup>44</sup> Hayden White ‘Probing The Limits Of Representation, Historical Emplotment and The Problem of Truth’, in Saul Friedlander (Ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1992, pp. 37-53, p. 39.



other. It is a problem Jenkins recognises when he writes that ‘epistemologically the conviction that one can make no sense of the past stands at exactly the same level of plausibility as the conviction that one can.’<sup>45</sup> Which is, in one sense, entirely liberating, but in another sense, entirely useless. As Paul Boghossian states

To say some claim is true according to some perspective sounds simply like a fancy way of saying that someone, or some group, believes it...If a claim and its opposite can be equally true provided that there is some perspective relative to which each is true, then, since there is a perspective - realism - relative to which it's true that a claim and its opposite cannot both be true, postmodernism would have to admit that it itself is just as true as its opposite, realism. But postmodernism cannot afford to admit that; presumably, its whole point is that realism is false. Thus, we see that the very statement of postmodernism, construed as a view about truth, undermines itself; facts about truth independent of particular perspectives are presupposed by the view itself<sup>46</sup>

Catherine Belsey suggests that ‘there is a danger that the total rejection of epistemology may present us with a world which is ultimately arbitrary and inscrutable, and in which one discourse (and therefore mode of action) is as good as any other.’<sup>47</sup> She claims it is possible to resolve this danger

by bringing together existing discourses which claim to be scientific, and foregrounding the incompatibilities and collisions between them, we can produce new, more coherent discourses which, until their own contradictions are exposed, can lay claim to the status of knowledge. Such a knowledge, though it is tested in practice, does not seek a guarantee in an extra-discursive order of reality. At the same time it is never final, always hypothetical, always ready to recognize the possibility of its own incoherence. To this extent it is never fixed but always in process.’<sup>48</sup>

Belsey's assertion, however, is unconvincing. Knowledge must be tested against what she describes as ‘an extra-discursive order of reality’, otherwise historians

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<sup>45</sup> Jenkins, 1995, p. 135.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Evans, p. 220.

<sup>47</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, Methuen, London and New York, 1994, p. 63.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63/4.

are locked in endless discursive practices with no way out of the linguistic cul-de-sac. The practical implications of the postmodern position are highlighted when these ideas are taken outside of academic discourse and applied to the world that exists outside the text. Jeremy Hawthorn highlights the example of a former Professor of Literature at the University of Lyons who argued in defence of neo-Nazis charged with Holocaust denial. The defence invoked recent theories of literary criticism by claiming that ‘the meaning of such terms found in Nazi documents as *resettlement* and *special treatment* could not be established by historical context...since their meaning was indeterminate.’<sup>49</sup> It is not surprising that in the trial of the British rightwing historian David Irving, the defence chose not to invoke the work of any of the postmodern historians, but rather the work of Evans, a traditional historian.<sup>50</sup>

The practical limitations of the linguistic turn when applied to contentious historical events call into question the usefulness of the theory itself. Historians are inevitably constrained by their ideological positioning, but it does not follow that all histories are simply subjective with no recourse to evidence in non-textual referents. There may not be one single truth, one objective reality that can be unproblematically accessed by the impartial historian. But even if we dispel the possibility of unproblematically accessing a completely objective past, it does not leave the historian adrift in an ocean of never-ending subjective perspectivism. As I suggested above, *Guernica* reveals that historical narratives

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<sup>49</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, Cunning Passages: New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Marxism in the Contemporary Literary Debate, Arnold, London and New York, 1996, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> For further information see Richard J. Evans, Telling Lies About Hitler, Verso, London, 2002. The book is an account of the defamation case brought against Penguin Books and Professor Deborah Lipstadt by the fascist historian David Irving. Irving alleged that she had falsely labeled him a liar and an anti-Semite by publishing his thesis that the Holocaust did not take place.



are tied in with dominant power structures; Guernica was a clear example of (official) history being written by the victors. In relation to Guernica the past and official history were clearly telling different stories and illustrates that it is possible to have conflicting perspectives on the past, but can we have conflicting truths? Did German fascists or Spanish anarchists bomb Guernica? Is the position of the fascists as valid as the position of Thomas and subsequent historians? In this case both narratives of the events can be tested against referential evidence – the fragments of bombshell, German papers taken from dead airmen, eyewitness accounts of survivors etc. It may not be possible to arrive at the absolute truth about what happened in Guernica, but that is far from the same thing as saying that no truth is possible. Moreover, to recognise that absolute truth is not possible to achieve is not equivalent to rejecting the possibility of arriving at truth claims altogether. According to Jenkins, ‘The past can be described as an utterly “promiscuous past”, a past which will, as it were, go with anybody; a sort of loose past which we can all have; the sort of past that is, arguably not much use having in the first place.’<sup>51</sup> In arguing against the promiscuity of the past, Evans suggests that it does, indeed have its referential limits when he writes

Most historical narratives consist of a mixture of revealed, reworked, constructed and deconstructed narratives from the historical past and from the historians’ own mind. We start with a rough-hewn block of stone, and chisel away until we have a statue. The statue was not waiting there to be discovered, we made it ourselves, and it would have been perfectly possible for us to have made a different statue from the one we finally created. On the other hand, we are constrained not only by the kind of stone it is; an incompetent sculptor not only runs the risk of producing an unconvincing sculpture that does not much resemble

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<sup>51</sup> Jenkins, 1995, p. 58.

anything, but also of hammering or chiselling too hard, or the wrong way, and shattering the stone altogether.<sup>52</sup>

Evans correctly states that all narratives are emplotted, but he suggests that not all emplotments will have the same explanatory powers. The past as chaos, the past as class struggle, the past as cyclical – these are conflicting theoretical formulations that can be tested against empirical evidence. I contend that Marxist accounts of the past offer the most explanatory analyses of historical processes. Although my aim in this thesis is not primarily to prove the correctness of one theory against the other, but to argue for the necessity of an approach towards the past that permits value judgements and truth claims to be made and contested. My aim is also to restate the necessity of history in an era when history is increasingly called into question. In his recent autobiography Eric Hobsbawm asserts that ‘More history than ever is today being revised or invented by people who do not want the real past, but only a past that suits their purpose. Today is the great age of historical mythology. The defence of history by its professionals is today more urgent in politics than ever.’<sup>53</sup> The necessity of historians and historical thinking is illustrated by an analysis of the problematic past of the Spanish civil war.

### **Historiography and The Spanish Civil War**

If the bombing of Guernica is a useful reference point for the discussion of truth and perspectivism in the past, the Spanish civil war provides another useful, if more complex, example. What is at stake in this debate is the possibility of arriving at authoritative, if not objective, accounts of this extremely complex

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<sup>52</sup> Evans, 2000, p. 147.

<sup>53</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life*, Allen Lane, London, 2002, p. 296.



historical period. Orwell forecast some of the problems facing future historians of the Spanish civil war when he wrote

How will the history of the Spanish war be written? If Franco remains in power his nominees will write the history books...But suppose Fascism is finally defeated and some kind of democratic government restored in Spain in the fairly near future; even then, how is the history of the war to be written? What kind of records will Franco have left behind him? Suppose even that the records kept on the Government side are recoverable - even so, how is a true history of the war to be written? For, as I have pointed out already, the Government also dealt extensively in lies. From the anti-Fascist angle one could write a broadly truthful history of the war, but it would be a partisan history, unreliable on every minor point. Yet, after all, some kind of history will be written, and after those who actually remember the war are dead, it will be universally accepted. So for all practical purposes the lie will have become truth.<sup>54</sup>

Sixty years after Orwell penned these lines, there are still ongoing battles over the civil war, even from the 'anti-Fascist angle'. It is from this angle that I explore the conflicting histories of the civil war. In order to adequately explore this question it is necessary to provide an introduction to the events of the conflict. I do not attempt a detailed historical analysis, but a brief outline is essential.<sup>55</sup>

The Spanish civil war is one of the most important social conflicts in twentieth century European history. When, on 17th July 1936, a right-wing military revolt took place against the democratically elected Republican government, the battle-lines were drawn in the first full-scale military attempt to stem the tide of fascism

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<sup>54</sup> George Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War,' in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume II My Country Left or Right, 1940-1943, Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, Secker and Warburg, London, 1968, pp. 249 – 267, p. 257.

<sup>55</sup> There are countless English language books on the history of the Spanish civil war. The key books are detailed below, but the starting point is Hugh Thomas's The Spanish Civil War, Fourth Edition, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2003, which was first published in 1961. See also the numerous writings of Paul Preston, notably, A Concise History of The Spanish Civil War, Fontana Press, London, 1996. This also contains an extensive bibliographical essay which outlines the main English language books on the civil war from all political perspectives.

that had already swept across Germany and Italy. Rather than examining the civil war solely as the events between July 1936 and its conclusion in March 1939, it is necessary to situate the conflict within a wider framework of Spanish history. It is also important to recognise the underlying economic and political processes that led to the conflict in the first place, viewing the civil war as symptomatic of the class antagonisms that developed out of the existing relations of production. The conflict was no aberration in an otherwise peaceful historical trajectory, but the outcome of a prolonged period of class struggle. At the time of the civil war Felix Morrow wrote that the period from 1875 till the start of the civil war represented a period of intense social turmoil which consisted of an almost continuous series of 'peasant revolts and army mutinies, civil wars, regionalist uprisings, army pronunciamientos, conspiracies and counter-plots.'<sup>56</sup> The forced abdication of King Alfonso XIII in April 1931 marked the beginning of a new volatile period. The years between 1931 and 1936 were marked by repeated crises, such as the brutally repressed workers' uprising in Asturias in 1934 which took place during the intense period of right-wing repression, known as the *bienio negro* (two black years). This instability was deepened by the electoral victory of the Republican coalition in February 1936 and led to Franco's military uprising in July of the same year. Wrapped in religious tones, the military conducted the civil war as a religious crusade against communism, atheism, Judaism and freemasonry. The connection between the armed forces, the Catholic church and the Spanish right had been a close one and the church hierarchy gave their full blessing to Franco's crusade. Franco regarded any form of liberal thought, never mind the anarchist, communist or socialist ideas which

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<sup>56</sup> Felix Morrow, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain, New Park Publications, London, 1976, p. 217.



had met with broad popular support in the February 1936 elections, as a virus that had to be eradicated. And, as this 'virus' particularly affected the most impoverished sections of society, it was the working class and peasantry that bore the brunt of Franco's actions.

It was no surprise therefore, that workers and peasants formed the bulk of the opposition to the rebellion; but their resistance did not stop at opposing Franco. Throughout parts of Spain, but primarily based in Catalonia, the workers' organisations took factories into collective ownership - in Barcelona the anarchists even took control of the cinema - and in many villages the peasants seized and collectivised land. One headline in the anarchist trade union, Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) newspaper, Solidaridad Obrera, reflected the wider social aspirations of many of the anti-fascist forces when it stated, 'Only by making a social revolution will fascism be crushed.'<sup>57</sup> Many on the left of the Republican movement argued that the only way to win the civil war was to wage a revolutionary war against Franco and against capitalism. This, they argued, would have the effect of mobilising the majority of workers and poor peasants behind the banner of the Republic. Yet, under the influence of the Soviet-influenced Spanish Communist Party (PCE), the Republic repeatedly limited the demands of the workers and peasants. The PCE fought to maintain the status quo, arguing that it was first necessary to win the war before it was possible to pursue revolution. Gradually the revolutionary movement was weakened and defeated, most notably in the May Days of Barcelona in May 1937 when the Republican army forcibly disarmed sections of the revolutionary

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<sup>57</sup> Ronald Fraser, Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936-1939, Penguin, London, 1988, p. 136.

left.<sup>58</sup> In March 1939, after two and a half years of bloody and brutal fighting, the war ended with defeat for the Republicans and the establishment of a military dictatorship headed by Franco.<sup>59</sup> After Franco's victory, a small guerrilla army continued to fight the war in the hills and countryside. For thirty years the Spanish armed forces fought a cat and mouse game with ever-decreasing numbers of guerrilla fighters, or maquis, who refused to surrender. Meanwhile, in the towns and cities, in the years immediately following their victory, the new Spanish government conducted a systematic campaign of terror and violence aimed at the physical destruction and atomisation of any opposition to the regime.<sup>60</sup> The death of Franco in November 1975 marked the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of the transition to democracy. This culminated in the election of the Partido Socialista Obrero España (PSOE) government under the leadership of Felipe Gonzalez in 1981.

Paul Preston estimates that fifteen thousand books have been written on the Spanish civil war.<sup>61</sup> Because of the stranglehold on information by Franco's regime, coupled with a fear of repression inside Spain, it was primarily foreign academics that worked on the history of the civil war, attempting to reconstruct a past that had been distorted by the regime. The most notable example is Hugh

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<sup>58</sup> George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989, provides a vivid eyewitness account of these events. For a more recent analysis, and one which is more sympathetic to the Communist position, see Helen Graham, The Spanish Republic at War 1936-1939, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, chapter five.

<sup>59</sup> Debates over the reason for this defeat continue to provoke bitter controversy, a debate to which I will return in greater detail in chapter seven in an analysis of Land and Freedom.

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, Michael Richards, 'Civil War, Violence and the Construction of Francoism' in The Republic Besieged: Civil War in Spain 1936 - 1939, Paul Preston and Ann L. Mackenzie (Eds.) Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p. 199. Despite attempts to cover up this repression, it is now being literally unearthed by those campaigning for the uncovering of mass graves where Republican sympathisers were slaughtered and dumped. See for instance Giles Tremlett, 'Spain poised to Seek the Graves of Franco's Disappeared', The Guardian, 23 August 2002.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Preston points out that this is a similar number to The Second World War. Paul Preston, A Concise History of The Spanish Civil War, Fontana, London, 1996, p. 1.



Thomas's groundbreaking The Spanish Civil War, first published in 1961. Ronald Fraser's Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936-1939 was published in 1979. Based on extensive interviews with those who had participated in the civil war it provided an oral testimony that gave a voice to those whose stories had never before been told. Preston also contributed The Coming of the Spanish Civil War in 1978. The work of a number of historians, most notably, Fraser, Preston and Thomas brought to a wider international audience some of the experiences of the conflict. But it is not the case that historians produce static accounts of the past. Even historians coming from the same methodological or political background will produce different versions or accounts over time. Thus, in the preface to the revised edition of The Spanish Civil War (2003) Thomas argues 'Perceptions of the Spanish war differ from one period of ten years to the next. It now appears to have been Spain's contribution to the continent-wide breakdown which occurred between 1914 and 1945.'<sup>62</sup> The latter part of Thompson's quote is questionable, but the former part chimes with Oscar Wilde's assertion that 'The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.' Thomas's quote highlights that the past can occupy a space that allows conflicting perceptions of the past to be articulated even if the factual evidence is not in question.

### **Democracy versus Fascism?**

As I suggested above, there was a critical class dimension to the Spanish civil war that pitched landlord against peasant, capitalist against worker. And yet the conflict is commonly understood as one fought between democracy and fascism;

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<sup>62</sup> Hugh Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, Fourth Edition, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2003, p. xiv



the 'Last Great Cause' when brave, noble individuals struggled to maintain democracy and decency against dictatorship and brutality.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in a standard introductory book on the civil war, Patricia Knight writes that it 'encapsulated the ideological struggle between democracy and fascism which dominated the 1930s.'<sup>64</sup> Knight develops this point when she writes that 'The war can be seen as a precursor to the Second World War or even as the Second World War in miniature.'<sup>65</sup> Support for the notion that the civil war was a preparation for a greater European conflagration is fuelled by the fact that the Nationalists received an estimated US \$981 million in aid from Germany and Italy.<sup>66</sup> In addition more than 10 000 German and up to 75 000 Italian troops fought on the side of Franco.<sup>67</sup> This military support was a crucial contributory factor in ensuring victory for the nationalists. Although supposedly committed to democracy, France, Britain and the US maintained an official policy of non-intervention and prevented the sale of arms to the democratically elected government of the day. Given that the rebels were receiving military aid from the axis powers, it was a crucial blow against the Republic. The notion of a war between democracy and fascism is certainly the dominant view of the war among many of those sympathetic to the Republican cause, both in Spain and abroad.

Representing the civil war in this manner suited the political position of those who were trying, albeit vainly, to appeal to Britain, France and the United States to intervene on the side of the Republic. But this view neglects the class

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<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, Stanley Weintraub, The Last Great Cause: Intellectuals and the Spanish Civil War, W.H. Allen, London, 1968.

<sup>64</sup> Patricia Knight, The Spanish Civil War: Access To History in Depth, Patricia Knight, Hodder & Stoughton, Oxon, 1998, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Hugh Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 976.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas, 1987, p. 976.

antagonisms at the heart of the civil war. George Orwell highlights that the working class campaign against the coup was not fought ‘in the name of “democracy” and the *status quo*; their resistance was accompanied by - one might almost say it consisted of - a definite revolutionary outbreak. Land was seized by the peasants; many factories and most of the transport were seized by the trade unions; churches were wrecked and the priests were driven out or killed.’<sup>68</sup> On his arrival in Barcelona in the early stages of the civil war Orwell commented that ‘it was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle.’<sup>69</sup> Orwell refused to ignore the revolutionary nature of the conflict suggesting that ‘the thing that had happened in Spain was, in fact, not merely a civil war, but the beginning of a revolution. It is this fact that the anti-fascist press outside Spain has made it its special business to obscure. The issue has been narrowed down to ‘Fascism versus democracy’ and the revolutionary aspect concealed as much as possible.’<sup>70</sup> Orwell’s position is supported by W.H. Auden who, writing from Valencia in 1937, observed that, ‘a revolution is really taking place, not an odd shuffle or two in cabinet appointments. In the last six months these people have been learning what it is to inherit their own country.’<sup>71</sup> Thomas also describes the immediate impact in the days following the fascist uprising in July as follows

victory over the rising meant, in Madrid and its surroundings, the start of the revolution. Large portraits of Lenin now appeared beside those of Largo Caballero [the Socialist Party leader]...Azaña [the Republican

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<sup>68</sup> Orwell, 1989, p. 190.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 192. On his return to England, Orwell initially struggled to find a publisher for his account of the time he spent in Spain because of his sharp criticisms of The Republican leaders in general and his scathing assault on the role of the communists, which no doubt fuelled his idea that the revolution was being concealed.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Valentine Cunningham (Ed.), The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980, p. 60.

prime minister] might still linger, gloomy and aghast, in the Royal Palace; his friends might still hold the portfolios of government; but in the streets, the 'masses' ruled.<sup>72</sup>

That a revolutionary situation existed, at least in the northern industrial stronghold of Catalonia, was illustrated when Companys, the head of the Catalan Government, The Generalitat, declared to a meeting of the anarchist leaders 'Today you are the masters of the city and of Catalonia...You have conquered and everything is in your power.'<sup>73</sup> For White, Orwell and Auden's position would be the imposition of a narrative that is not inherent in the events themselves, but a narrative emplotted on them. A war against fascism, a war for democracy, or a war for socialist emancipation; for White, these are only competing perspectives on the civil war with no ability to substantiate one against the other. But there is sufficient empirical evidence to substantiate the position of Orwell. Of course it was also a war for democracy, but to pose the war as simply a war between democracy and fascism is not necessarily to lie, but it is to neglect the available empirical evidence.

## **Truth?**

To return to the question of historical truth, Orwell forecast the problems faced by an abandonment of the notion of truth when he asserted that

Nazi theory indeed specifically denies that such a thing as 'the truth' exists. There is, for instance, no such thing as 'Science'. There is only 'German Science', 'Jewish science' etc. The implied objective of this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling clique controls not only the future but *the past*. If the Leader says of such and such an event, 'It never happened' - well it never

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas, p. 247.

<sup>73</sup> Fraser, p. 111. It was an offer that the anarchists were reluctant to accept. I return to the position of the anarchists in chapter seven, which deals with Land and Freedom and Libertarias.



happened. If he says that two and two are five- well two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs'.<sup>74</sup>

The lies of the Franco regime over the bombing of Guernica provide a real-life example of Orwell's nightmare. But what do postmodern critics say to the leader when he asserts that Republicans bombed Guernica? Do they assert that the leader's position is as valid as any other explanation of the past? After the war numerous conflicting accounts of events emerged from those who had lost the war: anarchist, Trotskyist, communist etc. This is hardly surprising and we should expect political histories to emerge from political groups. The central question is, however, are they all equally valid? Does it matter whether the Republic was defeated partially through Stalinist betrayal, Trotskyist collaboration with fascism, or anarchist adventurism as has been asserted?<sup>75</sup> The answer is clearly yes, because there remains a contemporary political imperative behind understanding why the Republic lost the war. This involves a sustained study of the traces that do exist from the past: records of the time, eyewitness accounts, oral testimonies etc. It may be impossible to find the whole, absolute, and unadulterated truth, as Gerald Howson puts it 'In 1998 few people, certainly not historians or even left-wing historians, still believe that we have the truth of the whole affair.'<sup>76</sup> It does not mean, however, there is no access to partial accounts of the past, which can subsequently be brought together to create a bigger, more comprehensive picture that can be tested against the extant

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<sup>74</sup> Orwell, 1968, pp. 258/9. A more recent example of this is displayed in the manner in which Tony Blair has misled the British Parliament over the extent of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. A postmodern perspective would only suggest that Blair's claims are as valid as any other perspective.

<sup>75</sup> I return to these political points in chapter three which touches on Hemingway's dismissive position of the anarchists. The debate over the role of Stalinism and Trotskyism is dealt with further in chapter seven.

<sup>76</sup> Gerald Howson, Arms For Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War, John Murray, London, 1998, p. 246.

empirical evidence. The civil war illustrates not only the possibility of making truth claims about the past, but also the necessity of doing so. It may be possible that the existing evidence can lead to conflicting positions being presented in the debate. Even when the evidence is not disputed conflicting positions will emerge. Thus in her recent book The Spanish Republic at War (2002) Helen Graham recognises the extent of the revolutionary movement, but argues against the idea of a revolutionary war when she argues that

Given Spain's social and economic profile, the urban working class – even if backed up by very newly incorporated rural sectors – simply did not represent sufficiently broad strata to carry the weight of structural political change alone. A liberal centre-left political alliance like the Popular Front meant a guarantee of constitutional norms and social reform via parliamentary legislation. But it could not by definition be a programme of *socialist* reform.

The reality of this position is that the social demands of the poorest sections of Spain were sacrificed to accommodate the middle class and Graham points out that

what this implicitly meant was that Spanish workers were being asked to sacrifice some of their aspirations in order to keep on broad middling constituencies who might otherwise be fished by the political right. But it had to be that or nothing. For only an inter-class front like the Popular Front could unite enough of the fragmented 'lefts' – defined as all those middling and worker constituencies outside the power structures of old-regime Spain.

I return to these questions in chapter seven, but this example illustrates that the historical debate often enters the arena of politics. But it is preferable to argue over conflicting positions than to maintain that none of them have access to any kind of truth status at all.

## Revisioning History

The re-writing of the history of the Spanish civil war increased following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the aftermath of which allowed historians access to hitherto unseen documents. A collection of these archives was published as Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War (2001). The book's authors, Ronald Radosh *et al*, correctly point out that 'the Spanish Civil War remains to this day a highly charged issue. It is history, but to those who are writing it, as well as those who have a romantic or political attachment to the events, the issues are still vital and worth fighting about.'<sup>77</sup> Until recently it was a commonly held opinion that the Soviet Union and Mexico were the only countries to assist the Republic. This book calls this into question by alleging that Republican Spain was not assisted but was betrayed by the Soviet Union. This was also alleged in Arms For Spain: The Untold Story of The Spanish Civil War (1998) where Gerald Howson details how the Spanish Republic was swindled during arms deals with the Soviet Union. The title of Howson's book suggests that far from the truth of the conflict being self-evident, there are episodes that remain to be told. He uncovers a scandal that involved the Soviet Union 'defrauding the Spanish government of millions of dollars, by secretly manipulating the exchange rates when setting the prices for the goods they were supplying.'<sup>78</sup>

Fresh evidence has also emerged for the viewpoint that Stalin's position was not born of international solidarity with the Spanish labour movement; rather, as James Hopkins writes

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<sup>77</sup> Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck and Grigory Sevostianov (Eds), Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001, pxxi.

<sup>78</sup> See Howson, p. 251.



The Soviets became convinced that without sizeable military aid to the Republican government, the Popular Front would fall to the Spanish generals. If Franco could be defeated or if the demise of the Republic were delayed, a triple effect could be achieved: Russian influence in Western Europe would be greatly expanded; Spain could be used as a bargaining chip with Hitler; and Western anti-fascist opinion would be distracted from the Terror, which Stalin was about to unleash on the people.<sup>79</sup>

Stalin had long previously abandoned the object of exporting revolution beyond the borders of the Soviet Union and his principal motivation was not to foster international revolution, but to defend the domestic interests of the Soviet Union. Fearful of the developing strength of a united fascist bloc, in 1935 the Soviet-controlled Seventh Congress of the Communist International proclaimed the policy of Popular Frontism which attempted to unite all anti-fascist forces in a common alliance. The Soviet Union was, therefore, keen to develop treaties with non-fascist, capitalist countries, particularly Britain and France. Fearful that social revolution in Spain would upset cordial international relations with the West, the Soviet Union instructed the Spanish Communists to dilute the social demands of the anti-fascist movement and act as a brake on the developing revolutionary movement. Thus a typical article in the Spanish Communist press read

at present nothing matters except winning the war; without victory in the war all else is meaningless...this is not the moment to talk of pressing forward with the revolution...At this stage we are not fighting for the dictatorship of the proletariat, we are fighting for parliamentary democracy. Whoever tries to turn the civil war into a socialist revolution is playing into the hands of the fascists and is in effect, if not intention, a traitor.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> James K. Hopkins, Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War, Stanford University Press, California, 1998, p. 153.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Vadim Rogovin, 1937: Stalin's Year of Terror, Mehring Books, Sheffield, 1998, p. 350.

Trotskyists and anarchists, like Orwell, have been accusing the PCE of betraying the revolutionary movement since the 1930s, but not always with the same level of success. Writing in 1984 about attitudes towards Homage to Catalonia, Audrey Coppard and Bernard Crick point out that

It sold badly at the time and was harshly reviewed by sympathisers within the Popular Front, the alliance of the Left against fascism. But the book is now recognised as a classic of English prose, an extraordinarily honest description of war as seen through the eyes of the common soldier, and as one of the shrewdest and most biting polemics against the Stalinist and Communist attempt to use the Civil War for their own ends, recklessly, fatally.<sup>81</sup>

The reputation awarded to Orwell's eyewitness account is indicative of the changing attitudes, certainly on the left, towards the civil war. Initially, the political influence of communist parties throughout Europe ensured that the role played by the Soviet Union in Spain was viewed favourably on the left. The reason that Stalin and the Communist International are more readily accepted as betraying the revolution has as much to do with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ultimate demise of the influence of its supporters throughout the international labour movement as with the availability of new evidence.

Access to the Moscow archives has also brought new insights to the history of the 40 000 strong International Brigades. Hopkins utilises these archives to document another hidden history; that of the 100 or so British International Brigade dissidents who departed from the official Communist line, suggesting that, 'They have been written out of history because they dared to criticize the

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<sup>81</sup> Audrey Coppard and Bernard Crick, Orwell Remembered, BBC, London, 1984. p. 14.

leadership or the party line or the hypocrisies of a proletarian army that developed its own class system and even totalitarian tendencies.’<sup>82</sup> It is inevitable that in the coming period other histories may yet surface, or be re-told from a fresh perspective.

### **Anarchist History**

One perspective that is still emerging is that of Spain’s anarchist movement. An organisation numbering up to two million members, the CNT was the jewel in the crown of the international anarchist movement. Its crushing defeat, theoretically, practically and militarily, ensured that the forces of Spanish anarchism dwindled in the post war years. It is no surprise, therefore, that in the post-war period, Anarchist accounts of the past were few and far between. And accounts of the role of the anarchists by others were rarely complimentary. In the introduction to the first edition of his history of the anarchist trade union, The CNT in The Spanish Revolution (2001), José Peirats writes

Since 1936, a great stream of books dealing with the Spanish civil war and the Francoist regime has come forth. If we leave to one side those studies written on behalf of victorious fascism and confine our attention to publications by authors who identify with the Republic, the majority of these books are blighted by a fundamental shortcoming: the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) and its role in the Spanish revolution are either omitted or shrouded in silence.’<sup>83</sup>

This has been partially compensated for by the English language publication of this account, however, they have yet to penetrate mainstream historiographical writing on the conflict. Anarchist accounts of the war are often confined to

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<sup>82</sup> Hopkins, p. 8.

<sup>83</sup> José Peirats, The CNT in the Spanish Revolution, (Ed. Chris Ealham) Meltzer Press, Hastings, 2001, p1. Ealham points out that although there have been some studies of the history of Spanish anarchism, their role in the civil war is generally under-represented.



alternative publishing houses, for instance, Stuart Christie's We, The Anarchists!: A Study of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) 1927-1937 (2000), or material published on the internet. The most notable English language account is Robert Alexander's two volume The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War (1999). With the increased support for anarchist ideas among a younger generation of political activists it is probable that in the next few years an increasing number of accounts of Spanish anarchism will be produced, thus further revising the history of the civil war.

### **Into the Future**

In the early 1990s, as western capitalism emerged victorious from the cold war, Francis Fukuyama argued that the world is a like a wagon train of countries all slowly moving to their ultimate goal of liberal capitalist democracy, which, for Fukuyama, represented the pinnacle of human development.<sup>84</sup> Within the last decade, however, a number of events, including the conflicts in the Balkans and Rwanda, have intervened to suggest that this is far from the case. Rather, Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise may be nearer the mark when he says 'Some people think that the future means the end of history. Well, we haven't run out of history quite yet.'<sup>85</sup> And we certainly have not run out of Spanish civil war history. The ongoing historiographical battles waged over the conflict indicate that historiography occupies a constant, never-ending struggle between forces arguing for the supremacy of one position over another. But, as I suggested in the example of the bombing of Guernica, some versions of the past will have more validity than others by their recourse to empirical evidence. This

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<sup>84</sup> Frances Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man, Penguin, London, 1993.

<sup>85</sup> From Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country, quoted in Callinicos, 1995, p. 15.

does not involve a return to an innocent appeal based on neutral ‘facts’ as if facts were not implicated in power structures. What stories get told is connected to power structures: the power of the official state; the power of patriarchy; the power of the official labour movement; in the case of the International Brigades, the power of the left of the official labour movement, etc. Where does this leave the question of objectivity and truth? E. H. Carr states that ‘It does not follow that because a mountain appears to take on a different shape from different angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes.’<sup>86</sup> The Spanish civil war may have an objective shape, but it is one that is difficult to map. The changing nature of the histories of the past also points to difficulties in making conclusive statements about the past. But that does not mean we are lost in a sea of relative perspectivism. Earlier I quoted Jenkins in the following terms, ‘The past can be described as an utterly “promiscuous past”, a past which will, as it were, go with anybody; a sort of loose past which we can all have; the sort of past that is, arguably not much use having in the first place.’ The Spanish civil war refutes Jenkins position. It is a problematic past certainly, but one that has referential limits placed on the narratives that flow from it. Thus it might not be possible to assert the universal, objective truth of the civil war; nevertheless what histories are presented can be tested against the traces of the past.

Christopher Hitchens suggests that ‘Unearthing the truth is no mere antiquarian task. The argument about Spain is probably the one argument from the age of

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Evans, 2000, p. 224.

20th-century ideology that is still alive.’<sup>87</sup> And there are fresh tales still to be told. Inside Spain an organisation has recently emerged called the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory) that campaigns for the excavation of the hidden graves mentioned above. Like ghosts from the past, the dead resurface to haunt the memory of their executioners; the victims take revenge on the victor. This group is also campaigning for the release of thousands of government files and military records that contain important information about the repression and executions carried out under Franco.<sup>88</sup> This campaign will ensure that there are new, fresh tales unearthed and re-told; thus the historiography of the civil war will continue to be a battleground for future generations.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to lay out my analysis of the debates surrounding the nature of historiographical enquiry and its relationship to one event: the Spanish civil war. I have argued that rather than accepting the perspectivism of contemporary postmodern philosophers of history, it is vital that historiography maintains a referential link with its object of enquiry. I have utilised the example of Guernica to highlight the necessity of adopting an approach to the past that can take a position on contested historical positions. It may not be possible to have complete, objective accounts of the past, but that does not negate the possibility of arriving at truth claims about the past that can be matched against empirical evidence. The limitations on the practical application of the position of White and Jenkins should lead to a rejection of their theoretical approach. In

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<sup>87</sup> Christopher Hitchens, review originally published in *Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 2001, viewed on line at <http://wwics.si.edu/outreach/wq/WQCURR/WQBKPER?BOOK-1.HTM>, 30/07/01.

<sup>88</sup> For further information on this organisation see [www.memoriahistorica.org](http://www.memoriahistorica.org).



contrast to postmodern perspectivism I have suggested that Marxism offers the most explanatory basis for the analysis of the past. In relation to the Spanish civil war I argued that it is not simply an unorganised chaos of unconnected events that are only narrativised by the subjective needs of historians. I have outlined the key developments in the recent historiography of the civil war and examined debates over the role of the Soviet Union in the war. If the battle over written versions of the Spanish civil war has been a protracted and bitter one, the battle over cinematic versions has been no less so. In the following chapter I examine debates about how history has been represented on film, in particular, exploring filmed representations of the Spanish civil war.

## Chapter Two

### History on Film: The Spanish Civil War

#### Introduction

I begin this chapter by exploring the relationship between film and history, examining the work of Pierre Sorlin, Hayden White and Robert A. Rosenstone. I also examine debates about the ability of different film forms to represent the past. I then provide a general overview of representations of the civil war in cinema, both inside and outside Spain. I suggest that under the Franco dictatorship the civil war was represented as a just and righteous crusade. I also address the issue of how oppositional filmmakers struggled under the dictatorship to present alternative views of the past. I also outline the key non-Spanish films set during the civil war before discussing how the conflict has been represented in post-Franco Spain.

#### Film and History

On 11 July 1974, a firebomb ripped through the Balmes cinema in Barcelona bringing to an abrupt and premature end the screening of Carlos Saura's La prima Angélica/ Cousin Angelica (Saura/Spain/1974).<sup>89</sup> The attack, by fascists loyal to their dying president, is an event that, perhaps more than any other, highlights the hotly contested nature of cinematic representations of the Spanish civil war. Moreover, it indicates that the discussion about film and history is more than an abstract argument. Since its inception, cinema has often been regarded as a medium with a hitherto unparalleled capacity to create an

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<sup>89</sup> Deveny, Thomas G., Cain on Screen: Contemporary Spanish Cinema, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J., & London, 1993, p. 172.

unproblematic representation of the world. Writing in the 1940s Siegfried Kraucer suggested that ‘Film is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates towards it.’<sup>90</sup> Pierre Sorlin points to some of the problems of applying Kraucer’s position when he writes, ‘Films are not a direct reflection of reality, but give a distorted image of society, restricting social conflicts to a limited environment, transferring from the social to the individual plane and arbitrarily shaped by the conventions of the genre.’<sup>91</sup> Sorlin correctly observes that artistic and industrial factors force constraints on how the world is cinematically represented, nevertheless, the usefulness of cinema in representing the world unproblematically remains unquestioned by some theorists writing on film and history. For example in the foreword to Hollywood as Historian (1998), Ray B. Browne writes

If a picture, as we generally agree, is worth a thousand words, then a motion picture or a movie, is worth millions of words because it is words in action. Pictures as history are exceptionally effective because, although words lie flat and dormant to some readers (indeed to a certain extent to all readers), it is difficult to miss messages carried in a motion picture as it explains a historical period or event – the historical message, the background, the setting, language and incidental details.<sup>92</sup>

Browne’s position is too simplistic in its analysis of how cinema reconstructs the past, for instance, in suggesting that messages are somehow carried in a film that subsequently explains the past. It accurately reflects, however, a wide-scale *belief* in the power of cinema to unproblematically represent the past.

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<sup>90</sup> Pierre Sorlin, ‘How to Look at an “Historical” Film’, in Marcia Landy, The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2001, pp. 25–49, p. 40.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>92</sup> Peter C. Rollins (Ed.), Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context, University Press of Kentucky, 1998, p. ix.



This belief in cinema's power to recreate the past has ensured that periods from the past are often revisited by filmmakers, particularly at times of political or economic crises, in an attempt to comment on or intervene in contemporary processes. Countless examples of historical films can be found from the early years of cinema. Birth of a Nation (Griffiths/USA/1915) and Oktyabr/October (Eisenstein/USSR/1927) are only two examples from different continents and political systems that strive to cinematically recreate the past in the present. Oktyabr/October, commissioned to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Russian revolution, draws on the memory of revolutionary Russia at a time when Stalin was attempting to consolidate his power base and stamp out opposition within the Soviet regime. For Stalin, cinematic representations were so vital to his campaign that he visited Eisenstein's edit suite to personally intervene in the final cut.<sup>93</sup> The wartime version of Shakespeare's Henry V (Olivier/1944/UK), designed to boost the morale of British troops at war with Germany, indicates that democracies, as well as dictatorships, clearly realise the value that a brief cinematic trip into the past can bring to their own present political objectives.

In chapter one I examined debates over whether it is possible to achieve objective and truthful accounts of the past. Leaving aside the question of actuality and documentary footage, which is beyond the boundaries of this thesis, fiction films are generally less burdened by the demand for objectivity that is placed on the shoulders of historians. Fictional cinema, nevertheless, continues to provoke controversy when it departs from established historical evidence, even if it is in minor detail. In In The Name of The Father (Sheridan/Ireland/UK/1993),

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<sup>93</sup> Norman Swallow, Eisenstein: A Documentary Portrait George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1976, pp. 56-7.

a fictionalised account of the wrongful imprisonment of the Guildford Four, father and son Giuseppe and Gerard Conlon are shown to share a cell. It may heighten the familial conflict and develop a deeper sense of injustice; in reality, however, they did not occupy the same cell and the factual inaccuracy in this scene was utilised by some critics to question the overall accuracy of the film. But audiences do often accept factual inaccuracies within fiction films. In Braveheart (Gibson/USA/1995) it seems highly improbable that William Wallace had a sexual liaison with the Princess of Wales which resulted in Her Royal Highness bearing an illegitimate child. Nevertheless, Braveheart is one of the most influential films about the history of Scotland in recent years. The reception of Braveheart illustrates the ability of audiences to dispense with, or place to one side, factual inaccuracies or inconsistencies, while still being influenced by the overall content of the film.

Disputes over historical details are often used to undermine the legitimacy of a film, a process that is evident in chapter seven when I discuss the critique of Land and Freedom by Paul Preston. One of the minor accusations laid at the door of the film was that it showed members of the Communist Party of Great Britain fighting on the Aragon Front despite historical evidence to the contrary.<sup>94</sup> This may be regarded as a minor historical detail that amounts to little more than historiographical tittle-tattle. However, in popular culture it is the most common assault used to attack films which depart from ‘the facts’ of a historical account. It is not my intention, however, to dissect films that depart from the minutiae of historical detail in the interests of drama. The most mundane discussions on film

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<sup>94</sup> Ken Loach accepts that there are a number of minor inaccurate historical details in Land and Freedom but defends the overall content of the film. Information obtained from interview with author, April 2000.

and the past can revolve around the inclusion, omission, or slight departure from established historical evidence. This is not to say that the outside world has no bearing on the internal world of the film. The influence of cinema on the external world was illustrated when 500 000 Catalans marched in Barcelona in 1982 to celebrate the screening of the civil war drama La Plaza del Diamante/Diamond Square (Betriu/Spain/1982). Set during the civil war and exploring the conflict from a Catalan perspective, Deveny suggests that the film ‘represents a triumph of the Catalan language and culture.’<sup>95</sup> Cinema’s relationship with the past may be regarded as less exact than conventional historiography, but it does maintain an important relationship with its referent and is a powerful influence in shaping audience views about the past.

Some historians, however, have neglected the importance of filmed representations of the past. Sorlin suggests that ‘historians have stressed the artistic aspect of cinema, failing to speculate on its documentary value, its possible influence on moulding opinion, or its interest as an historical source.’<sup>96</sup> Sorlin argues that, prior to the sixties, historians could exist without recourse to cinema, but, if this was the case in the past, it is increasingly less so as the proliferation of screen images becomes an ever-increasing source of information. For Sorlin, there is a clear difference between what he classifies as information and fictional film. He states that

An information film seeks the best viewpoint of the event, the clearest picture; it concentrates entirely on the scenes and the people to be shown. A fictional film has less need of clarity and precision, but as it refers to nothing other than itself, it must grip the audience, making them

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<sup>95</sup> Deveny, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Sorlin, p. 25.



participate actively, guess what is not shown, and feel sympathy or repulsion with what is happening on the screen.<sup>97</sup>

But, as written representations of the past maintain a link with their referent, similarly, it is wrong to suggest that the fictional feature film refers to nothing other than itself. Sorlin continues, 'Historical films are all fictional. By this I mean that even if they are based on records, they have to reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show.'<sup>98</sup> That films are in many ways imaginary, however, does not negate the fact that they have referential qualities. The fascists who attacked the screening of La prima Angélica in Barcelona were in no doubt about the referential nature of cinematic images.

One key writer on film and history in recent years is the historian Robert A. Rosenstone who, subsequent to his involvement in feature film production, began to question the status of filmed representations of the past.<sup>99</sup> Rosenstone concurs with Jenkins and White about the nature of historiography when he suggests that

the aims of our histories tend to govern what we find in the past and how we represent it. (This is true both for academic historians and for filmmakers, but historians work in a professional context which delimits their aims; or, rather, makes them all accept similar, positivist aims for representing the past, while filmmakers are freer to set personal agendas for history.)<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 29/30.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>99</sup> Rosenstone worked as an historical adviser on both The Good Fight (Buckner, Dore & Sills/USA/1984), a documentary focusing on the lives of the members of the International Brigades who travelled from the USA to fight in Spain, and the Russian revolution drama about the American novelist John Reed. Reds (Beatty/USA/1981).

<sup>100</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 111.

As is clear from the examples already detailed, filmmakers are less restricted by the need for empirical evidence than historians and, as Rosenstone points out, at the end of a film you read credits, not footnotes. Rosenstone points to the distrust that historians have for historical films and offers two possible answers. Firstly, he suggests, because 'Films are inaccurate. They distort the past. They fictionalize, trivialize, and romanticize people, events, and movements. They falsify history.'<sup>101</sup> He suggests another more cynical reason when he writes that 'Film is out of the control of historians. Films show we do not own the past. Film creates a historical world with which books cannot compete, at least for popularity. Film is a disturbing symbol of an increasingly postliterate world (in which people can read but won't).'<sup>102</sup> Despite the dislikes and fears of historians and teachers, Rosenstone suggests that this has not prevented an ever-increasing interest in film by historians when he states that 'film has invaded the classroom, though it is difficult to specify if this is due to the "laziness" of teachers, the postliteracy of students, or the realization that film can do something written words cannot.'<sup>103</sup> Indeed, film is increasingly being incorporated as an educational tool into mainstream education. In the chapter on further reading in her book, The Spanish Civil War: Access To History in Depth (1998), a typical introductory textbook for higher education students, Patricia Knight concludes by writing 'try to see the film Land and Freedom directed by Ken Loach and released in 1995. This graphically portrays issues of revolution, collectivisation, and the disputes between the Communists and their more left-wing rivals, seen through the eyes of a British volunteer.'<sup>104</sup> Knight's inclusion of Land and

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 46

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>104</sup> Patricia Knight, The Spanish Civil War: Access To History in Depth, Hodder & Stoughton,

Freedom is indicative of a developing trend among historians who realise the importance of representations of the past in fictional cinema.

In the study of historical film Rosenstone highlights two approaches that can be adopted. What he outlines as the ‘explicit approach’ suggests that films are ‘reflections of the social and political concerns of the era in which they were made’ which, he argues, can be read ‘historically’. He finds this unsatisfactory, however, in that this

provides no specific role for the film that wants to talk about historical issues. Nor does it distinguish such a film from any other kind of film. Which leads to the question: Why not treat written works of history in the same way? They, too, reflect the concerns of the era in which they were made, yet we historians take their contents at face value and not simply as a reflection of something else. Why consider history books in terms of contents and historical films in terms of reflections?<sup>105</sup>

Broadly speaking, this argument suggests that a Spanish film made about the civil war in the forties is likely to reveal more about Franco’s post-war regime than the civil war itself. In contrast, what he describes as the ‘implicit approach’ is to view the historical film as a written historical account projected onto a cinema screen. For Rosenstone, this approach involves subjecting the historical film to the same judgements, the need for evidence, sources etc., that are used in historiography. With this position Rosenstone suggests that there are two problematic assumptions: ‘first, that the current practice of written history is the only possible way of understanding the relationship of past to present; and, second, that written history mirrors “reality.”’ If the first of these assumptions is

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Oxon, 1998, p. 130.

<sup>105</sup> Rosenstone, p. 48.



arguable, the second is not.’<sup>106</sup> Rosenstone suggests that rather than starting from the initial question of how historical films differ from written history, there are three questions which have to be posed first: ‘What sort of historical world does each film construct and how does it construct that world? How can we make judgements about that construction? How and what does that historical construction mean to us?’<sup>107</sup> It is only after these three questions have been responded to that Rosenstone suggests we can then ask ‘How does the historical world on the screen relate to written history?’<sup>108</sup> Rosenstone is trying to break free from the idea that written history is somehow superior to history on the screen, suggesting that cinema need not follow the rules of historiography.

Rosenstone highlights a number of points that apply to mainstream cinematic representations of the past which can be summarised as follows: it constructs a story with a beginning, middle and, usually, an optimistic ending, regardless of the setting; it focuses on the actions of individuals (usually men) and tends to offer individual solutions to historical problems; it tends to offer up history as a closed, completed, and simple past with little room for alternatives or questions; in its drive for drama it tends to concentrate on the emotional and personal implications of the past; it strives to give audiences the look of the past, and, finally, that rather than separating different aspects of the past, mainstream film shows history as process by bringing many disparate elements together. For Rosenstone, mainstream cinema conceals its own constructed nature and he celebrates an experimental cinema, citing an eclectic mix of films; Oktyabr/October and its use of collective heroes, Far from Poland

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

(Godmilow/USA/1984), a self-reflexive documentary about the difficulties involved in making a documentary about the Solidarity movement in Poland, and Walker (Cox/USA/Spain/1987), the tale of the eponymous nineteenth century colonialist William Walker and his imperial adventures in Nicaragua. Rosenstone celebrates Walker because it departs from mainstream linear narratives and employs anachronism, which, he argues, highlights the film's constructed nature. One example from Walker which highlights Rosenstone's favoured approach is the closing sequence when a group of 19th century Americans are interrupted by the sudden arrival of a US helicopter in a far from subtle attempt to link Walker's invasion of Nicaragua with US foreign policy under Ronald Reagan. Rosenstone suggests that it is possible in these experimental films to uncover 'works that are analytical, unemotional, distanced, multicausal; historical worlds that are expressionist, surrealist, disjunctive, postmodern; histories that do not just show the past but also talk about how and what it means to the filmmaker (or to us) today.'<sup>109</sup> Thus, for Rosenstone, experimental cinema, 'Rather than opening a window directly onto the past, it opens a window onto a different way of thinking about the past.'<sup>110</sup> Rosenstone is clearly developing an approach that focuses on a desire for a Brechtian cinematic practice that consciously shows itself as a construction as opposed to mainstream cinema that, primarily, strives to mask its constructed nature.<sup>111</sup>

In his work on film and history Hayden White also argues that it is necessary to create a different way of thinking about the past on film. White suggests that 'the

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>111</sup> I return to the question of Brecht and of self-reflexive cinema in chapter four when discussing Vacas.

twentieth century is marked by the occurrence of certain ‘holocaustal’ events...These kinds of events do not lend themselves to explanation in terms of the categories of traditional humanistic historiography.’<sup>112</sup> White does not suggest that these holocaustal events are unrepresentable ‘only that techniques of representation somewhat different from those developed at the height of artistic realism may be called for’<sup>113</sup> White calls for a postmodern cinematic practice in which ‘Everything is presented as if it were the same ontological order, both real and imaginary, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated’<sup>114</sup> In this postmodern cinema, he claims, ‘What you get is...‘History as you like it’, representations of history in which anything goes.’<sup>115</sup> Self-reflexive cinema can open up a critical distance between spectator and text, thus allowing the audience to reflect on the constructed nature of what is projected, but Rosenstone and White are less clear about the effect of the overwhelming majority of films which reject this approach. Rosenstone states that ‘The world that the standard or mainstream film constructs is, like the world we live in and the air we breathe, so familiar that we rarely think about how it is put together. That, of course, is the point.’<sup>116</sup> That does not mean, however, that mainstream films cannot invite, or provoke, historical thought among audiences. Indeed, it is rather patronising to suggest that audiences can only make historical judgements under certain cinematic conditions. One of the problems with the approach of the champions of experimental cinema is their suggestion that

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<sup>112</sup> Hayden White, ‘The Modernist Event’ in Vivian Sobchack (Ed.), The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp. 17-38, p. 21.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 19. I return to these issues in chapter eight when I discuss the film form utilised in Soldados de Salamina.

<sup>116</sup> Rosenstone, p. 54.



audiences are unable to forge links between past and present without the inclusion of intertextual references to guide them along the way. There are countless examples of films that contradict this position, notably Michael Collins (Jordan/Ireland/UK/USA/1996). This epic historical drama details the events surrounding the partition of Ireland in the early 1920s and the subsequent bloody split in Irish Republicanism. Released at a time when the IRA was on ceasefire, it was not difficult for audiences to draw parallels between the figures of Collins and Gerry Adams, the then leader of Sinn Fein who was trying to prevent splits developing within Irish Republicanism. Thus the content of the film alone allows for audiences to historicise Irish politics without the inclusion of self-reflexive cinematic devices. Moreover, the controversy surrounding the release of Land and Freedom is testimony to the ability of, even non-self-reflexive, cinema to foster genuine discussion about a problematic and difficult period in the past.<sup>117</sup> Thus, self-reflexive cinema does not have a monopoly on creating a historical consciousness in audiences. This thesis consists of an analysis of a varied mixture of films which all, to some degree or another, invite reflection on the past.

### **The Spanish Civil War and Cinema<sup>118</sup>**

The Spanish civil war has provoked numerous works by artists, writers and filmmakers. This was, after all, the poets' war, or so it has been repeatedly

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<sup>117</sup> I describe Land and Freedom as 'primarily non-reflexive cinema' although it does, on occasion, pointedly refer to its own construction. This is most notable when Kim reads her grandfather's old articles, which include newspaper cuttings written by screenwriter, Jim Allen. I will develop these points further in chapter seven.

<sup>118</sup> Some of the latter points of this chapter are based on my article 'Re-framing the Past: Representations of the Spanish civil war in Popular Spanish Cinema,' in Spanish Popular Cinema, Edited by Antonio Lázaro Reboll and Andrew Willis, Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 76-91.

described.<sup>119</sup> As is well established, countless international writers and artists travelled to Spain to support the Republic, including André Malraux, John Don Passos, Joris Ivens, Stephen Spender and, most famously, Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell. The assassination of Federico García Lorca in Granada at the hands of Nationalist soldiers in 1936 also deepened this artistic connection. That the first British volunteer to die in the conflict was Felicia Browne, an artist and sculptress shot dead while returning to help a wounded colleague, fuelled the romanticism.<sup>120</sup> But, of course, it was neither a poets' war nor an artists' war. Primarily it was a war waged by millions of faceless Spaniards whose activities are not, generally, recorded in the history books. And, as with all wars, the poorest sections of society were in the frontline, even at the level of the international volunteers, 80% of whom came from working class backgrounds.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, that the civil war attracted many of Europe's leading artists to commit themselves to the 'Last Great Cause' has ensured that it has become the subject of numerous famous works of art, none more so than Picasso's Guernica. His 1937 painting, The Weeping Woman, which portrays a woman, her distorted face, torn and twisted from grief, can also be read as a response to the mass grief of the civil war. More explicitly Salvador Dali's surrealist painting Soft Construction with Boiled Beans: Premonition of Civil War, Magritte's Le Drapeau Noir/Black Flag and Miró's eight small-scale etchings known as the Black and Red Series are only a few of the best known examples from a vast

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<sup>119</sup> For a comprehensive, if slightly dated, account of further reading on the Spanish civil war as a literary phenomenon see Peter Monteath's The Spanish Civil War in Literature, Film and Art: An International Bibliography of Secondary Literature, Greenwood Press, Connecticut and London, 1994. For an analysis by the same author see Writing the Good Fight: Political Commitment in the International Literature of the Spanish Civil War, Greenwood Press, Connecticut and London, 1994. For poetry see Valentine Cunningham, (Ed.) The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980.

<sup>120</sup> James K. Hopkins, Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998. p. 130.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.



array of art that was influenced by the conflict. In addition countless propaganda posters were produced by both sides during the civil war, which now feature regularly in art exhibitions throughout Europe and the United States of America.<sup>122</sup> The civil war also spawned a litany of literature, primarily in the fields of poetry and prose, but also in the world of theatre, including numerous agit-prop pieces such as Jack Lindsay's On Guard for Spain!, (1936) which was performed by workers' theatre groups throughout the world. More conventional dramatic responses also appeared, such as Bertolt Brecht's Señora Carrar's Rifles published in 1937. Cinema was to prove no exception to this artistic development.<sup>123</sup>

### **Cinema 1936 – 1939**

The Spanish civil war was one of the first major international conflicts since the advent of cinematic sound in 1929 and cinema became a key element of propaganda value to both sides.<sup>124</sup> Filmmakers from outside Spain were also attracted to the conflict, most notably Joris Ivens who directed The Spanish Earth which I discuss in chapter three, and André Malraux who adapted the last chapter of his celebrated novel, L'Espoir/Man's Hope (Malraux/Peskin/France/Spain/1939-1945), which was shot during the closing period of the civil war but not released until 1945.<sup>125</sup> The Soviet Union also produced Ispaniya/Spain

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<sup>122</sup> In 2001 an exhibition of art and memorabilia was held at The Imperial War Museum, London. For a review see David Archibald 'Death of a Dream', The Guardian, 18/10/01.

<sup>123</sup> There is an extensive catalogue of films in which the Spanish civil war appears in Alfonso del Amo García, Catálogo general del cine de la guerra civil, Cátedra/Filmoteca Española, Madrid, 1996.

<sup>124</sup> Ronald Fraser points out that one of the more practical uses of the cinematic apparatus occurred in Madrid when, owing to lack of anti-aircraft defence, cinema projectors were utilised as searchlights to spot Nationalist aircraft. Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936-1939, Penguin, London, 1988, p. 175.

<sup>125</sup> For an analysis of The Spanish Earth see Thomas Waugh, 'Men Cannot Act Before the Camera in the Presence of Death' in Barry Keith Grant & Jeanette Sloniowski (Eds.), Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video, Wayne State



(Shub/USSR/1939) a documentary which highlights Soviet support for the Republic. Newsreel footage and propagandist documentaries were produced regularly, but a small number of fictional features were also released.<sup>126</sup> For instance, following the collectivisation of cinema production in Catalonia, the anarchists produced a number of features that mixed elements of melodrama with propaganda.<sup>127</sup> These include Aurora de Esperanza/Dawn of Hope (Sau/Spain/1937), which charts the life of a worker whose everyday experiences draw him to enlist in the CNT.<sup>128</sup> Las Hurdes/Land Without Bread (Buñuel/Spain/1933), Buñuel's enigmatic documentary-style account of the lives of the rural population of Las Hurdes was re-released with additional intertitles championing the Republican cause. Hollywood also produced a small number of features including Blockade (Dieterle/USA/1938) and Last Train From Madrid (Hogan/USA/1937).

### **Post-War Representations Outside Spain**

This thesis, however, is not primarily concerned with how the war was cinematically represented at the time, but at how it has been re-visited over time. In the years following the war international filmmakers returned to the conflict in a number of films. ¡Viva la muerte!/Long Live Death! (Arrabal/France/1970) takes its name from the slogan of the crazed leader of the Spanish Foreign Legion General Millán Astray who in an infamous exchange with the

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University Press, Detroit, 1998, pp. 136-153.

<sup>126</sup> For an analysis of the British newsreel footage see Anthony Aldgate, Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War, Scolar Press, London, 1979.

<sup>127</sup> See Richard Porton, 'Cinema in the Spanish Revolution' in Film and the Anarchist Imagination, Verso, London & New York, 1999, pp. 76-96 for information on the CNT and cinema production.

<sup>128</sup> An overview of filmmaking on both sides during the civil war is provided by Núria Triana-Toribio, in Spanish National Cinema, Routledge, London, 2003, pp. 31 – 37.

philosopher Unamuno cried ‘Down with intelligence! Long Live Death!’<sup>129</sup> Directed by Spanish exiled filmmaker Fernando Arrabal it is an experimental, surreal account of the life of a young boy who witnesses the violence of the regime at close hand. La guerre est finie/War is Over (Resnais/France/1966) set in contemporary France, centres on the life of Diego, a veteran communist still working in the Spanish underground but demoralised and ready to give up the struggle. It charts his encounter with the Communists running the official underground but also the new, militant youth movement, which is attracted to a more direct means of opposition.<sup>130</sup> Adapted from the novel by Emeric Pressburger, Behold a Pale Horse (Zinnemann/France/USA/1964) is based on the exploits of the real life figure of Francisco Sabaté Llopart, popularly known as El Quico, a guerrilla fighter (maquis) who is caught in a cat and mouse chase with a Spanish police chief.<sup>131</sup> Fünf Patronenhülsen/Five Cartridges (Beyer/GDR/1960) tells the tale of five International Brigade members during the Ebro campaign in July 1938 who struggle to relay an important message from their dying commander.<sup>132</sup> These are four of the most notable films set during the civil war which were produced outside Spain, all of which were sympathetic to the

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<sup>129</sup> For further information see Paul Preston’s chapter on Astray in ¡Comrades!: Portraits From The Spanish Civil War, Fontana, London, 2000.

<sup>130</sup> David Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp. 205-233 contains an extensive analysis of the film. See also Roy Armes, The Cinema of Alain Resnais, Zwemmer Ltd., London, 1968.

<sup>131</sup> For an analysis of Behold A Pale Horse see, Claudia Sternberg, ‘Real-Life References in Four Fred Zinneman Films’, Film Criticism, Vol. 18/19, No. 3/1, Spring/Fall 1994, pp. 108-126.

<sup>132</sup> Fünf Patronenhülsen/Five Cartridges stars Manfred Krug and Armin Mueller-Stahl, two of the GDR’s most famous post-war actors. When they defected to the west in the 1960s the film was removed from the state television schedules. The short-lived success and ultimate failure of the Ebro offensive by Republican forces was the last significant victory for the Republic. Following its failure, defeat was almost inevitable. See Hugh Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, Fourth Edition, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2003, pp. 813-821.



Republican forces. A different, more complex process was unfolding inside Spain.<sup>133</sup>

### **Spanish Cinema Under The Dictatorship**

Under the dictatorship, the civil war had almost exclusively been represented as a just and righteous crusade against atheism, communism and freemasonry. This was evident in the state-run cinema news service *Noticiarios y Documentales Cinematograficos* (NoDo), but also in the film scripted by the dictator himself, Raza/Race (Sáenz de Heredia/Spain/1941).<sup>134</sup> It is a film that perfectly fits Benjamin's assertion that 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'<sup>135</sup> Glorifying Spain's past through a melodramatic narrative dealing with a gallant military figure – a thinly disguised Franco – the film was made at the time when the regime was carrying out mass repression throughout the country. Yet, in spite of its overt propagandising, and its unusual blend of melodrama and fascism, it contains well-constructed sequences with a powerful agitational impact, exemplified in the sequence where a group of Catholic clergy are machine-gunned on a deserted beach.

A number of other films glorifying the regime were produced around this time.

Sin novedad en el Alcázar (Genina/Italy/Spain/1940) reconstructs the infamous

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<sup>133</sup> Outside of Spain the Spanish civil war is still used as a reference point for establishing heroic credentials, exemplified by Song for a Raggy Boy (Walsh/Ireland/Spain/2003) which narrates the true-life tale of former International Brigader William Franklin's campaign against the brutal behaviour meted out to young male residents at a Catholic run borstal in the immediate post civil war period. The most notable documentary is Mourir à Madrid/To Die in Madrid (Rossif/France/1963) which utilises archive footage to chart the conflict from the 1931 elections to Franco's ultimate victory in 1939.

<sup>134</sup> For an analysis of these documentary films see Sheelagh Ellwood, 'The Moving Image of the Franco Regime: *Noticiarios y Documentales* 1943-1975', in Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (Eds.), Spanish Cultural Studies, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 201-203.

<sup>135</sup> Benjamin, Walter, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents, Dennis Walder (Ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, pp. 362-364, p. 363.



siege of Alcázar when Nationalist troops were under siege from Republican forces for two months in the summer of 1936. Given the dramatic events of the original story, a dream for any fascist spin-doctor, there is little need to overtly propagandise the narrative and it is a straightforward personalised account of the events. Indeed the events of the siege are still glorified by the Spanish army at the army museum in Toledo where the official brochure of the museum erected to the memory of the events states: ‘The 70-day defence of the Alcázar, under the command of Colonel Moscardó, became world famous and has become a page of Spanish history of epic grandeur, serving as a sublime example of heroism and of sacrifices made for the highest ideals.’<sup>136</sup> Another film glorifying the role of the armed forces is ¡A mí la legión! (Orduña/Spain/1942), which takes its title from the unofficial battle cry of the Foreign Legion and stars Alfredo Mayo as a young and valiant legionnaire. One of the leading Spanish actors of his generation, Mayo features in Raza and also appears in El santuario no se rinde (Ruiz Castillo/Spain/1949) where he again plays a soldier caught up in the conflict.<sup>137</sup> During this period Mayo became the Spanish actor most associated with the dictatorship, a point opposition filmmakers later utilised to their advantage.

In her study of Spanish cinema attendance from 1943 to 1975, María Antonia Paz suggests a number of contributory factors which indicate that the regime successfully utilised cinema as a propaganda tool. Thus she writes ‘In short, the

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<sup>136</sup> Brochure distributed on a visit to the museum, October 2002. The museum remains as a monument to the Nationalist forces and displays the supposedly untouched remains of the room where Colonel Moscardó conducted a telephone conversation with his son who had been captured by Republican soldiers and was due to be executed His speech advising him to prepare to meet his maker is displayed on a wall. It is inconceivable that a display like this glorifying a similar wartime episode could exist in either Germany or Italy and is testimony to the uneven way in which the country still holds its past. Another example of this is that in numerous Spanish towns the main thoroughfare is still named after the dictator.

<sup>137</sup> Ruiz Castillo also directed a number of short documentaries during the war including Guerra en el campo (1936) and Un Año de guerra (1937).

lack of information, fear of repression, the memory of repercussions and purges during the war and the immediate post-war years, in addition to a rudimentary filmmaking culture, all gave the regime's propaganda a certain efficiency, which, however, probably diminished progressively.'<sup>138</sup> Although she adds that the regime may not have been totally successful in its cinematic endeavours when she writes 'Nonetheless, if the propaganda did not fully succeed in mobilizing the Spanish people as a whole in favour of Franco's regime, it was at least able to give a softer image of reality, which soothed the conscience of the Spanish people.'<sup>139</sup>

Spanish cinema was certainly used as a vehicle for overt propaganda during this period. But, in relation to the civil war specifically, Marsha Kinder points out that 'Except for a flurry of patriotic films in the early 1940s such as Raza...the Civil War remained a taboo subject both for films and for foreign imports in the 1940s and 1950s because it was perceived as a threat to the monolithic unity imposed by Franco and to his ongoing process of defascistization.'<sup>140</sup> Raza illustrates this process; although the 1941 version concludes with a montage of fascist salutes the salutes were surreptitiously edited out of the re-released version in 1949. As the regime began avoiding reference to the civil war in cinema, it would be oppositional filmmakers who would be next to bring it to the fore.

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<sup>138</sup> María Antonia Paz, 'The Spanish Remember: Movie Attendance During the Franco Dictatorship, 1943-1975,' in Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2003, pp. 357-372, p. 369.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>140</sup> Marsha Kinder, Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain, University of California Press, 1993, p. 38.



## Opposition Filmmakers

The regime had always lacked the support of Spain's leading filmmakers. In a celebrated attack at a conference in Salamanca in 1955, Juan Antonio Bardem argued that 'After seventy years of anaemia, Spanish cinema is politically, useless; socially, false; intellectually inferior; esthetically non-existent, and industrially, sick.'<sup>141</sup> The existence of extreme forms of censorship, however, ensured that the civil war was off limits for the opponents of the regime. Nevertheless, some Spanish filmmakers struggled to raise the subject even under these constraints. Speaking in London in October 2001, at a visit to the Imperial War Museum as part of a season of films entitled 'Cinematic Amnesia? Spanish Cinema and the Civil War'<sup>142</sup>, one of Spain's leading oppositional filmmakers, Carlos Saura, argued, 'It's obvious that one couldn't talk about the Spanish civil war when Franco was alive. Well you could talk about it, but only from the fascists' point of view, not from the Republicans'.<sup>143</sup> Although, for Saura, censorship brought its own artistic rewards and, as he puts it, 'When you are faced with censorship and a very repressive system, you are using your intelligence, going around things, telling the story indirectly. You could never approach the subject directly. I found that it had certain advantages because, as you have to go to it indirectly, another thing can come out of it.'

One feature that allowed filmmakers a certain amount of leverage inside the country was the acclaim with which many of their films were greeted at international film festivals. As Saura explains,

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<sup>141</sup> Quoted in Virginia Higginbotham, Spanish Film Under Franco, Austin University Press, Austin, 1988, p. 28

<sup>142</sup> For further details of the films on show see <http://www.iwm.org.uk/lambeth/wotfilm7.htm>.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with author London 2003, translated by staff from Cervantes Institute. All subsequent Carlos Saura quotes are from this interview, unless otherwise stated. I return to Saura's work in chapter five.



I've been able to make cinema just because my films were able to go out of Spain. I was lucky in that international film festivals like Cannes or Berlin showed an interest in the films that I was making, and they put pressure on the Spanish government to make sure that my films could go to those festivals. And once I had a certain status, particularly in France, the government had to be much more careful when they were trying to stop me. But that was the way that we decided to work. We decided to try to have status outside so when our films came back we would not have reprisals taken against us.

In retrospect, it is relatively easy to sit back and reflect on the pros and cons of censorship twenty-five years after it has been abolished, but for filmmakers working under the Franco regime it is a lot more than an abstract question. Saura states 'I remember after I wrote the story for Los Golfos/The Hooligans (Saura/Spain/1959). We went to see a minister under Franco's regime and he opened his drawer pulled out a gun and said if you are going to be like that then we will just go outside and start shooting.' Saura first deals with the civil war in La caza/The Hunt (Saura/Spain/1965) which focuses on a group of civil war veterans whose weekend shooting trip culminates in a brutal finale with the violence of the veterans operating as a metaphor for the violence of the regime. Indeed Preston points out that hunting was a key pastime of Franco and writes, that 'His main objective seemed to be to kill as much as possible, suggesting that hunting, like soldiering before it, was the outlet for the sublimated aggression of the outwardly timid Franco.'<sup>144</sup>

The metaphor of violence in La caza is also apparent in Pascual Duarte (Franco/Spain/1975) an adaptation of the novel, La familia de Pascual Duarte, by Camilo José Cela. In the film the eponymous anti-hero kills his dog, his horse,

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<sup>144</sup> Preston, 2000, p. 65.

his mother, and local citizens, before being captured by soldiers and executed. The intense brutality of the film perhaps ensured that it would receive few screenings outside its native land. Spain's most critically acclaimed film El espíritu de la colmena/Spirit of the Beehive (Erice/Spain/1973), a sparse, silent tale set amidst a barren Castilian landscape in 1940, can also be read as an oblique commentary on the enforced silence following Franco's victory in the preceding year.<sup>145</sup> This short list of films is indicative of the lack of oppositional films produced under the regime and is testimony to the levels of censorship that filmmakers faced. It would take Franco's death before alternative representations of the civil war could be aired in Spanish cinema.

### **Post-Franco Cinema**

Franco's death ushered in a period that permitted a cinematic re-examination of this traumatic period in Spain's past free from the censorial control exercised by the right-wing regime. Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas argue that during the period of transition, 'Spanish cinema was seriously concerned with recuperating a historical past and a popular memory that had been denied, distorted or suppressed under the Franco dictatorship. The optimism and hope evoked by the new democratic freedoms and the need for many communities in Spain to reassert their legitimate identities and politics created a "politicised", sometimes radical cinematic response.'<sup>146</sup> In the period immediately following Franco's death, Spanish filmmakers openly challenged early nationalist accounts of the civil war, producing alternative histories of past events in heavily

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<sup>145</sup> For further reading see Virginia Higginbotham, The Spirit of the Beehive: El espíritu de la colmena, Flicks Books, Trowbridge, 1998.

<sup>146</sup> Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, Contemporary Spanish Cinema, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998, p. 11.

politicised documentaries such as La vieja memoria/The Old Memory (Camino/Spain/1977) and ¿Por qué perdimos la guerra?/Why Did We Lose the War? (Santillán/Spain/1978). As Román Gubern argues ‘The complete political process of transition from dictatorship to democracy was recorded in...films that adopted the techniques of cinema vérité and of reportage.’<sup>147</sup> A more indirect approach, however, is adopted in Raza, el espíritu de Franco/Race, The Spirit of Franco (Herralde/Spain/1977), which includes interviews with the Spanish actor Alfredo Mayo about his involvement in Francoist cinema and deconstructs the ‘glorious’ past that Franco had depicted for himself in Raza.

The initial move to debate the central political concerns of the civil war in documentary cinema was followed by a move away from detailed historical and political analyses in feature film production. Antonio Monegal suggests that, even after Franco’s death, the civil war has rarely been the ‘subject of a film that represented the war *as such*.’<sup>148</sup> He suggests that, although there are numerous films which utilise a civil war or post-civil war setting, ‘the treatment of the topic was mediated by some form of indirection. In order to make it available for a specific kind of cinematic approach, the collective experience of the most crucial event in contemporary Spanish history had to be transformed into a private experience.’<sup>149</sup> Thus Monegal is critical of Dragon Rapide, (Camino/Spain/1986) a film dealing with the immediate days preceding the coup, stating that the war ‘is treated more in terms of individual dilemmas and family environment than of

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<sup>147</sup> Román Gubern, ‘The Civil War: Inquest or Exorcism?’ in Quarterly Review of Film and Video, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1999, p. 111.

<sup>148</sup> Antonio Monegal, in Janero Talens, Jenaro and Santos Zunzunegui (Eds.), ‘Images of War: Hunting the Metaphor’, Modes of Representation in Spanish Cinema, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, pp. 203-215, p. 203,

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203/4.



the social forces at play.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, Monegal also suggests that the film industry was complicit in the attempt to ease the transition from dictatorship to democracy at the expense of examining the more painful aspects of the civil war history. He argues that one such approach was to represent the conflict from the perspective of the middle class, supposedly caught in the crossfire, as is apparent in Las largas vacaciones del 36/The Long Vacation of 1936 (Camino/Spain/1976). The focus on those caught in the middle is also evident in Soldados/Soldiers (Ungría/Spain/1978), in this case a group of non-political Republican soldiers. The depoliticising of the civil war is also evident in Las bicicletas son para el verano/Bicycles are for Summer (Chávarri/Spain/1984), which focuses on the smaller, more personal concerns of a middle class family.

The civil war was characterised by an intense polarisation into opposing camps, often involving members of the same family.<sup>151</sup> In Cain on Screen: Contemporary Spanish Cinema (1993), an extensive study of Spanish civil war films, Thomas G. Deveny uses the theoretical framework of Cainismo, which he describes as ‘a fraternal antagonism within Spanish society’ to analyse a number of films located during the civil war.<sup>152</sup> He quotes Unamuno’s assertion that the concept of civil war ‘began with the fraternal assassination of Abel by his brother Cain.’<sup>153</sup> Deveny cites the use of Cainismo in Las largas vacaciones del ‘36, but the theme also surfaces in La lengua de las mariposas/Butterfly’s Tongue (Cuerda/Spain/1999) and Soldados de Salamina two films released since the

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 212. Dragon Rapide was the name of the plane that transported Franco to mainland Spain at the onset of the coup.

<sup>151</sup> The most famous example of this in Spain is of the poet Antonio Machado who, after spending the war defending the Republican government, died in February 1939. His brother, Manuel fought for the Nationalists. In Britain the former Conservative cabinet minister, Michael Portillo, was the son of a Republican exile all of whose brothers had fought for Franco.

<sup>152</sup> Deveny, p. 5.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

publication of his book. This may be a recurrent theme touched on by Spanish filmmakers, however, the 'theory' of Cainismo itself, rather than providing illuminating analyses of the films it examines, represents a flawed theoretical approach. Flowing from an analysis of the nation state as a collective unit with its population sharing a communal interest, the theoretical model of Cainismo unsuccessfully attempts to transcend barriers of class, gender and national identity, leaving it unable to deal with the complexities of the films it strives to analyse.

The desire to re-represent cinematically this repressed and distorted historical period has ensured that the country's recent past has become a rich historical seam for Spanish filmmakers to mine. Thus Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas note that 'Of the nearly three hundred historical films produced since the 1970s, more than half are set during the Second Republic, the Civil War and Francoism.'<sup>154</sup>

There appears to be a contradiction, however, in a fascination with the past and, simultaneously, a turning away from the 'reality' or at least the complexity of the past. Thus, despite the turn to twentieth-century history by Spanish filmmakers, there have been few films whose primary subject matter has been the civil war itself; the film director Vicente Aranda suggests that 'Apenas hay películas sobre la Guerra Civil ya que hay un deseo de olvidar este suceso histórico. (There are hardly any films about the Civil War as there is a desire to forget this historical event.)'<sup>155</sup> This is not a trend isolated to the world of cinema, but is reflective of a more widespread tendency in Spanish society itself. As Preston comments:

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<sup>154</sup> Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, p. 16.

<sup>155</sup> Quoted in Marvin D'Lugo, 'Vicente Aranda's *Amantes*: History as Cultural Style in Spanish Cinema', in Talens, Jenaro and Santos Zunzunegui (Eds.), *Modes of Representation in Spanish Cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, pp. 289–300, p. 291.



Since the return of democracy to Spain, commemoration of the Civil War has been muted. The silence was partly a consequence of the legacy of fear deliberately created during the post-war repression and by Franco's consistent pursuit of a policy of glorifying the victors and humiliating the vanquished. It was also a result of what has come to be called the *pacto del olvido* (the pact of forgetfulness). An inadvertent effect of Franco's post-war policies was to imbue the bulk of the Spanish people with a determination never to undergo again either the violence experienced during the war or the repression thereafter.<sup>156</sup>

Preston outlines that in the realm of official culture, anniversaries of the war were notable by their absence when he writes that 'In Spain itself, the fiftieth anniversary of the war in 1986 was marked by a silence that was almost deafening.'<sup>157</sup> But the civil war is being increasingly discussed in official cultural activity. For example on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2002, Spanish television transmitted Dragon Rapide to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Franco's death. And although Spanish cinema may have been complicit with the *pacto del olvido*, an increasing number of films set in this period have been released. One of the most notable is the Oscar-winning Belle Époque, but also La lengua de las mariposas and Libertarias. El Portero/The Goalkeeper (Suárez/Spain/2000) and Silencio Roto/Broken Silence (Armendáriz/Spain/2001) are two recent films, which are set in the post civil war period and focus on the figure of the *maquis*.

The numbers of films set during the conflict continues to increase with the recent release of El viaje de Carol/Carol's Journey (Uribe/Spain/2002) based on the novel A boca de noche by Angel García Roldán. Symbolic of the youthful nature of democracy in post-Franco Spain, A boca de noche, like La lengua de las mariposas represents the conflict from a child's perspective. It is as if the civil

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<sup>156</sup> Paul Preston, Comrades: Portraits From the Spanish Civil War, Harper Collins, London, 2000, p. 321.

<sup>157</sup> Paul Preston, A Concise History of The Spanish Civil War, Fontana Press, London, 1996, p. 7.



war still has to be explained from the start to a general public who have only limited information about a past that is only now coming to full public knowledge. But an increased desire for the truth of the past is ensuring that Spanish cinema will continue to be an arena for an ongoing battle about Spain's past.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined why the past has been an attractive area for filmmakers to visit, often returning to the past in order to intervene in the present. I have suggested that filmmakers are not subject to the same demands as those placed on the historian and that they are allowed a greater degree of artistic licence when representing the past. Nevertheless, they are often criticized for departing from established factual evidence. I have argued that history on screen is an invaluable way of opening up the past to modern audiences and, although a self-reflexive film form can create a more conscious historical spectator, audiences are capable of actively engaging with questions surrounding the nature of the past in mainstream cinema. In relation to the Spanish civil war in cinema I have outlined the most important films which represent the civil war both within and outside Spain. In charting Spanish cinematic representations of the civil war, both under the dictatorship and following Franco's death, I have suggested that there is still a desire to get to the truth of the past and, consequently, it is likely that there will be many new films which are set during the civil war in the future. The following six case studies are an attempt to understand how this complex historical period has been represented cinematically up to the present.

## Chapter Three

### For Whom the Bell Tolls: Hollywood and the Spanish Civil War

#### Introduction

In this chapter I investigate how the Spanish civil war was represented in the cinematic version of Ernest Hemingway's 1941 Pulitzer prize-winning novel For Whom the Bell Tolls<sup>158</sup> (Wood/USA/1943). Outlining the way that Hollywood represented the civil war when the United States was at war with Germany, I explore how much of the political and historical detail of the novel is omitted in the drive to reach a mass market. I also argue that the removal of the novel's political complexity was suited to the interests of wartime America. As background to this analysis I examine two films made during the Spanish civil war that were also aimed, primarily, at an American audience Blockade and the documentary The Spanish Earth. I begin, however, by examining the relationship between the narrativisation of the past and the use of narrative within cinema.

#### Narrative

As I outlined in chapter one, Jenkins and White suggest that the historical narratives that circulate in the present are the result of the subjective interpretative emplotments of contemporary historians. For Jenkins and White narrative discourses do not convey the 'reality' of the past, on the contrary, they work to conceal its non-narratable nature, fostering a lasting sense of cohesion

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<sup>158</sup> There are a number of different versions of the film. Originally released at 170 minutes, most television transmissions now come in at 120 minutes and exclude the flashback sequences and direct references to the war itself. In the UK there is a 151m version with the flashbacks intact and in the US a recently restored version reinstates more of the cut footage and runs at 166 minutes.

and coherence. Janet Staiger echoes the position of Jenkins and White when she asserts that narrative works “to fix” in a double sense as in “to halt” and “to cure.”<sup>159</sup> She argues further that ‘If narrative is understood as “taking place” and as operating on trajectories of desire, it is also a framing, an aggressive act of holding “in place,” and a settling of that desire into its proper space.’<sup>160</sup> For Staiger the reasons for this process are to be found in the needs of individuals striving to control the past; thus she asserts that ‘Such a fixing, securing, or pinning down of the past as coherent is not attempted for the past's sake but for the sake of the present - such a representation appears to ward off the threatening anxiety of having to recognize the inability of an individual to control and master the self-as-subject.’<sup>161</sup>

Rejecting the idea that narrative is inherently conservative Eagleton argues that ‘The idea that all closure is oppressive is both theoretically sloppy and politically unproductive.’<sup>162</sup> And Callinicos points to the possible advantages of narrative when he writes ‘Narratives do not serve only to give a sense of certainty...they allow us to recover the contingencies of the historical process, the junctures at which particular choices and chances tipped the balance between significantly different possible outcomes.’<sup>163</sup> Callinicos correctly suggests that narrative presents an opportunity to work through why one process happens rather than another. Narrative may be linked to questions of human desire to control, or to hold in place, but this need not be viewed negatively. Narrative is a tool that can

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<sup>159</sup> Janet Staiger, ‘Securing the Fictional Narrative as a Tale of the Historical Real’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88:2, Spring 1989, p. 393.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 393/4.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>162</sup> Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p. 67.

<sup>163</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 210.



be utilised to attempt to understand questions about the past. Why, for instance, the Spanish civil war started, or why Franco was victorious in 1939. This often leads to multiple contending narrative possibilities that compete for supremacy at any given moment. This may result in different narrative histories predominating at different times and, depending on a wide variety of social and political factors, one version of events may have greater validity than another. That need not mean, however, that they are either all equally valid or all equally useless. Moreover, as I argued in chapter one, it does not mean that narrative emplotments cannot be examined against objective realities.

In his work on narrative in cinema Edward Branigan suggests that

Narrative is a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern that represents and explains experience. More specifically, narrative is a way of organizing spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle and end that embodies a judgement about the nature of events as well as demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events.<sup>164</sup>

In the world of Hollywood cinema, narratives are organised around the plot, which involves the selection and ordering of events in such a way that the audience is presented with an aesthetically pleasurable experience, regardless of whether the subject matter is a romantic comedy, a gangster movie or a war story.

The importance attached to pleasure obviously has wider implications for the cinematic representation of what White describes as 'holocaustal events'. Ilan Avisar argues that, in relation to the Holocaust, 'the combination of narrative

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<sup>164</sup> Edward Branigan, Narrative Comprehension and Film, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 3.

pleasures with tragic history is deplorable.’<sup>165</sup> But his opposition to narrative pleasures is not only moral. Avisar also suggests that narrative is a fundamentally restraining device for representing the Holocaust. He states that ‘any dramatization of the Holocaust is liable to betray its subject, for the enormity of the genocide and the Nazi atrocities cannot serve as the springboard for the presentation of the meaningful action of a few remarkable dramatic agents; rather, the very scale and magnitude of the suffering and victimization paralyze dramatic action.’<sup>166</sup> Avisar is correct in pointing to the inability of cinematic narrative to capture the totality of holocaustal events. The focus on individuals in cinema ensures that the tale of one individual can be almost meaningless set against the scale of the holocaust, or any large-scale holocaustal event.

Narrative cinema may be inadequate for representing the complexity of the events it attempts to depict; however, it remains the most influential and popular form of filmmaking. It is not something that can either be dismissed as inadequate nor will it simply fade away. In relation to narrative in literature Eagleton states that ‘It would be easy to conclude... that narrative is a mode to be abolished – that everything that happened from Defoe to Dostoevsky was a ghastly mistake. Indeed, amazing though it may seem, such a position has been hotly insinuated in our time. Narrative, however, far from constituting some ruling-class conspiracy, is a valid and perhaps ineradicable mode of human experience.’<sup>167</sup> The importance of narrative is outlined in the following quote from Roland Barthes

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<sup>165</sup> Ilan Avisar, Screening the Holocaust: Cinema’s Images of the Unimaginable, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988, p. 35.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>167</sup> Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, New Left Books,

The narratives of this world are numberless...Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting...stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.<sup>168</sup>

How narrative operates in relation to holocaustal events needs to be understood rather than rejected as objectionable.

### **Narrative in cinema**

Walter Benjamin states that 'The past does not break down into stories, but into images.'<sup>169</sup> This position appears to concur with the position of White and Jenkins about the nature of the past. Jenkins himself asserts that, 'past events just don't have in them the shape of stories'.<sup>170</sup> These two quotes, however, appear to lie in contradistinction to the vast bulk of cinematic output that deals with events from the past. Mainstream cinema, in particular, often attempts to marry the two together, representing the past as (moving) image and the past as story.

One central feature of cinematic narrative in Hollywood is the concentration on the actions of individual characters. In Hollywood films that deal with the past,

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London, 1981, p. 51

<sup>168</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Roland Barthes Reader*, Susan Sontag (Ed.), Vintage, London, 1993, p. 251.

<sup>169</sup> Quoted in Hayden White, 'The Modernist Event' in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, Vivian Sobchak (Ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp. 17-38, p. 17.

<sup>170</sup> Keith Jenkins, *On 'What is History?': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 134.



the events are structured around the impact of history on an individual, or, at most, a small group of individuals. This is a process that cinema has inherited from the world of literature, specifically the nineteenth century realist novel. Mike Wayne highlights some of the problems in this approach when he states that 'An account of historical change which starts from and ends with the individual is problematic because it is unable to show how the individual is formed within a broader set of social relationships and how they develop in conjunction with those relationships.'<sup>171</sup> Thus, in many Hollywood films, extremely complicated political processes become individualised into personal narratives of specific men and women caught up in events that are often only a backdrop, or events that they only partially comprehend. This has a tendency to render the past as the subjectivised experience of individuals, not classes, nations or other social formations. A desire to break with this individualising process led early experimental filmmakers to explore the possibilities of creating narratives without individual heroes. In two films by Eisenstein, Stachka/Strike (USSR/1924) and Bronenosets Potyomkin/Battleship Potemkin (USSR/1925), there is a clear attempt, if only partially successful, to move away from the focus on an individual heroic figure to the focus on collective heroes. The individual hero, however, remains a cornerstone of Hollywood cinema and is apparent in For Whom the Bell Tolls.

### **For Whom the Bell Tolls historical background**

Hemingway travelled to Spain to cover the civil war as a correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance. An active supporter of the Republican

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<sup>171</sup> Mike Wayne, Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema, Pluto Press, London, Sterling, Virginia, 2001, p. 60.

government he collaborated with the Spanish novelist Prudencio de Pereda on the short propaganda film Spain in Flames (Prudencio de Pereda/Spain/1938) and also provided the voice-over for The Spanish Earth. He started writing For Whom the Bell Tolls in Cuba in March 1939, he finished it in July 1940 and it was published on 21 October 1941 to a warm critical response. One factor in its success was the novel's perceived lack of didacticism. The novel wrapped some of the historical detail of the civil war around a love story about an American fighter in Spain and was sympathetic to the general cause of the Republic. Its politics, however, were regarded by some critics as unimportant to its success. Thus Kenneth Kinnamon argues that the novel 'transcends partisanship in its artistic integrity.'<sup>172</sup> Gene D. Phillips notes that the book received a generally favourable critical reception when he writes, 'The majority of critics who did not have a political axe to grind agreed that Hemingway's book was both good and true.'<sup>173</sup>

The novel is obviously not entirely fictional and Hemingway places his narrative within established events, not only the Spanish civil war, but, particularly the Republican offensive against La Granja and Segovia towards the end of May 1937, the failure of which led to the fall of Bilbao.<sup>174</sup> Allen Josephs states that Hemingway 'invented a great deal - the bridge, the cave, the guerrillas themselves had no historical counterparts in that sector - but he placed his invented elements in very real country and within a very real failed offensive,

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<sup>172</sup> Keneth Kinnamon, 'Hemingway and Politics' in Scott Donaldson (Ed.), The Cambridge Companion To Hemingway, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York & Melbourne, 1996, pp. 149 – 169, p. 165.

<sup>173</sup> Gene D. Phillips, Hemingway and Film, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, New York, 1980, p. 40/1.

<sup>174</sup> See Hugh Thomas, The Spanish Civil War, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, pp. 688-9.

one of the turning points of the war.<sup>175</sup> Josephs further suggests that there is strong evidence that Hemingway may have participated in the blowing-up of a bridge north of Turuel which would certainly have provided the author with much of the material for his novel.<sup>176</sup> There is also evidence that Hemingway modelled certain characters on real figures, thus General Golz, who has an exchange with Jordan in an early sequence, was based on the Polish general Karol Swierezenski.<sup>177</sup> Therefore, the novel is factual in that it revolves around the general setting of the civil war and contains specific references to established events and characters within that war. This has led some critics to suggest that the novel is, in part, an accurate portrayal of these events. For instance, Josephs writes that ‘the stories and the play, in fact, do give us an accurate rendition of that part of the war that Hemingway actually experienced, in and around Madrid.’<sup>178</sup>

### **Cinematic fidelity**

If the novel was regarded as faithful to the events of the civil war, the film’s release provoked critics to question how authentic the cinematic version would be. Thus Phillips suggests that ‘The question now was how much of that truth and goodness would find its way into the projected film version of the novel.’<sup>179</sup> Sixty years after its release it is difficult to accept the terms in which this quote is posed. Notions of ‘truth’ or ‘goodness’ have been increasingly problematised.

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<sup>175</sup> Allen Josephs, 'Hemingway's Spanish Sensibility' in Scott Donaldson, (Ed.), The Cambridge Companion To Hemingway, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York & Melbourne, 1996, pp. 221-242, p. 239.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, p. 226. Hugh Thomas writes, however, that at this time Hemingway was back in the United States raising funds for the Republican cause. p. 689.

<sup>177</sup> Cited in Kinnamon, p. 165.

<sup>178</sup> Josephs, p. 236. The reference is to Hemingway’s 1938 play The Fifth Column, published in The Fifth Column and Four Stories of the Spanish Civil War, MacMillan, 1969.

<sup>179</sup> Gene D. Phillips, Hemingway and Film, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, New York, 1980, pp. 40/1.



The novel may contain elements that are true in the sense that they match certain individuals who fought in Spain or because it is set against certain historical events. But as the novel wraps some historical detail around a love story about an American fighter in Spain, the details of the civil war become historical background rather than the central component of the narrative. This is a process which is accelerated in the transition from page to screen and which I will attempt to detail in the following analysis of the film.

### **Synopsis**

For Whom the Bell Tolls opens with the dramatic orchestral sweep of Victor Young's score. A giant bell tolls as an intertitle appears on screen with a quote from John Donne which reads 'any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.' A subsequent intertitle places the action in Spain 1937. The opening sequence bursts forth in glorious colour reminiscent of an epic Hollywood Western and the film plunges immediately into highly dramatic action as two men successfully blow up a train. In their attempted escape from enemy troops one man, Kashkin, presumably Russian, is shot and wounded. He appeals to the other, Robert Jordan (Gary Cooper) to keep his promise and kill him before enemy soldiers arrive. Jordan, who we later learn is a Spanish language teacher from the United States, does so. After receiving orders from General Golz at the Republican headquarters, Jordan, a munitions expert, is again sent into enemy territory, this time to blow up a bridge. The attack is timed to coincide with the launch of a Republican offensive. In this operation he is aided by a small band of Spanish guerrilla fighters led by Pablo (Akim Tamiroff)

and his 'woman' Pilar (Katina Paxinou). The group also comprises Maria (Ingrid Bergman), a beautiful nineteen-year-old woman recovering from the murder of her parents and her subsequent rape by a group of Nationalist soldiers. Other key individuals include Anselmo, an elderly peasant fighter, and Rafael, a gypsy who adds some comic relief to the narrative, particularly in his endless, if ultimately tragic, desire to blow up a tank. Maria falls instantly for Jordan and the couple's love story forms the central focus of the narrative.<sup>180</sup> The film follows the actions of the group as they prepare for the attack on the bridge over the ensuing three days. Whereas the novel is narrated in flashback, the narrative of the film is generally linear. There is recourse to flashbacks when Pilar relates violent tales from the start of the war. However, the film begins with the end of Jordan's penultimate mission and ends with his last mission.

The sense of foreboding present with the tolling of the bell in the opening sequence is developed throughout the film; in Pilar's reading of Jordan's palm, in Anselmo's reluctance to shoot a man from his own village and in Pablo's reluctance to participate in the attack on the bridge. The darkness of the wartime situation is represented by lighting a number of sequences in a way that places the characters in silhouette such as the opening train-blowing sequence or the early exchange between Jordan and Golz. The film concludes after the bridge has been successfully destroyed, albeit with the death of Anselmo and Rafael. However, the Nationalists have learned of the plans of the Republican offensive and it is doomed to failure. As the remainder of the group attempt to escape, Jordan is wounded. Although facing certain capture or death he remains behind

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<sup>180</sup> The audience never learns how old Jordan is, but Cooper would have been 42 at the time of the shoot. It only increases the implausibility of Maria's sudden and dramatic love interest in a man more than twice her age.

to face the ensuing Nationalist soldiers and to assist the escape of the others. As the enemy attacks he turns his machine-gun to the camera and fires directly to the audience. The film fades to another shot of the giant bell tolling before the final credits roll.

### **American centrality**

As is clear from the opening and closing sequences Jordan is the primary focus of narrative attention, thus presenting an American as a key agent in a Spanish war. The early exchange between Jordan and the Russian general also establishes them as key players, thus further marginalising Spaniards. The casting develops this process with a selection of non-Spanish actors taking the key roles.<sup>181</sup> This mirrors the international complexities of the war as a game fought out with Russian and Americans as decisive agents, but it has the effect of reducing Spaniards to the status of supporting players in their own conflict. Furthermore, in contrast to the clear-headed, intelligent foreign strategists at the top, the Spanish Republicans, mostly peasants identified with the land and rural way of life, are humble, simple characters. Therefore, Jordan's authority, and consequently, American leadership of the group, goes unquestioned. Only Pablo questions his authority, mocking Jordan's status as a 'false professor' because Jordan does not have a beard. But Pablo's morality is called into question by his alcoholism and violent past, thereby undermining his opposition. The viewer is presented with the ignorant, if noble, Spanish guerrillas, eager to be led by the educated figure of an American outsider, or 'Inglés' as they call him.

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<sup>181</sup> Cooper is American, Bergman is Swedish, Paxinou is Greek, and Tamiroff was born in Georgia in the former Russian Empire.



Jordan's status as a Spanish teacher in a US college further places him in a hierarchical position above the group members. He is the natural leader forced to teach Anselmo and Rafael how to record vehicles and soldiers crossing the bridge. Unbelievably, Jordan also has to explain to Rafael what an 'interval' is. Jordan's supposed moral superiority is also highlighted when the group quarrels over how to deal with Pablo's initial treachery. The Spaniards, including Pilar, want him killed. Rafael suggests that they 'sell him to the nationalists' or 'blind him'. Jordan also wants Pablo out of the way, but introducing old-fashioned Hollywood Western morality, he refuses to 'kill a man in cold blood'.

In contrast to Jordan's unquestionable morality, Rafael states that Pablo had 'killed more people than the cholera', a reference to those that Pablo had killed at the outbreak of the civil war. The film suggests that it is the violence that has both corrupted Pablo and turned him to alcohol. His degeneration is further evidenced when he shoots the three men in the gorge that have come to assist their escape commenting 'I look after my own people.' The suggestion, however, is that he is more interested in their horses than in the men themselves. In the novel Anselmo says to Pablo 'Until thou hadst horses thou wert with us. Now thou art another capitalist more.'<sup>182</sup> To which Jordan adds 'The old man was right. The horses made him rich and as soon as he was rich he wanted to enjoy life.' (p. 22) Pablo's desire for wealth is less clear in the film, but is still apparent in his reluctance to attack the bridge because, as he states, 'it brings no profit.'

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<sup>182</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, Harper Collins, London, 1976, p. 22. Future page numbers are contained in brackets.

As with the novel, the film is littered with words and phrases which attempt to create a sense of 'Spanish' dialogue. Thus when Rafael asks Roberto his name he says 'How do they call you?' mimicking Spanish grammatical rules. Similarly, when Jordan first greets Maria he also states 'How are you called?' and Jordan and Anselmo exchange an 'until soon' instead of the literal Spanish translation, 'hasta luego'. Jordan is a Spanish teacher, however, so the audience can assume he is fluent in both English and Spanish. Maria's only Spanish dialogue is to greet Jordan with an 'hola' and on another occasion bid him farewell with a 'salud.' Despite her occasional use of 'Spanish', her lack of a Spanish accent creates no barrier between her and an American audience. In contrast, Pablo's gruff thick accent and 'Spanish' language increasingly differentiates him, most noticeably in his repeated statement 'I don't provoke' when the group is trying to create a situation whereby they can kill him. The action may have been filmed in the High Sierra Mountains of North Carolina (substituting as Spain's Guadarrama mountains) but the effect of this use of language is to locate the action in a foreign, non-English speaking locale and works to distance the location from the predominantly American audience. That Jordan is American obviously fits with the narrative requirements of a film aimed at an American audience ensuring a higher level of narrative identification with the two central characters and with the love story at the heart of the narrative. This may have helped create sympathy for the Republican plight among an American audience, but it also increases the role of non-Spaniards.

## Women

The world of war is commonly associated with men, in both history and in cinema; but, with Maria and Pilar the film introduces two central female characters. The gypsy figure of Pilar is a simultaneously terrifying and nurturing figure and is described by Pablo as having ‘the head of a bull and the heart of a hawk.’ She has mystical qualities expressed in her attempt to read Jordan’s palm and is further characterised and differentiated by her Greek accent, her dark make-up, dark hair and dark skin. Rena Anderson suggests that ‘Hemingway resolved his long-standing fear of emasculation by splitting the intimidating woman of his earlier fiction into two separate characters.’<sup>183</sup> The split, however, is far from equal and Pilar stands poles apart from the virginal Maria, a woman that Jordan can love without fear or complication. In the novel Maria is described in the following terms, ‘Her teeth were white in her brown face and her skin and her eyes were the same golden tawny brown.’ (p. 27) But in the film her brown face and eyes are replaced with pale, white skin and sharp blue eyes that are ideal companions for her brilliant white polished teeth. She is the perfect picture of a beautiful Hollywood star rather than an impoverished peasant ravaged by the horrors of a brutal civil war. Maria, albeit played by a Swedish actor, is about as near to a stereotypical white American as it is possible to get.

From the beginning Pilar’s political position is simple, yet unequivocal, and early on she declares ‘I am for the bridge and the Republic.’ After the dispute with Pablo over blowing up the bridge she states ‘Here I command’, but although she

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<sup>183</sup> Rena Sanderson, ‘Hemingway and Gender’, in Scott Donaldson (Ed.), The Cambridge Companion To Hemingway, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York & Melbourne, 1996, pp. 170 – 196.



displaces the patriarchal hierarchy she remains responsible for the provision of food for the group. In contrast, Maria, despite her parents' death at the hands of Nationalist troops and her subsequent rape, rarely voices anything political, her primary concern being to run off into the distance with Jordan. Although she does state that at the time of her parents' murder she wanted to cry out 'Long live the Republic!', Maria is marked not by her politics but by her passivity. Thus, while Pilar carries a gun in the attack on the bridge and is also skilled in the throwing of hand grenades, Maria is left quietly behind to tend the horses. A. Robert Lees states that 'Pilar as the incarnation of the earth Madonna is routinely judged to lack all credibility, while Maria, adoring and healed of her rape by the fascists through her too instantaneous love for Jordan amounts to no more than a cipher, a figure out of barely disguised supremacist male fantasy.'<sup>184</sup> Highlighting her place in the group hierarchy Pilar is often shot from below, most notably when she first appears, standing on a ledge above the entire group. In a subsequent shot with Jordan in the mountains outside the cave she is framed so that he is forced to look up to her, quite literally she stands head and shoulders above him. In contrast, Maria is always situated below the male figures and is always framed half a head shorter than Jordan. The difference between the two women characters is exemplified by reference to their sensuality. There is little attempt to sexualise Pilar who comically, if not intentionally, states 'I was born ugly.' When she goes to kiss one of El Sordo's men he draws back quickly. In contrast, the virginal status of Maria, who is often shot in soft-focus, is highlighted when she innocently tells Jordan 'I don't know how to kiss or I would kiss you' before she, unbelievably, asks him 'where do the noses go?'

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<sup>184</sup> A. Robert Lee, 'Everything Completely Knit Up: Seeing For Whom The Bell Tolls Whole' in A. Robert Lee (Ed.), Ernest Hemingway: New Critical Essays, Vision, London, 1983, p. 82/3.

## Romance

The romantic relationship between Jordan and Maria is a central component of the film; but it is far from a relationship of equals. After Maria relates the traumatic tale of her parents' death to Jordan she proceeds to tell him of when nationalist soldiers cut off her hair and gagged her with her own braids. Jordan, unwilling to soil Maria's virginal qualities, responds by placing his patriarchal, censorial hand over her mouth and says 'I don't want to hear it.' Jordan makes it clear that Maria's traumatic tale is one that he refuses to allow her to narrate. Later, as the couple spends their first and last night together, Maria again attempts to recount her experience. She states that after they had cut her hair she was taken to the office of her father 'where they laid me on the couch. It was here the worst things were done.' But Jordan still refuses to let Maria speak and says 'Don't talk about it anymore. No one touched you.' Maria's rape and torture can be hinted at, even spoken of, provided the details are avoided and Jordan allowed the opportunity to deny it. Thus Jordan attempts to keep intact her virginal status, even if it will last for only a few hours more. The endings of both film and novel contrast the increased role of the love interest in the film. Jordan's final words in the novel are 'Think about Montana. *I can't*. Think about Madrid. *I can't*. Think about a cold drink of water. *All right*. That's what it will be like. Like a cool drink of water.' (p. 412). In contrast, Jordan's last words in the film are 'Don't pass out. Think about America. I can't. Think about Madrid. I can't. Think about Maria. I can do that alright' which then runs into an interior monologue where Jordan states 'they can't stop us ever. She's going on with me.'

On one level the film may be an individualised, romanticised, sugar-coated narrative that can be watched easily without worrying about the details of history. Yet the love story does not simply neutralise the politics. The war becomes the backdrop for a love drama, but even if the civil war only operates as a backdrop it is still present and an understanding of the historical events surrounding the conflict provides a deeper, more informed reading. Although set in Spain during a civil war there is no attempt to explain in any detail what the war is about, indeed in some ways this could be any war. Hemingway's novel plays an important part in portraying the civil war as, generally, an uncomplicated struggle between good republicans and evil fascists. But most of the political content of the novel has been excised from the screenplay with many direct political references removed. Some remain; thus Maria mentions both Republicans and Nationalists and there is a clear reference to wider social forces at play when Pilar recollects that Pablo defended his town 'the day the revolution began.' But the film steers clear of sharp political debate. In an article in Time on the release of the film, the director, Wood states that 'It is a love story against a brutal background. It would be the same love story if they were on the other side.'<sup>185</sup> It is possible, however, that this was an attempt to focus on the romantic interest in an effort to fuel box-office demand. Phillips suggests that the reason for the lack of politics in the script was that 'Wood and the studio bosses wanted to soft-pedal the political implications of the story in order to avoid running the risk of having the film boycotted by the Spanish government or by Spanish groups in the United States.'<sup>186</sup> If this was the approach it was unsuccessful, as the film was banned in Spain; it seems unlikely, however, that this was the main

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<sup>185</sup> 'For Whom?' *Time* 2/8/1943 p. 80, cited in Phillips, p. 43.

<sup>186</sup> Phillips, p. 43.



reason. Films may not be made only to make money, but in the world of commercial cinema, films are rarely made unless a profit is at least possible. Films are commodities that require a mass market in order to be profitable and there is a general assumption that strident political filmmaking leads to box-office failure. Thus, although politics are largely absent, the film contains a number of components that would ensure a reasonable box-office return: a famous and celebrated literary source; the use of famous box-office stars; a strong love interest and highly charged dramatic action.

### **Politics**

This seems a more likely reason why the screenplay is much vaguer about politics than the novel, although certain clear political moments remain. This is highlighted when Fernando asks Jordan 'Why have you come so far to fight for our Republic?' In response Jordan states that 'a man fights for what he believes in.' He continues

It's not only Spain fighting here is it? It's Germany and Italy on one side and Russia on the other and the Spanish people right in the middle of it all. The Nazis and fascists are just as much against democracy as they are against the communists and they are using your country as a proving ground for their new war machinery; their tanks and dive-bombers and stuff like that so that they can jump the gun on the democracies and knock off England and France and my country before they get armed and ready to fight.

In an effort to develop sympathy amongst an American audience for the Republican cause, in the novel Hemingway strives to link the Spanish peasants' desire for land reform with homesteading in the US and there are constant references to his grandfather's homesteading project. In the transition to the screen, however, these references are all removed. When Fernando asks if he was

always a Republican, however, Jordan conflates the political situation of Spain and the US when he states that his father had always voted Republican. Thus the film mixes two entirely different political traditions, albeit with the same name, in a somewhat confusing attempt to ‘Americanise’ the conflict.

A number of overt political points made in the novel are omitted from the film. One main feature is Hemingway’s attitude towards the anarchists. Thus Pilar describes the anarchists during the revolutionary events in derogatory terms ‘It would have been better for the town if they had thrown over twenty or thirty of the drunkards, especially those of the red-and-black scarves,<sup>187</sup> and if we ever have another revolution I believe they should be destroyed at the start. But then we did not know this. But in the next days we were to learn.’(117/8) This is further developed in a report of the killing of Durutti, the anarchist leader, when Hemingway writes that ‘Durutti was good and his own people shot him there at the Puente de los franceses. Shot him because he wanted them to attack. Shot him in the glorious discipline of indiscipline. The cowardly swine.’ (326)<sup>188</sup> This is also apparent as Andres tries to get back to warn of the attack, his journey being interrupted by ‘the crazies; the ones with the black-and-red scarves.’ (330) His failure is described by Gomez to Marty when he states that ‘Once tonight we have been impeded by the ignorance of the anarchists. Then by the sloth of a bureaucratic fascist. Now by the oversuspicion of a Communist.’ (367) The political complexities of this situation, however, are lost completely in the film

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<sup>187</sup> Red and black were the colours of the anarchist flag and also of many of the neckerchiefs worn by anarchist militiamen.

<sup>188</sup> The anarchists may have had their faults, but shooting their own leaders in the back does not appear to have been one of them.

with the failure to arrive in time not pinned on any political shoulders but put down to suspicion and incompetence.

One small scene indicates how the political details are omitted in the transition from the page to the screen. When Jordan first meets Pablo he shows him his papers from SIM (Servicio de Investigación Militar/Service of Military Investigation) an organisation working under Communist control, however, there would be very few audience members who would be aware of this connection.<sup>189</sup> This is the only reference to the possible politics of Jordan. In the novel, however, Jordan asserts that he is not a communist but an anti-fascist. (64) The narrator asserts, moreover, that Jordan's sympathies lay with the communists when he says that 'He was under Communist discipline for the duration of the war. Here in Spain the Communists offered the best discipline and the soundest and the sanest for the duration of the war. He accepted their discipline for the duration of the war because, in the conduct of the war, they were the only party whose programme and discipline he could respect.'(149) Echoing the communist position Jordan himself argues that 'The first thing to win was the war. If we did not win the war everything was lost.'(125) None of this detail is mentioned in the film, it is not the case, however, that the film was regarded as unimportant politically. The importance of the film's politics to the US authorities is evidenced by a report from the F.B.I. in July 1943 that scrutinised the content of the film and kept records of all people who worked on it.<sup>190</sup> The American military were also interested in the film and a US Office of War Information

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<sup>189</sup> The SIM was only formed in the latter part of the civil war, thus placing it out of the timeframe of the events of the film. It degenerated into a political police force under communist control and was responsible for acts of torture against dissident Republican forces. It is an odd organization for Hemingway to place his 'hero' in. Thomas, 2003, pp. 756-7.

<sup>190</sup> See Gerald Horne, Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2002, p. 57.



report in relation to the Republican violence carried out by Pablo in the flashback sequence stated that

Now it is necessary that we see the democratic-fascist battle as a whole and recognize that what the Loyalists were fighting for is essentially the same thing that we are. To focus too much attention on the chinks in our allies' armour is just what our enemies might wish. Perhaps it is realistic, but it is also going to be confusing to American audiences.<sup>191</sup>

### **Blockade and The Spanish Earth**

I have suggested that For Whom the Bell Tolls creates a narrative of Spanish struggle against a fascist aggressor, but does not deal with politics in anything other than the broadest of brushstrokes. This is a process that is also at work, albeit to a lesser degree in Blockade and The Spanish Earth. Hemingway provided the narration for The Spanish Earth, a documentary film funded by Contemporary Historians Inc., an organisation established by a number of prominent writers and artists based in the United States. The group raised the finance to send Joris Ivens to Spain with the purpose of making a documentary that could be used to raise awareness of the civil war amongst a largely uninformed American public. In an opinion poll published in 1937, as many as 67% of Americans stated that they were neutral in the conflict.<sup>192</sup> In January 1937, the US Congress passed the Embargo Act prohibiting the export of arms to either side, however, as Franco was being supported by Germany and Italy, many questioned the validity of this supposedly neutral position. The Spanish Earth was part of the campaign to build support for the Spanish government and

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<sup>191</sup> Source: Script review, For Whom the Bell Tolls, Oct. 14, 1942, OWI files - Office of War Information, cited in Koppes & Black, Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies, The Free Press, New York, 1987, p. 71.

<sup>192</sup> See Russell Campbell, Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States 1930-1942, UMI Research Press, Michigan, 1982, p. 170.

attempt to force an end to the US government's non-intervention policy. The group's second, more immediate, objective was to raise money for medical relief for the Republican cause; Ivens comments that their task was 'to make a good film for exhibition in the United States in order to collect money to send ambulances to Spain.'<sup>193</sup> As with For Whom the Bell Tolls, the attempt to appeal to a wide audience unaware of the complexities of the war was to have crucial consequences in determining how The Spanish Earth represented the conflict.

Set in the town and fields of Fuentiduena, the city of Madrid and battlefronts along the key highway connecting Valencia and the besieged capital, parallel editing links the importance of the local irrigation project to the defence of Madrid. This is continued as documentary footage of the civilian bombing - strikingly encapsulated in a shot of two young boys lying lifeless on the floor - is contrasted with the dramatic reconstruction of village life. While the bombing sequences represent the people as almost anonymous victims of war, in contrast, in the narrative reconstruction of a Spanish peasant, Julian, and his family, the Spanish people are represented as positive historical agents in the fight against Franco. The film displays a clear sympathy for the day to day struggle of the villagers which is exemplified by Hemingway's narration, which romantically links village life with the land: 'this Spanish Earth is dry and hard and the faces of the men who work that earth are dry and hard from the sun.' Although overly dramatic in the battle sequences, for instance when Hemingway boldly asserts that 'men cannot act before the camera in the presence of death', the narration also adds a sincere and sympathetic, personal and poetic tone in its description of

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<sup>193</sup> Quoted in William Alexander, Film on the Left: American Documentary Film From 1931 to 1942, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981, p. 152.

peasant life. The connection of the people to the land is continued throughout the film with the closing sequence of water cascading over the arid earth. The struggle of 'the Spanish people' is tied to the struggle for progress and the struggle to conquer nature. As William Alexander argues, the film establishes 'that the earth and the universe are huge and powerful, the war destructive and its fortunes uncertain, yet that people assert their spirit and their humanity nonetheless.'<sup>194</sup> In returning to the scene of the opening landscape shot, the closing sequence strives to unify the film, suggesting that come what may, the peasants will triumph over adversity. The result is a haunting cinematic account of the experience of those living in fear of the fascist's bombing raids; the rough nature of the black and white cinematography, rather than weakening the impact, brings an immediacy that authenticates the reality the film conveys.

Ivens claims that The Spanish Earth avoids tendentiousness, arguing that he was 'providing instead a base on which the spectator was stimulated to form his own conclusions.'<sup>195</sup> The film, however, is undoubtedly supportive of the Republican cause, but whom it is against is far from clear. Indeed, it is extremely vague as to what the war is about at all. There is no attempt to explain the origins of the conflict and Hemingway describes the 'enemy' simply as 'they'. Richard Meran Barsman argues that 'the moral assumptions behind the Spanish resistance are taken for granted.'<sup>196</sup> The film, moreover, is open to charges of oversimplification of the conflict - the passivity of simple village life under threat from fascist aggression. Incredibly, fascism is mentioned only once and even

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>196</sup> Richard Meran Barsman, Non Fiction Film: A Critical History, E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1973, p. 92.



then, not by the narrator, but by a speaker at a rally. There is no mention of Franco, no mention of Republican divisions and critically, no mention of wider social demands - beyond the peasants' desire for land. Thus, after one screening a New York Times columnist could write 'the Spanish people are fighting, not for broad principles of Muscovite Marxism, but for the right to the productivity of a land denied them through years of absentee landlordship.'<sup>197</sup>

In attempting to simplify the struggle by avoiding complicated and controversial issues the effect is to nullify the overall political content, leading Meran Barsman to comment that it 'is a moving film which suffers...from a lack of political focus.'<sup>198</sup> Flowing from the lack of controversial political detail, most of the critical response also avoids the controversial nature of the conflict and focuses instead on humanist aspects of the film. Time magazine states that 'as face after face looks out from the screen the picture becomes a sort of portfolio of portraits of the human soul in the presence of disaster and distress.'<sup>199</sup> This comment illustrates how audiences can engage with the film without engaging with the controversial aspects of the conflict. Thomas Waugh argues that 'all of these elisions can be justified in terms of dodging domestic red-baiters, religious groups, and censors...but they are also part of a systematic depiction of a simple non-ideological struggle of 'little people' against 'rebels' and invaders. The stakes of the war came across as 'democratic' in a very loose sense, rather than those of the class struggle.'<sup>200</sup> In the film's defence Campbell argues that 'if the

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<sup>197</sup> Quoted in Thomas Waugh, 'Men Cannot Act Before the Camera in the Presence of Death' in Barry Keith Grant & Jeanette Sloniowski (Eds.), Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1998, p. 152.

<sup>198</sup> Meran Barsman, p. 92.

<sup>199</sup> Quoted in Eric Barnouw, Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film, Oxford University Press, New York, 1974, p. 36.

<sup>200</sup> Waugh, 1998, p. 130.

political issues at stake were oversimplified, even distorted, it was because of the overriding need for unity in the face of the enemy.'<sup>201</sup> As part of this strategy the filmmakers use a policy of self-censorship in their refusal to make direct reference to Communist involvement in the war. Thus La Pasionaria, a leading Communist, is referred to as 'the wife of a poor miner in Asturias' and General Lister, a prominent Communist who had studied at the Freunze military academy in the Soviet Union,<sup>202</sup> is casually described as having risen 'from a simple soldier to the command of a division.'

Defending the film, Ivens points to its pragmatic use: 'it really provided information about a problem that spectators were not really familiar with, and it helped the anti-fascist movement enormously...directly even. People gave money for the International Brigades.'<sup>203</sup> It did not, however, attain the success that they had expected; despite the lack of controversial political content, few commercial distributors were interested in exhibiting the film and it was largely shown to already sympathetic audiences, thus lowering its propaganda value considerably.<sup>204</sup> Nevertheless, at Hollywood screenings in July 1937, \$20 000 was raised to buy ambulances for the Republican cause and as Meran Barsman comments, 'Ivens participated in a monumental battle against fascist aggression, and aided that cause with his film...he raised social consciousness and funds for ambulances, and under the circumstances, those were his intentions.'<sup>205</sup> In an immediate sense, therefore, The Spanish Earth made a practical contribution to

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<sup>201</sup> Campbell, p. 165.

<sup>202</sup> See Campbell, p. 65.

<sup>203</sup> Quoted in Thomas Waugh (Ed.), Show us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary, Scarecrow Press Inc. Metuchen, New Jersey & London, 1984, p. 127.

<sup>204</sup> See John J. Michalczyk, in John J. Michalczyk & Sergio Villani (Eds.), 'Malraux, Hemingway and Embattled Spain', in North Dakota Quarterly, 60.2, Spring 1992, p. 27.

<sup>205</sup> Meran Barsman, p. 94.

the Republican cause. The desire to broaden its appeal, however, resulted in a representation of the conflict that sidestepped any problematic political issues.

As with The Spanish Earth, the primary motivation behind Blockade was to campaign for an end to the non-intervention pact. The scriptwriter, John Howard Lawson, makes his position clear when he states that ‘the people of Spain were fighting for democracy and freedom...the blockade cut off food, medical supplies, and arms from the legal government. I had no other message, and there was none which so urgently needed to be said.’<sup>206</sup> If The Spanish Earth can be criticised for refusing to engage politically with the conflict, it is a charge that can be laid more firmly at the door of Blockade. Although the New York Times, 17th June 1938, cites Blockade as ‘the first fiction film to deal at all seriously with the Spanish Civil War’<sup>207</sup>, the social implications of the conflict were even further diluted in an attempt to broaden its appeal. This partly flows from the strategy adopted by the filmmakers; to select a familiar genre form and use conventional Hollywood strategies to ensure that the film reached a wide audience, but also from the film’s Hollywood production context. Joe Breen, head of the Production Code Authority, the industry’s self-regulating body, sternly advised producer Walter Wanger:

you will of course be careful not to identify at any time the uniforms of the soldiers shown throughout the story. You will also have in mind that your picture is certain to run into considerable difficulty in Europe and South America, if there is any indication in the telling of the story that you are ‘taking sides’ in the present unfortunate Spanish Civil War. It is

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<sup>206</sup> Quoted in Gary Carr, The Left Side of Paradise: The Screenwriting of John Howard Lawson, UMI Research Press, Michigan, 1984, p. 76.

<sup>207</sup> Quoted in Greg M. Smith ‘Blocking Blockade: Partisan Protest, Popular Debate, and Encapsulated Texts’, in Cinema Journal 36, No. 1, Fall 1996, pp. 18-38.



imperative that you do not, at any time, identify any of the warring factions.<sup>208</sup>

The combination of these factors results in the almost complete eradication of politics from the film, leaving nothing much more than a love story set against a pretty shaky spy plot. Thus, although Wanger was one of Hollywood's most independent producers and Lawson was the Communist Party's main organiser in Hollywood, Colin Schindler argues that 'together they made a film which contained no verbal or visual clues that gave the prospective audience the slightest idea about what was happening in the Spanish Civil War.'<sup>209</sup> Working under the watchful eye of Breen led to a policy of self-censorship and, as Gary Carr points out, Wanger insisted 'that the film's emphasis not be on causes, but effects, the horror of bombing and of starving civilian populations.'<sup>210</sup> Thus, instead of making direct references to events in Spain, the film asserts a general anti-war sentiment that almost everyone could agree with. Although opening intertitles state 'Spain: the Spring of 1936', there is no subsequent mention of any events of the period and if that had not been declared, the events could be taking place almost anywhere. For those aware of the war in Spain, however, the relevance was not lost and as Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black argue 'even though the sides were not identified, few politically conscious Americans in 1938 would have been confused over the issues'.<sup>211</sup>

Reflecting the common issues that the left felt capable of mobilising to win support, there are a number of similarities in the political content of all three

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<sup>208</sup> Quoted in Colin Schindler, Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society, 1929-1939, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 197.

<sup>209</sup> ibid, p. 196.

<sup>210</sup> Carr, p. 69.

<sup>211</sup> Koppes, & Black, p. 25.

films. Most obvious is the question of land; as Jordan links the struggle in Spain with homesteading, Marco explains his reasons for fighting by pointing to a photograph of the countryside, suggesting that the land is already communally owned. Marjorie Valteau points out, however, that Blockade 'does not deal with the fact that most Spanish peasants owned very little or no land.'<sup>212</sup> The Spanish Earth makes only one direct reference to fascism, Blockade never states who the enemy are, either fascist or Nationalist, simply an anonymous 'they'. For Whom the Bell Tolls is slightly more political, for instance through the inclusion of Jordan's speech, but there is no strident politicising.

Although it is established that Blockade is set in Spain, as with For Whom the Bell Tolls the central characters have few problems conversing adequately in English. Marco's friend Luis may speak with a heavy 'foreign' accent, but both Marco and Norma eloquently converse in English - albeit with convenient American accents. While this would be crucial for the film's commercial success, the decision to 'Americanise' the central characters in order to provoke sympathetic character identification also fits with the strategy of the US Communist Party (CPUSA). In an attempt to widen their support and influence, Waugh points out that the CPUSA 'preferred in the late 1930s to call its ideology 'Americanism', stressing 'democracy' and 'civil liberties' rather than class allegiance...soliciting the support of non-left unions, the middle classes, elected officials, intellectuals, and even the clergy.'<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Marjorie Valteau, The Spanish Civil War in American and European Films, UMI Research Press, Michigan, 1982, p. 28.

<sup>213</sup> Waugh, 1998, p. 152.

The effect of attempting to win over religious groups as part of this strategy is illustrated in Blockade's representation of Republican supporters as a group of friendly Christians. The inclusion of religious imagery and the sequence of women praying in the church led Valleau to comment: 'Blockade's utilization of religion for propaganda purposes represents a curious distortion of facts.'<sup>214</sup> The film does not examine Hugh Thomas's estimate of the 6,831 'religious persons' killed by the Republicans.<sup>215</sup> Thus we have a central feature of Hollywood cinema; an inability to attempt to explore the complexities of the history.

Despite the lack of political content in Blockade the film provoked widespread controversy following its release and Smith argues that its significance 'relies less on the film itself than on the discursive blockade around the film.'<sup>216</sup>

Blockade sparked a chorus of right wing disapproval with the New York state deputy of the Knights of Columbus writing that 'the picture is historically false and intellectually dishonest. It is a polemic for the Marxist controlled cause in Spain, which would ruthlessly destroy Christian civilisation.'<sup>217</sup> Further, the conservative-led Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America worked to limit the number of screenings in an attempt to make the film an economic failure.<sup>218</sup> Internationally Blockade met with a further right-wing onslaught and was subsequently banned in Spain, Germany and Italy in addition to ten other countries.<sup>219</sup> Many on the left, however, were just as disgruntled as those on the right and Schindler argues that 'to the Spanish Loyalists...it must have come as

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<sup>214</sup> Valleau, p. 27.

<sup>215</sup> Thomas, p. 270.

<sup>216</sup> Smith, p. 18.

<sup>217</sup> Quoted in Schindler, 1996, p. 199.

<sup>218</sup> See Koppes & Black, p. 25.

<sup>219</sup> See Smith, p. 29.



something of a disappointment.<sup>220</sup> Despite its vague political content Smith suggests that 'Blockade managed to outrage simultaneously both pro-Loyalist and pro-Franco camps, providing ammunition for those who favored American interventionism and those who opposed it.'<sup>221</sup> The political ambiguity inherent in Blockade is revealed by Lawson's use of the film in his defence before the House Un-American Activities Committee, while at the same time, the committee cited it as an example of his Communist affiliations.<sup>222</sup>

It is perhaps the case that the wide-ranging responses to the film were a consequence of marketing and initial press coverage. Thus, while the Chicago Daily Tribune cautions 'WE WARN YOU: Bigots, scoffers, cynics, don't see this picture! Because it is life and love, war and hate in the raw',<sup>223</sup> the film's publicity poster omits any reference to the Spanish conflict, choosing instead to market it as a love story where the central protagonists 'fought the world to reach each others arms'. It is not difficult to imagine why supporters of the Republican government would have been disappointed.

Most of the overt political content is encased in the closing sequence where, as the camera tracks into a close-up, Marco directly addresses the audience

Where can you find peace? The whole country's a battleground. There is no peace. There is no safety for women and children. Schools and hospitals are targets. And this isn't war, not between soldiers. It's not war, it's murder. It makes no sense. The world can stop it. Where is the conscience of the world? Where is the conscience of the world?

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<sup>220</sup> Colin Shindler, Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society, 1939-1952, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1979, p. 4.

<sup>221</sup> Smith, p. 18.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>223</sup> Quoted in Ibid., p. 25.

Carr comments that through the course of the film, Marco's moral outrage has developed to such a point that his closing speech 'seems not at all out of place, but a Brechtian necessity.'<sup>224</sup> The speech does have a surprisingly powerful impact and Valleau argues that 'by raising questions of guilt about civilian bombings and blockades, this speech and the film as a whole do challenge the United States and Western Europe to re-examine the morality and political integrity of their pursuit of the Non-Interventionist Policy.'<sup>225</sup> The problem with Valleau's statement, however, is that for the United States and Western Europe it was not a moral question, their own economic and political interests determined their position. Suggesting that the United States were more fearful of the development of a socialist Spain than a fascist Spain, Smith argues that the 'rhetoric of economic revolution posed a larger danger to many (particularly those invested in capitalism) than national fascism did.'<sup>226</sup> Smith further suggests that the US government 'feared that radical economic nationalism might spread in a 'domino effect' from Spain to Latin America, jeopardizing American holdings in the region'<sup>227</sup> The attempt to win over the representatives of the US government proved to be futile; the signing of the Munich Treaty in September 1938 sounding the death-knell of any faint hope of the US government breaking the non-intervention policy.

### **Willing backwards**

The attempt to appeal to the US government led the filmmakers behind both Blockade and The Spanish Earth to represent the war as a straightforward

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<sup>224</sup> Carr, p. 75.

<sup>225</sup> Valleau, p. 26.

<sup>226</sup> Smith, p. 20.

<sup>227</sup> ibid, p. 20.

struggle between good and evil, which assisted the process of this view becoming the dominant version of events. This is also evident in For Whom the Bell Tolls. The critical and commercial success of For Whom the Bell Tolls is testimony to the relevance of both the film and Hemingway's novel to the needs of wartime America. The film was one of the top grossing films of 1943 and also received nine Academy Award nominations.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, it is possible to watch For Whom the Bell Tolls and assume that the US had always supported the fight against fascism. Thus we have a cinematic example of what Hayden White describes as 'willing backward'. White states that 'willing backward occurs when we rearrange accounts of events in the past that have been emplotted in a given way, in order to endow them with a different meaning or to draw from the new emplotment reasons for acting differently in the future from the ways we have become accustomed to acting in the present.'<sup>229</sup> American cinema re-emplots the role of the US in the Spanish civil war by placing the US in a central role opposing fascism. For Whom the Bell Tolls is not the only wartime film that strives to create an anti-fascist history of the US. In Casablanca (Curtiz/USA/1942) Rick (Humphrey Bogart) is the American owner of a bar in the eponymous Moroccan city who had previously worked as a gunrunner in Ethiopia, a reference to the resistance against Mussolini's invasion. But there is also a reference to his role as an anti-fascist in Spain, thus tracing his anti-fascist credentials, or more importantly, the American hero's credentials, back to before the outbreak of the Second World War. This is also the case in The Fallen Sparrow (Richard Wallace/USA/1943) where John McKittrick (John Garfield) is

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<sup>228</sup> Only Paxinou was successful, winning the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her portrayal of Pilar.

<sup>229</sup> White, Hayden, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1987, p. 150.



an American who had previously fought for the Spanish Republic. In the film he is captured and tortured by German Nazis in an attempt to recover information about a flag that they want to retrieve. Thus both Casablanca and The Fallen Sparrow reconnect the wartime fight against fascist Germany with the fight against fascist Spain by rewinding the spool of history and placing an American at the heart of the struggle.

### **Death in the afternoon**

The conclusion of For Whom the Bell Tolls differs from most Hollywood endings because of its open-ended nature. In the closing sequence, Jordan is in a situation where death seems the most likely outcome, but as the nationalist soldiers arrive he turns his machine gun towards the camera and fires directly at the audience. It is an unconventional fourth wall-breaking device, reminiscent of the ending in Blockade, which is at odds with the narrative conventions of the rest of the film. In Death in the Afternoon, Hemingway writes ‘All stories, if continued far enough, end in death; and he is no true story teller who would keep that from you...If two people love each other there can be no happy end to it.’ And there is no happy ending to the love affair between Jordan and Maria. Jordan is sacrificed, illustrating America’s willingness to sacrifice, but the narrative’s open-endedness leaves victory as a possibility, with hope represented by those that have managed to escape. The film’s opening quote from Donne suggests that Jordan’s death, in a gorge in far-away Spain, should be relevant to the lives of contemporary Americans. The bell tolls for Jordan, but in 1943 it could also toll for Americans fighting in Europe and therefore operated as a wider call to arms for an American audience. Thus the concluding scene

indicates the centrality of America in the fight against fascism. It also indicates how the Spanish civil war was conveniently narrativised to suit the needs of wartime America.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I have argued that despite its limitations, narrative provides an opportunity to work through the conflicting possible outcomes of the past. In relation to fiction it has become the most popular form of storytelling and, although it cannot deal with complex historical events other than in a superficial way, it remains an important storytelling form. It is not enough just to dismiss it as either inadequate or to point out its potential shortcomings. It is also necessary to engage with how it operates in popular culture. I have argued that the representation of the Spanish civil war in For Whom the Bell Tolls does not attempt to deal with the details of the political or historical situation. Instead, as with the vast majority of Hollywood cinema, politics and history are placed well below other factors: romance, action, etc. As part of a drive to reach a mass market it also displaces the protagonists in the civil war, substituting Americans as key agents in a foreign war. I argued that the general political stance – to represent the war as a battle between fascism and democracy - suited the needs of wartime America. As with Blockade and The Spanish Earth, in representing the civil war as a struggle between fascism and democracy it contributed to the fact that this is the dominant way that the civil war has been understood outside of Spain. In the next chapter I examine the representation of the Spanish civil war in Julio Medem's perplexing film Vacas, filmed almost fifty years later, and with an entirely different narrative form.

## Chapter Four

### Re-cycling the Past: Patterns of History in Vacas

#### Introduction

In this chapter I examine an alternative cinematic narrative style than that presented in the linear narrative model of For Whom the Bell Tolls. I specifically focus on Vacas/Cows (Medem/Spain/1992), a self-reflexive, experimental, arthouse film by first-time director Julio Medem.<sup>230</sup> A critical success both at home and abroad (Medem won a Goya for best New Director in 1993), Vacas was also one of the best-selling films in Spain that year. Yet, in spite of its success, it remains a puzzling, perplexing film that denies straightforward analysis, even after multiple viewings. Although only the closing third of the film is set during the civil war, it is worthwhile dealing with it in detail because it situates the conflict as part of a continuing historical process. Through an analysis of the film I explore debates about patterns of historical development, in particular looking at cyclical notions of historical progress. I proceed to outline debates on the ability of alternative narrative forms to create a critical distance in which viewers can contextualise or actively engage with what is projected onto cinema screens. Finally, I locate Vacas away from any perceived ‘Spanishness’ and examine it within a Basque context, exploring the impact of its ‘Basqueness’ on any possible readings that may be produced from it.

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<sup>230</sup> Medem has subsequently directed four similarly perplexing feature films, La Ardilla Roja/The Red Squirrel (1993), Tierra/Earth (1996), Los Amantes del Círculo Polar/The Lovers of the Arctic Circle (1998) and Lucía y el sexo/Sex and Lucia (2001).



## Synopsis

Vacas is an extremely confusing film which requires, indeed almost demands, multiple viewings and the complexity of the narrative should be apparent from this brief, if somewhat tortuous, plot synopsis. Set in the Basque country, the events in Vacas take place between the second Carlist war in the 1870s and the outbreak of the civil war in July 1936. Vacas narrativises sixty years of history and examines it through the lens of two feuding families from a rural, agricultural environment. Carmelo Mendiluze (Kandido Uranga) and Manuel Irigibel (Carmelo Gómez), rival *aizkolaris* (log-cutters), are both Carlist soldiers posted to the front. Carmelo is shot and fatally wounded and Manuel, terrified by his new war-time experience, uses blood from Carmelo's neck-wound to help feign his own death. Manuel subsequently escapes, albeit suffering a serious leg wound in the process. He travels in a cart full of dead bodies from which he manages to free himself and crawls through a field where he encounters a large white cow. The camera zooms in on the cow's eye before the film re-emerges thirty years later where Manuel, now an old man, puts the finishing touches to the eye on a painting of a cow. He is assisted by his three granddaughters who are the daughters of his son, Ignacio (also played by Carmelo Gómez). In a neighbouring house lives Carmelo's son, Juan (also played by Kandido Uranga), and log-cutting contests between the two continue to fuel the family feud. The rivalry is deepened by Ignacio's sexual desire for Juan's sister, Catalina (Ana Torrent). As the film jumps forward another ten years Ignacio and Catalina's illegitimate child, Peru (Miguel Ángel García), establishes a close friendship with Ignacio's father, Manuel (also Peru's own grandfather), and Ignacio's daughter, Cristina (Peru's own sister played by Ana Sánchez). Peru develops an

adolescent, incestuous sexual interest in Cristina. Catalina, Ignacio and Peru emigrate to the US; but Peru and Cristina remain in contact by exchanging letters. At the outbreak of the civil war, Peru (now an adult and played by Carmelo Gómez) returns to photograph the war for an American newspaper. The ending of the film can allow for conflicting readings; after a battle in the woods, either Peru and Cristina set out to emigrate to France, or they are both killed. I will offer a reading that suggests that they are both dead, a reading that I return to below.

Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas suggest that in the 1980s and 1990s history in Spanish cinema is generally represented 'in terms of the domestic, the everyday and focused from the point of view of the individual, the family or other small groups and communities rather than through documentary analyses and broad historical reconstructions of the epic type.'<sup>231</sup> Vacas is certainly confined to the domestic realm, dealing with the lives of specific individuals, but this is within the overall context of a broad, if somewhat unconventional and unusual, historical sweep. Rather than locating the civil war as a violent aberration in an otherwise peaceful historical trajectory, by framing its narrative between two wars, Vacas situates the civil war as part of a prolonged pattern of bitter social conflict. This is no wistful representation of history, but a perplexing account of a problematic past. Vacas does not attempt to deal in detail with particular events or details and there is no socio-economic motivation or causal explanation for the historical events located in its narrative.<sup>232</sup> Rather, Vacas

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<sup>231</sup> Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan Tamosunas, Contemporary Spanish Cinema, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998, p. 39.

<sup>232</sup> A brief summary of Basque history is provided in Mark Kulansky, The Basque History of the World, Jonathan Cape, London, 1999. In particular, see chapters seven and eight for an account

perhaps suggests that the socio-historical context of the wars is a mere sideshow; it is enough to know that war will always happen, an inevitable by-product of human nature, and of Basque politics, points I return to below. But the film does explore issues dealing with general trends in historical development and challenges traditional linear historiographical models. It also questions theories which view the past as a chaotic mass that historians make sense of through subjective narrativisation processes.

As the credits run in the opening sequence Ignacio is practising his log-cutting skills when a small piece of wood hurtles skyward only to be captured in a freeze-frame close-up. The shot is connotative of the saying ‘a chip off the old block’ and raises questions about the extent to which personal histories are genetically predetermined, a theme which permeates the film. Split into four separate acts, the first act begins with a close-up of the burning head of a dead cow before the camera pans across the scarred remnants of a battlefield. Intertitles place the action in a valley in Guipuzcoa in the Basque province of Bizkaia during the second Carlist war. By taking the blood from Carmelo’s lethal wound and smearing his own face, Manuel creates a blood tie, forewarning of the link between the two feuding families. Whereas Carmelo has accepted his role as a soldier, Manuel rejects what is thrust upon him and escapes. Following Manuel’s re-birth from the cart of broken and blooded dead bodies, there is an exchange of glances between him and a white cow before the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of the cow’s eye. The camera zooms towards the cow, appears to enter its eye and travel through it, its eye connotative of the iris of a camera,

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of the development of Carlism in the nineteenth century.



before re-emerging, as intertitles tell us, in 1905. Thus the narrative takes a cosmic shortcut through space and time, thirty years have passed and the film introduces a new generation of characters including Manuel's son, Ignacio, and Carmelo's son, Juan, who are both played by the actors who played their respective cinematic fathers. The world may have moved on a generation, but the present appears to carry the genetic imprint of previous generations; corresponding to a pattern of cyclical movement, of history as a never-ending, interminable, cycle.

### Cycles

Medem suggests that Vacas 'is about time...there's a cyclic sense to it; it begins and ends with a war and everything's predestined to repeat itself from generation to generation.'<sup>233</sup> The cyclical movement to which Medem refers is initially suggested in the opening battle scene where Carmelo receives news of the birth of his son, Juan, only to be killed himself minutes later. Yet his dying words, 'I'm not dead', suggest a belief in his own immortality through the transfer of life to his newborn son. Isabel C. Santaolalla suggests that in the film 'one dimensional or essentialist notions of identity and subjectivity are ruthlessly exposed: in Vacas successive generations of male characters lose their individuality as the same actor performs all the various roles'<sup>234</sup> Some of the behavioural characteristics of the characters are certainly presented as transferred genetically; thus Ignacio, like his father before him, is a first class *aizkolari*.

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<sup>233</sup> Quoted in Anne M. White, 'Manchas Negras, Manchas Blancas: Looking Again at Julio Medem's Vacas' in Rob Rix & Roberto Rodríguez-Soana, (Eds.), 1999, Spanish Cinema: Calling the Shots, Leeds Iberian Papers, Trinity and All Saints, Leeds, 1999, pp. 1-14, p. 4.

<sup>234</sup> Isabel C. Santaolalla, 'Julio Medem's Vacas: Historicizing the Forest', in Peter William Evans (Ed.), Spanish Cinema: The Auteurist Tradition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 310-324, p.312.

During the first contest between Juan and Ignacio, the judge declares to the triumphant Ignacio, 'Irigibel the Second. If you go like this, you'll make a lot of money. You're as good as your father. It's in the blood,' thus suggesting a genetic development across generations. Similarly, following his capture near the end of the film, Peru pleads to the Nationalist officer to spare his life, emulating his grandfather's shaking hands, and supposedly cowardly behaviour at the Carlist Front sixty years previously. This cyclical progression is cinematically foregrounded by the casting of one actor, Medem regular Carmelo Gómez, in the roles of Manuel, Ignacio and Peru Irigibel, three generations of one family. This is also evident in casting one actor, Kandido Uranga, to play both Carmelo and Juan and another single actor, Karra Elejade, to play the family associate, Illegori, and his son Lucas. This casting device is connotative of Voltaire's maxim that 'history never repeats itself, but man always does.' Death is never what it seems as the same actor re-appears to portray his own predecessor. Yet there is something more complex at work than never-changing human nature; the three generations are not all the same. Ignacio does not emulate his father's artistic interest and the successive characters are not simply carbon copies of their ancestors. Peru may have 'inherited' Manuel's interests in the process of representation, but he is not interested in the macho pastimes of his predecessors. Ignacio, unlike his father, has no interest in reproduction – other than the 'reproductive' pleasures that come with sexual encounters with Catalina. Perhaps it is his experience at the front that has forced the grandfather to turn his back on war and the world, whereas Ignacio's macho world is safe from the reality of war. Thus the film posits human nature as a product of both genetic inheritance and social experience. By casting actors in multiple roles, however, Vacas

appears to suggest that the balance weighs heavily towards genetic inheritance with human nature as a cyclical process, a never-ending continuum. Vacas is packed full of circular visual metaphors which further develop this view. This is evident in the concentration on cows' eyes, the circular movement of Manuel's mysterious scytheman, the tree stump, the logs that the *aizcolaris* cut and, not least, in the iris of the camera.<sup>235</sup>

### **Cycles Of History**

Vacas posits a cyclical approach to historical development, an approach that has a long history.<sup>236</sup> During classical antiquity, Callinicos asserts that there were three assumptions implicit in the practice of Greek historiography. Firstly, that human nature is constant, and, therefore, human beings presented with similar choices and placed in similar positions will respond in similar ways. Secondly, and flowing from the first assumption, that the past can be seen as a space that can be studied in order to forewarn of possible dangers and to offer lessons for future generations. Thirdly, that the rise and fall of organised societies can only be comprehended as part of a cyclical process. Callinicos states that 'The cycle is thus one of decline and degeneration, powered by the infirmities of human nature: each good form of government becomes corrupted when a generation

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<sup>235</sup> The use of circles is also evident in Los Amantes del Círculo Polar/The Lovers of the Arctic Circle where even the characters, Ana and Otto are given palindromic or 'circular' names. The film also deals with movement through time and in the film Medem again returns to the subject of the Spanish civil war through the appearance of a pilot who fought during the war.

<sup>236</sup> Another example is that of the Aztecs who developed three types of calendar: the ritual calendar, the annual calendar, and the 52-year calendar. They also developed a 260 day cycle to record ritual events and attempt to forecast future developments. Thus their worldview tied together astronomical forecast with fatalistic views of human development. See, for instance, Michael E Smith, The Aztecs, Blackwell, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA, 1996.



unfamiliar with the circumstances which led to its introduction takes the helm.<sup>237</sup>

Herodotus suggests this approach when he outlines his own historiographical methodology and states 'I will proceed with my history, telling the story as I go along of small cities no less than of great. For most of those which were great once are small today; and those which used to be small were great in my own time...human prosperity never abides long in the same place'<sup>238</sup>. But rather than simply having a view of history as cyclical regression, Callinicos suggests that the possibility of cyclical views of history which were in tandem with notions of progress began to emerge with the onset of industrial capitalism. Thus as capitalist modernity initially seemed capable of moving onwards and upwards, cyclical views of progressive historical development became more prevalent.<sup>239</sup>

Cyclical views of history can, therefore, be utilised to describe the process of history as one of development or as one of regression and decline. In Vacas a number of signifiers illustrate the process of historical development, for instance with the appearance of the motorcar that Ignacio wins in a log-cutting contest or the camera which is used to record his victory celebrations. However, in the film the onset of these inventions are blocked, or partially restrained, by the rural environment. This is most apparent when Catalina and Ignacio attempt to escape to the United States and their motor car is confronted by another seemingly immovable cow. The film suggests that there is a conflict between the landscape

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<sup>237</sup> Alex Callinicos, Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 58.

<sup>233</sup> Herodotus, The Histories, Translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, Penguin, London, 1996, p. 5

<sup>239</sup> See Callinicos, p. 63.

and the rural environment and new inventions developed by modernity. Of the importance of the environment to the historical process Santaolalla states that

Although the inexorable progression of history is economically conjured up by the changes in guns, uniforms, and by the gradual introduction of horses, cameras, and cars, its course is less linear than one would expect...It is almost as if the valley, the forest, and their inhabitants were occupying the motionless centre of a rotating wheel: history here takes a rather curved and spiralling trajectory, trapped as it is in a centripetal force which moves around but never really abandons the centre.<sup>240</sup>

Thus, in Vacas, we have the movement of history as a complex, contradictory, circuitous phenomenon which, through its own reflexivity, also highlights its constructedness. By foregrounding its status as a representation of the past the film invites contemplation on the historical process and on the constructed nature of cinematic representations of historical events and processes.

### **Representation as art cinema**

An emphasis on the visual means of reproduction is repeatedly foregrounded. There is a continued focus on eyes, on looking, on art and on representation. Manuel becomes fascinated with looking and what he can see, thus when he stares into the eyes of the cow, Pupil, he predicts her pregnancy. The eye is the gateway to a special type of knowledge. Manuel is preoccupied with his own surreal artistry and kinetic sculptures. He is fascinated further by the arrival of the camera and its ability to create a different perspective, a different representation; he urges his grandchildren to steal the camera and hide it in the woods. This interest is, in turn, 'inherited', by Peru who, by pursuing a photography career, continues his grandfather's work of representing the world.

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<sup>240</sup> Santaolalla, p. 317.

The sustained concentration on looking and representation suggests that there are no representations of events that are not mediated artistically, or refracted cinematically. Anne M. White states that 'For *Medem*, the point seems to be that each of these visions of history, whether captured by the lens of the photographer or the eye of the painter, is only a representation, an optical illusion. Reality is always mediated'<sup>241</sup>. Even when Peru and Cristina remain in contact by exchanging letters, their illiteracy ensures that their thoughts and words are mediated through the writing and reading of others. As spectators watch a cinema screen and its own cinematic 'reality', they can contextualise how reality itself is mediated, whether it is through painting, the eye of the cow, or the lens of the camera. So whilst establishing a historiographical perspective based on cycles, *Vacas* also invites reflection on its own constructedness. As Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas suggest 'the film also displays a clear awareness of its status as a textual production; it presents itself as a text which is both a clarification as well as another mystification of Basque history and identity. In short, it stands as another version of events to be questioned rather than be unquestionably accepted.'<sup>242</sup>

The potential power of representation is apparent in the sequence in the woods where Peru has traded the weapons of previous generations for reproductive weaponry, using his camera lens to frame the enemy before capturing their cinematic images. After his capture by Nationalist soldiers, Peru thinks that the soldiers have taken his camera and says to Catherine 'I'm nobody without my camera' thus placing great emphasis on the reproductive process. White

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<sup>241</sup> Anne M. White, p. 2.

<sup>242</sup> Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, p. 196.



speculates that Peru's attention to the importance of his camera also reveals that 'he sees his photographs, the results of mechanical rather than human reproduction, as a surer way of guaranteeing his immortality.'<sup>243</sup> Therefore, when he realises that he still has it and says to Catherine 'what a relief', his relief is not for his camera but for the immortalising reproductive qualities that it brings. Manuel also attempts to extend his own mortality by creating his own offspring; the scythe-man and the boar-killer. The futility of human life is captured by Manuel's axe-wielding figure as he stands in the forest continually striking at imaginary boars. It is also captured in the scythe-man he creates, which sardonically comments on the futility of human existence; sporting a Carlist red beret and a broken leg the figure is a representation of Manuel himself and moves circuitously, forced by the pressure of the wind, of nature. Yet despite placing this importance on the means of reproduction, these representations all evaporate. Manuel's scytheman and his mysterious figures in the woods are either shot or destroyed by the soldiers, or disintegrate, suggesting that there is no place for creation during war and that war is a great devourer, not only of human beings, but also of art. Even Medem's camera itself appears to be consumed in the closing sequence as it enters the mysterious tree stump. In raising issues dealing with artistic and cinematic representation, Vacas becomes more than a self-reflexive film that comments on the events within its own narrative; by focusing on the artifice of representation, it invites spectators to view all cinema, all art and, indeed, all history, as mediated representations.

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<sup>243</sup> Anne M. White, pp. 9/10.

In its concentration on the importance of looking and in its own self-reflexive cinematic style Vacas is probably a film that White and Rosenstone would approve of. White's position flows from a long line of support for alternatives to realism in the arts. Almost contemporaneous with the birth of cinema was the development of modernism. Eagleton suggests that

Modernism reflected the crack-up of a whole civilization. All the beliefs which had served nineteenth-century middle-class society so splendidly – liberalism, democracy, individualism, scientific enquiry, historical progress, the sovereignty of reason – were now in crisis. There was a dramatic speed-up in technology, along with widespread political instability. It was becoming hard to believe that there was any innate order in the world. Instead, what order we discovered in the world was one we had put there ourselves. Realism in art, which had taken such an order for granted, began to buckle and implode. A cultural form which had been riding high since the Renaissance now seemed to be approaching exhaustion.<sup>244</sup>

Symbolism, futurism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism and other artistic movements all rejected 'realist' forms of representation which they held to be inadequate to represent the era in which they emerged. One such form was naturalism. Arising as an artistic response to the developing scientific revolution in the latter half of the nineteenth century, naturalism attempted to ground itself in the objectivity of scientific enquiry. Naturalists attempted to prove, by means of literary experiment, that human behaviour was determined by a combination of hereditary and socio-environmental factors. Zola, the outstanding representative of naturalism in his time, argued that 'you start from the point that nature is sufficient, that you must accept it as it is, without modification or pruning...the work becomes a report, nothing more.'<sup>245</sup> This is, however, not a neutral investigation. The political nature of the naturalist project is revealed

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<sup>244</sup> Terry Eagleton, After Theory, Penguin, London, 2003, p. 64.

<sup>245</sup> Quoted in, John Caughie, Television Drama, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 96.

when Zola argues that ‘we are looking for the cause of social evil; we study the anatomy of classes and individuals to explain the derangements which are produced in society and in man...No work can be more moralising than ours, then, because it is upon it that law should be based.’<sup>246</sup>

Deborah Knight highlights this as a crucial aspect of the political impetus underpinning naturalism’s desire to take the reader ‘from the discussion of art to the discussion of society, from discussions of characters in a fiction to discussions of people in real life.’<sup>247</sup> In order to achieve the link between art and life, naturalism attempted to render its setting, characterisation and dialogue so close to conventional impressions of actual life that the reader would be convinced by the illusion of reality, thus more likely to accept the ‘truth’ of the text. Many critics, however, have waged a sustained attack on both naturalism and realism because, it is claimed, it attempts to create unproblematic accounts of both the present and the past. Thus Catherine Belsey suggests that realism assembles ‘juxtapositions and complexities out of what we already know, and it is for this reason that we experience it as realistic. To this extent it is a profoundly conservative form.’<sup>248</sup> Other theorists have adopted a similar critical position in relation to cinema specifically. In the 1970s a wide-ranging debate took place within the pages of the film journal Screen over what came to be known as the classic realist text. In this debate, Colin McCabe attacked naturalism and realism because, he argues, they establish ‘a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of

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<sup>246</sup> Quoted in: Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel, Routledge, London, 1973, p. 96.

<sup>247</sup> Deborah Knight, ‘Naturalism, Narration and Critical Perspective: Ken Loach and the Experimental Method’ in George McKnight (Ed.), Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach, Flicks Books, Bath, 1997, p. 60.

<sup>248</sup> Belsey, Catherine, Critical Practice, Methuen, London and New York, 1994, p. 51.



an empirical notion of truth'.<sup>249</sup> For McCabe there are two resulting problems; this hierarchy cannot deal with the contradictory nature of reality, and secondly, as it fails to fracture the subjectivity of the reader, it leaves her/him in a position of what he calls 'dominant specularity',<sup>250</sup> with her/his knowledge assured. McCabe argues that 'what is...impossible for the classic realist text is to offer any perspectives for struggle due to its inability to investigate contradiction.'<sup>251</sup> Although, for McCabe, the realist text could be progressive if it challenged the dominant ideology of its time, he argues that 'such an organisation was fundamentally reactionary for it posed a reality which existed independently of both the text's and the reader's activity, a reality which was essentially non-contradictory and unchangeable.'<sup>252</sup> For McCabe and Belsey, classic realist texts were to be abandoned in favour of texts which proclaimed their own status as texts. This approach was exemplified by the theatrical methodology employed by Bertolt Brecht.

One of the foremost advocates of a new modernist theatre, Brecht attempted to create a new theatrical form that would displace the dominance of naturalism in the arts. Brecht argued that art was neither mere entertainment nor a neutral entity with no ideological connotation. Thus he commented that 'There is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way or other affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences.'<sup>253</sup> For Brecht art could, and should, be utilised as a powerful

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<sup>249</sup> Colin McCabe, Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985, p. 35.

<sup>250</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>251</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>253</sup> Quoted in Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, Film Theory: An Introduction, Manchester

ideological weapon in the struggle to transform the world. But the content of art was not sufficient, the very form of the theatre had its own impact. Brecht bemoaned naturalist drama arguing that too often its 'audience hangs its brains up in the cloakroom along with its coat.'<sup>254</sup> The desired effect behind naturalist drama, Brecht argued, was to ensure that audiences identified completely with the characters before them in such a way that they did not question what was confronting them. Rather than drawing his audiences into a state of suspended disbelief, Brecht developed a theatrical form which he called Epic theatre through which he attempted to create a critical distance or estrangement (*verfremdung*) between the audience and the events on stage. Brecht hoped that this would encourage audiences to critically engage with what was presented before their eyes rather than being lulled to sleep by some dream-inducing reality. Brecht was happy, therefore, for stage lights to be on view, for characters to change costume on stage and to adopt a variety of theatrical techniques which highlighted the constructed nature of the performance. Brecht drew up a table contrasting the features of Dramatic Theatre and Epic Theatre. Whereas dramatic theatre 'implicates the spectator in a stage situation' and 'provides him with sensations', the Epic Theatre 'turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses his capacity for action'.<sup>255</sup> Whereas in the dramatic theatre 'the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience' in Epic Theatre 'the spectator stands outside, studies'. The influence of Marx on Brecht is apparent when he outlines that 'thought determines being' in the dramatic theatre whereas in the Epic Theatre 'social being determines thought.'

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University Press, Manchester, 1988, p. 219.

<sup>254</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, Translated by John Willett, Methuen, London, 1987, p. 27.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37. All remaining quotes in this paragraph are also from this page.

Brecht argued that it is a political necessity to break down the illusion of the real in theatre. Thus, he comments

Too much heightening of the illusion in the setting, together with a 'magnetic' way of acting that gives the spectator the illusion of being present at fleeting, accidental, 'real' event, create such an impression of naturalness that one can no longer interpose one's judgement, imagination or reactions and must simply conform by sharing in the experience and becoming one of 'nature's' objects. The illusion created by the theatre must be a partial one, in order that it may always be recognised as an illusion. Reality, however complete, has to be altered by being turned into art, so that it can be seen to be alterable and be treated as such.<sup>256</sup>

Brecht's influence on the study of culture has been widespread and it has also impacted widely on both the creation of and the study of cinema. His influence has helped develop an art cinema that, in relation to history, tries to grasp history as process, change, contradiction and conflict; to create new ways of looking at the world, to provoke an intellectual engagement with the audience through the very form of representation as much as through the content. In chapter two I suggested that audiences are capable of historicising the content of even mainstream cinema; nevertheless, the foregrounding of the cinematic process makes it more possible to develop what Bill Nichols describes as a 'historical consciousness' in the viewer. According to Nichols,

Historical consciousness requires the spectator's recognition of the double, or paradoxical, status of moving images that are present referring to past events. This formulation involves viewing the present moment of a film as we relate to past moments such that our own present becomes past, or prologue, to a common future which, through this very process, we may bring into being.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>257</sup> Bill Nichols, in *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, p. 118.



As viewers watch Vacas, the cinematic self-reflexivity in the text invites a response that is more likely to create a historical consciousness in the viewer, thereby forcing consideration of contemporary political and historical processes as much as those from the past. Nichols is wary of falling into a formalist trap that prioritises form at the expense of content when he states, “Form guarantees nothing. Its content, the meaning we make of it, is a dialectical process taking place between us and the screen and between past, present, and future.”<sup>258</sup> Yet, obviously, film form is not incidental and he argues that

The uses and effects of form can no more be guaranteed than the future foretold. But if some forms lend themselves to certain subjectivities and interpretations more than others, this particular search will be for forms that intensify the need for retrospection, that require recall in order to grasp the pattern they propose, that heighten the tension between a representation and its historical referent, that invoke both past and present in the dialectic of constructing a future.<sup>259</sup>

This is clearly more representative of the narrative and cinematic style present in Vacas and not present in mainstream narrative cinema models exemplified by For Whom the Bell Tolls in the previous chapter.

In his work on narrative in cinema David Bordwell suggests that in mainstream cinema reality ‘is assumed to be a tacit coherence among events, a consistency and clarity of individual identity. Realistic motivation corroborates the compositional motivation achieved through cause and effect.’<sup>260</sup> On the contrary, in art-cinema, which draws on the experimental nature of literary modernism, he argues that ‘the very construction of the narration becomes the object of spectator

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<sup>258</sup> Bill Nichols, ‘Historical Consciousness and the Viewer: Who Killed Vincent Chin?’ in Vivian Sobchak (Ed.), The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp. 55-68, p. 57.

<sup>259</sup> Nichols, 1994, p. 119.

<sup>260</sup> David Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 210.

hypotheses: how is the story being told? why tell the story this way?<sup>261</sup> Moreover, Bordwell asserts that 'Odd ("arty") camera angles or camera movements independent of the action can register the presence of self-conscious narration.'<sup>262</sup> Vacas continually invites its audience to reflect on its own constructedness and pose relevant questions; Why does one actor play more than one character? Why does the camera enter the eye of a cow and re-emerge thirty years (one generation) later? Why is Medem's camera often placed in positions which break with mainstream cinematic convention? Paul Julian Smith observes that Medem has become renowned for his 'playful use of cinematic point of view, of "subjective shots" from the perspective of animals or objects.'<sup>263</sup> This process is evident in the sequence when Catalina and Ignacio have sex in the woods. The camera is positioned at the level of the copulating couple whose rhythmical writhings are at one with the natural world that they occupy as the camera pans across both their bodies and the grass beneath them. Thus the camera departs from conventional point of view shots to give the perspective of anonymous, perhaps non-human witnesses to the events depicted. As Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas observe 'the spectator is positioned by imaginative camerawork to adopt the optical viewpoint of the cows, to follow a flying axe on its dizzy trajectory through the air, to be sucked into the head of a cow or the hollow trunk of a 'magical' tree, creating a world in which the unexpected and the fantastical intrude on the realist.'<sup>264</sup> All of which invites reflection on the cinematic and historical process.

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>263</sup> Paul Julian Smith, The Moderns: Time, Space, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Spanish Culture, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 146.

<sup>264</sup> Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, p. 51.



Vacas may depart from realist narrative conventions. However, it still strives to comment on the world outside the camera. Thus the film obliquely criticises the concept of war; when Manuel surveys the after effects of a log contest he strides along the grass where woodchips litter the floor and comments despairingly, 'What is this for? What a waste.' The scattered wood-chips are the consequence of the pointless destruction of the logs by the *aizkolaris*, moreover, they act as a metaphor for the pointless destruction of human life which war engenders. This is a similar position to that suggested in the scene where the cow, Txagorri, and Manuel's granddaughter are in the woods. They both look at Ignacio, the phallus-wielding woodcutter chopping his log, before they both exchange quizzical glances. Vacas presents a patriarchal world where men do the log cutting and the fighting; where male peacetime pastimes are as destructive and wasteful as wartime endeavours. Humans are always chopping down logs but their impact is minimal. The forest endures, but the characters are at odds with the natural world around them, not in harmony with it. Thus Manuel, having witnessed the madness of the real world that he occupies, seems more content withdrawing to his own 'mad' world on what he describes as the 'other side'. Manuel's art has also gone over to the 'other side' in a movement away from a naturalist representation of the world around him. Thus his paintings have no straightforward figurative relationship to that which they depict, their referent, on the contrary, they represent that which cannot be figuratively represented. This is clear in the painting of a boy and girl who are wearing a Carlist beret and sitting astride a two-headed cow. It is also evident in Manuel's painting, 'War', where he rejects realism in his portrayal of his own traumatic past. In this painting there is a boy and two cows, one lying with its neck slashed like Carmelo in the



opening act. This link between cows and animals in Manuel's art is also paralleled by Medem's editing techniques, for instance when a shot of a painting of a cow's head is immediately dissolved into a shot of Peru sitting with his arms in the position of a cow's ears. The link suggests some oblique crossing over of the world of humans with the world of cows. And the movement from one world to another is also continued with Medem's directorial style. Thus he states that

I usually like to create situations which can incorporate various worlds at the same time. I often like to use a very real, very immediate and recognizable photography, adjusting myself to the rules of reality as it is known and shared by all of us. But I am also interested in contrasting this reality with another one, with another space which looks like this reality but which has not yet been made and which is somehow connected to it; and sometimes I want to narrate the trajectory from one world to another.<sup>265</sup>

This movement is clear in an analogy between the expansion of the pupil of a cow and the opening of the lens of a camera when the camera appears to enter a cow's eye, blacking out and expanding from a pin-hole of colour to fill the entire screen at the start of Act I. It is also evident at the start of Act III, The Burning Hole, which opens with a shot of the mysterious tree stump in the woods, then cuts to the birth of a cow. Ignacio has his arm inside a cow's womb pulling out a calf, thus linking Peru's birth ten years previously with the birth of the cow and with the burning hole of the Basque landscape. This is an integral component of the film and one to which I now turn.

### **'Basqueness'**

Medem's relationship with both the Basque country and Basque cinema was highlighted at the 2003 San Sebastian/Donostia Film Festival with the screening

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<sup>265</sup> Quoted in Santaolalla, p. 313.

of the documentary La Pelota Vasca: La piel contra la piedra/The Basque Ball: The Skin Against the Stone (Medem/Spain/2003). The film, which was heavily criticised by Spain's culture minister, Pilar del Castillo, and which the governing Popular Party in Spain attempted to ban, is a documentary concerning the ongoing national conflict in the Basque country. To the dismay of many Spanish politicians it calls for negotiations between the Spanish government and ETA, the military wing of the Basque separatist movement.<sup>266</sup> In press notes accompanying the film's release, Medem comments that 'After a long period in which I confess that I distanced myself, especially politically, from all things Basque, the rise in the ultra Spanish nationalism of Aznar, which had gradually become unbearable in its totalitarian confrontation with Basque nationalism, meant that, after Sex and Lucia, I decided to try again to write something minimally fair about the Basque conflict.'<sup>267</sup>

It is worthwhile, therefore, to look at Medem within a Basque, as well as a Spanish context. It is not a straightforward process, however, because Medem makes clear his oppositional stance towards Basque nationalism. Speaking of his decision to leave the Basque country to live in Madrid he states that 'It hurts me to have left the Basque country, but I think I have gained something. Leftwing nationalism is fascistic. They tell you how you have to be to be a true Basque, how you should feel. The nationalist press exaggerates and promotes difference,

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<sup>266</sup> See Fiachra Gibbons, 'Medem's Basque Documentary Sparks Bitter Controversy', The Guardian, 22 September, 2003 and Giles Tremlett, 'Anyone for Pelota?', The Guardian, 23 October, 2003.

<sup>267</sup> Untitled, La Pelota Vasca: La piel contra la piedra/The Basque Ball: The Skin Against the Stone British Production Notes, Tartan Films, London, 2004, p. 5. Lucía y el sexo/Sex and Lucia was released in 2001.

but everybody should have the right to behave as they feel.’<sup>268</sup> Paul Julian Smith notes, moreover, that ‘Medem has refused to take up the public position of “Basque filmmaker”, bravely resisting those who appeal to violence in support of a dualistic and antagonistic nationalism.’<sup>269</sup> He also asserts that ‘Medem denies the existence of a distinctively Basque cinema, whether it is based on artistic or commercial criteria: he claims to have nothing in common with other Basque directors of his “generation” (such as Juanma Bajo Ulloa or Alex de la Iglesia.)’<sup>270</sup> Medem may deny the existence of a specifically Basque cinema; but Vacas clearly makes numerous references to the Basque country itself. Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas argue that ‘the film is playfully aware of its own remystification of Basqueness. This is evident in its sardonic recycling of stereotypical images of national identity – for example, the characteristic red beret and scarf and the traditional competitive log-chopping of the *aizkolaris* – together with the self-conscious use of repetition.’<sup>271</sup> The film’s use of a wide-ranging number of Basque signifiers becomes a self-reflexive ironic commentary on the present political situation in the Basque country. Thus Vacas, although set in a distant past, invites contemplation on the nature of contemporary Basque politics without offering an overt commentary or suggesting any political answers to the national question. I want to offer a reading of the film, however, which suggests that Vacas presents the history of the Basque country as one of never ending, continuous historical conflict.

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<sup>268</sup> Quoted in Dan Glaister, ‘It’s All About My Father’, The Guardian, 5 January 2000.

<sup>269</sup> Paul Julian Smith, p. 149.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>271</sup> Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, p. 50.



## Cyclical Progress or Stasis

Vacas uses a modernist, self-reflexive style that draws attention to itself as a film, or as a text, yet it has a view of the world with a tendency towards fatalistic, biologically determinist politics; although characters are influenced by their own particular historical experiences, the film suggests that everything changes but much stays the same. It revels in its own status as discourse, allowing the director free rein to experiment with perception and reality through his surreal rendering of the narrative, creating a historical tale which poses more questions than it even attempts to answer. As I have outlined previously there are conflicting historiographical models that posit history as cyclical progress or history as the eternal return of the same. But what kind of cyclical process is represented in Vacas? This is determined by the reading of the film and, in particular, hinges on any analysis of the concluding sequence. Of the ending of the film Rob Stone suggests that 'It is a ludicrous, fairy-tale ending to a film that so consistently undermines stereotypes and genre conventions.'<sup>272</sup> Stone's position is based on a reading which suggests that Cristina and Peru survive the civil war and successfully flee to France; a reading which permits the possibility of cyclical progress and development. Santaolalla appears to concur with this positive outlook when she asserts that

Vacas suggests that the roots of conflict have always been and perhaps always will be there. And yet, the film's insistence on the inexhaustible regenerative properties of the land - its various holes guaranteeing successive literal and metaphorical rebirths - carries with it the more hopeful possibility of reversal and change. After all, the fact that the film actually ends with the *agujero encendido* and the cow seem to imply that, even though violence, death, and expatriation are on the agenda now, the potential for inclusion and regeneration still permeates the land.'<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Rob Stone, Spanish Cinema, Longman, Harlow, 2002, p. 166.

<sup>273</sup> Santaolalla, p. 324.

Yet an alternative reading might suggest a more pessimistic prognosis, of cyclical repetition, or even regression with the *agujero encendido*, or burning hole, representative of all human activity being controlled and consumed by the Basque landscape.

This reading centres on the scene that takes place at the outbreak of the civil war when, following an attack by Nationalist forces on the village occupants, Peru is captured and faces a Nationalist firing squad. He appeals to his Uncle Juan, clothed in the Carlist red beret and uniform of his father, to intervene. When Marx states that history repeats itself, first time as tragedy, second time as farce, he mockingly refers to the leaders of the 1848-51 revolutions who, in his view, had clothed themselves in the metaphorical garments of their predecessors sixty years earlier.<sup>274</sup> But he could as well have been referring to Juan who is not only wrapped in his father's clothes, but by multiple casting, is also wrapped in the same skin as his father. An alternative reading to that offered by Santaolalla and Stone would suggest that Peru has in fact been killed in this sequence. Although Juan attempts to intervene, appealing to the head of the firing squad that Peru was the grandson of two heroic Carlist fighters, the firing squad shoot at the line-up of captured Republican fighters and Peru, along with the others, falls backwards into the green field as if he has been shot. In the following shot he re-emerges and walks past the Nationalist soldiers, although neither they nor the officer acknowledges his existence. None of the other characters establishes eye contact with him as he walks, like a ghostly presence, away from the firing squad. Disembodied breathing also hints at some kind of otherworldly presence.

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<sup>274</sup> See Willie Thompson, *What Happened to History*, Pluto Press, London, 2000, p. 122.

In the following sequence, I suggest, therefore, that Peru, or the ghost of Peru, meets up, not with Cristina, but with the ghost of Cristina, who we learn has rested after a long sleep. When he sees Cristina she says 'I fell asleep. I feel much better now.' In the previous battle in the woods she had looked barely alive but now asserts that she is 'fine, just hungry.' Cristina and Peru both state that they have seen their dead grandfather, Manuel, and then they depart, on horseback, supposedly for France. But their destination lies, not across the border, but much closer to home. As the couple rides off, the camera tracks back through the woods to the mysterious, magical tree stump that appears throughout the film. And as Cristina states 'we're nearly there', the closing words of the film, the camera cranes downwards into the dark, circular trunk of the tree stump; into the earth, swallowed by the Basque landscape, almost as if it has consumed the young couple, connotative of a history of cyclical destruction and decline. There is no opportunity to escape to far-off lands, rather, the only escape that they can find is through death.

This inability to escape is further evidenced by the fact that, apart from the opening battlefront sequence, the narrative never leaves the valley. As characters strive to escape, the camera remains in the Basque countryside, thus the film focuses on the inability of the characters to escape. Only Manuel has left and returned, the others cannot leave, except in death. Indeed in this reading the life-lines of both the families comes to an end; the possibility of Juan being able to continue his blood-line in old age (he is 59 by the end of the film) is increasingly unlikely. Peru's bloodline can continue, but only with the children that Peru has fathered through his marriage in the US, not within the Basque country itself. All



three generations of Irigibels have fled what faces them and that is what has kept them alive; Manuel flees the war, but only to find freedom in 'madness'. Ignacio successfully escapes further conflict with Juan by emigrating, yet his son, his lifeline, a continuation of his genetic pattern, returns to his homeland. Peru tries to avoid the war by opting to document the passing of history, but finds that in a civil war it is no longer possible to be neutral. Yet all three attempts at escape are interrupted by the presence of cows acting as cinematic metaphors for the rural landscape, or for the restrictions of the Basque country itself. Manuel as he flees the war, Ignacio in a car ride with Catalina and, finally, Peru and Catherine are confronted by yet another cow as they attempt their escape at the conclusion of the film. Thus, rather than the film presenting a positive outlook, it represents the civil war as part of an ongoing process of violence which is enmeshed in the politics of the Basque country itself.

## **Conclusion**

Vacas is a film that invites repeated viewing with a film form that seeks a more critical response than in most mainstream cinema. For this is a film not just about Basque, or Spanish history, but also about the writing or filming of the historical process. War, to one degree or another, has been a constant in the Basque country since the end of the civil war and the film suggests that rather than looking at outside factors that may have influenced the civil war, it is necessary to look at local factors specific to the Basque country. Thus as For Whom the Bell Tolls returns to the civil war to intervene in the second world war, Vacas returns to historical events to comment on contemporary events in the Basque country.

## Chapter Five

### No Laughing Matter? Comedy and The Spanish Civil War

#### Introduction

In this chapter I examine a number of Spanish films produced between 1985 and 1995; ¡Ay Carmela!, Belle Époque, La vaquilla/The Calf and Libertarias. The narratives of all four films centre on supporters of the Republican side during, or, as with Belle Époque, in the period preceding, the Spanish civil war. They were also all commercial hits at the box-office. My interest lies, however, in another particular feature that they have in common; whereas all of the films I have looked at previously represent the war in a serious manner, the films in this chapter utilise comic elements as a key component within their narratives. Through an analysis of these four films I attempt to determine when, and through what processes, it is possible for those who were sympathetic to the Republican side to laugh about aspects of the civil war in the world of cinema. Hegel asserts that the Owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk, which can be interpreted to mean that only after a period of time will it be possible to understand the lessons of the past. Is it possible, however, for Hegel's owl to take flight with some laughter in its belly or with a sly smirk on its face? My main focus is on ¡Ay Carmela! and Belle Époque though I also draw on the comic aspects of La vaquilla and Libertarias. The main thrust of the chapter will be to explore whether it is possible to narrativise the Spanish civil war as a comedy.

## Background

War, it might be said, is no laughing matter and the Spanish civil war and the Franco regime were characterised by a degree of brutality and barbarism which does not easily lend itself to comedy. Yet there exists a thread of oppositional black humour which can be traced back to the days of Franco's rule, humour which was often articulated in the use of satirical cartoons. In an article entitled 'Resisting the Dictatorship Through Humour', the Spanish cartoonist José María Pérez González, also known as Peridis, suggests that

The very longevity of the Franco dictatorship, with its severe repression of freedom of expression and its state control of the press, forced people to find subtle ways to give vent to their frustrations at the conditions under which they were forced to live. Dictatorship gave a young generation of humourists and political satirists the opportunity to rise to the challenge of penetrating those imposed silences surrounding the regime: its pathetic pretences to imperial glory, its hounding of dissenting voices, its imposition of cruelly low wages, the neglect of the beggar's plight and even its sexual hypocrisies.<sup>275</sup>

José María Pérez González suggests that Spanish cartoonists were often inspired by the tradition of black humour that featured prominently in the Spanish picaresque novel, in particular, he cites Cervantes's novel El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha. This tradition of black humour, otherwise known as gallows humour or *galgenhumor*, is also evident in Juan M. Molina's book Noche sobre España.<sup>276</sup> Published in 1958, the cover of Noche sobre España includes a black and white sketch of a group of men being executed by a *guardia civil* firing squad. Yet the book contains numerous short stories and political jokes which poke fun at Franco and the dictatorship. Alongside the cartoons of

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<sup>275</sup> José María Pérez González (Peridis), 'Resisting the Dictatorship Through Humour', in Consensus Politics in Spain: Insider Perspectives, Edited by Monica Threlfall, Intellect, Bristol, 2000, pp. 16-26, p. 16.

<sup>276</sup> Juan M. Molina, Noche sobre España, Ediciones de la CNT de España, Mexico, 1958.



Peridis, Noche sobre España illustrates that, although it may have been difficult to laugh when the beaten were still getting beaten, it was not impossible. Moreover, the cartoons reveal that comedy can be a popular way of provoking resistance when many other roads are far more problematic. They also suggest that comedy can be utilised to make a direct political impact on events.

That laughter and comedy can have a profound political effect is illustrated by an event that occurred in Barcelona on September 20, 1977, during a period of political instability. On this day a bomb exploded in the reception hall of the Amaika publishing house killing the janitor and wounding several others. Responsibility for the bombing was claimed by AAA (Alianza Apostólica Anticomunista) a fascist fringe grouping. AAA had targeted Amaika because they were the publishers of El Pápus, a satirical magazine which had published numerous cartoons attacking the regime. The magazine also suggested that, despite Franco's death, his ideas were still dominant among those still in power.<sup>277</sup>

Although some artists who were critical of the regime employed humour during the years immediately preceding Franco's death, within the world of cinema oppositional filmmakers who managed to make films that mentioned the civil war chose a far more serious register. As I outlined in chapter two, Franco's death created a cinematic space where filmmakers struggled to recapture the truth of past events. After years of listening to their country's history told from the perspective of the winners, there was a desperate cinematic attempt to get to

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<sup>277</sup> Information from 'Representations of the Past in Political Caricature,' Unpublished paper delivered by Anne Magnussen, University of Southern Denmark, at the History in Words and Images Conference, University of Turku, 26 – 28 September 2002.

the truth of past events, or at least to tell the story from the viewpoint of the losers. This process is exemplified by the documentaries La vieja memoria/The Old Memory and ¿Por qué perdimos la guerra?/Why Did We Lose the War? This attempt to grapple with the Truth of the past, with a capital T, was followed by films with a more personal register that often dealt with narratives of individuals caught in the crossfire of the war. It is not until 1985, with the release of Luis Berlanga's smash hit comedy La vaquilla, that there is the first attempt to laugh about aspects of the civil war within the world of Spanish cinema.

### **What is comedy?**

The danger of comedy and its ability to unsettle or destroy power with laughter is illustrated in the screen version of Umberto Eco's mediaeval murder mystery novel The Name of the Rose (Jean-Jaques Annaud/France/Italy/West Germany/1986). Set in a fourteenth century Benedictine Abbey, it involves a series of gruesome murders. The book that lies behind the series of deaths is Aristotle's missing book on comedy, a book the existence of which threatens the authority of the church hierarchy. In classical antiquity, within the world of theatre, tragedy was the realm of gods and kings, whereas comedy was generally regarded as the genre for humble, 'small' people. If tragedy was regarded as providing the material for great drama and grand politics, the narratives of comedy often revolve around the complex and often absurd contradictions and hypocrisies of human existence. As Eagleton writes 'Comedy embraces roughness and imperfection from the outset, and has no illusions about pious ideals. Against such grandiose follies, it pits the lowly, persistent, indestructible

stuff of everyday life.'<sup>278</sup> Comedy also focuses on questions of love and, conventionally, concludes with a happy ending. If in tragedy life is to be fled from, in comedy, life is to be grasped. And whereas tragedy ends in a cathartic outpouring of grief then comedy traditionally begins with misfortune and ends in joy.

The world of theatre illustrates that comedy was not always for light or amusing material. The extant plays of Aristophanes include a number of works that utilise comedy in order to intervene directly in the volatile and violent affairs of Ancient Greece. These include Lysistrata, a bawdy anti-war fantasy and The Archanians, another anti-war play set against the war with Sparta. For Aristophanes, comedy could be utilised as a weapon to intervene in the political affairs of the day. The importance of comedy is exemplified in the following fictional exchange between Euripides and Dionysus taken from The Frogs, written in 405 BC when the Spartan enemy was encamped only a few miles from Athens:

Euripides: 'What do you want a poet for?'

Dionysus: 'To save the city of course'<sup>279</sup>

Aristophanes clearly believes in the educational value of comic drama when he uses the character of Aeschylus to assert that 'schoolboys have a master to teach them, grown-ups have the poets.'<sup>280</sup>

Steve Neale and Frank Kutnik suggest that 'Comedy is itself a varied phenomenon, both in the range of forms it encompasses – from the joke to the sitcom – and in the range of defining conventions it can involve: from the

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<sup>278</sup> Terry Eagleton, After Theory, Penguin, London, 2003, p. 186.

<sup>279</sup> Aristophanes, The Frogs, Translated by David Barrett, Penguin, Middlesex, 1980, p. 208.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.



generation of laughter, to the presence of a happy ending, to the representation of everyday life.’<sup>281</sup> They argue that although subversion and transgression may be built into the system, ‘comedy necessarily trades upon the surprising, the improper, the unlikely, and the transgressive in order to make us laugh; it plays on deviations from socio-cultural norms, and from the rules that govern other genres and aesthetic regimes.’<sup>282</sup> They further suggest that the difference between the comic and comedy is that the latter is specific to certain forms of narrative. Whereas the former is what makes us laugh, laughter in itself is not enough to make something a comedy, indeed they argue that some comedies can make us laugh as much as they can make us cry.

Neale and Kutnik cite the definition offered by the Concise Oxford Dictionary: *Comedy* n. Stage-play of light, amusing and often satirical character, chiefly representing everyday life, and with a happy ending.<sup>283</sup> They suggest, therefore, that a comedy is characterised not necessarily by its ‘light’ or ‘amusing’ elements, but that it is marked by its concern with the representation of everyday life and its conclusion, which should be a happy ending.<sup>284</sup> Neale and Kutnik do point out that although happy endings are not always necessary, comedy and happy endings tend to go hand in hand. The question this chapter poses is this, if comedy has a tendency towards happy endings, given its tragic nature, is it possible to narrativise the Spanish civil war as a comedy?

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<sup>281</sup> Steve Neale and Frank Kutnik, Popular Film and Television Comedy, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

In his work on comedy and carnival in the popular folk culture of the Middle Ages, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that at the early stages of preclass and prepolitical society both serious and comic views of the world were held on equal terms. He points, for instance, to the way that triumphal processions in the early Roman state both glorified and derided the victor in equal measure. By the advent of the Middle Ages, however, he suggests, that ‘in the definitely consolidated state and class structure such an equality of the two aspects became impossible. All the comic forms were transferred, some earlier and others later, to a nonofficial level. There they acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered more complex, until they became the expression of folk consciousness, of folk culture.’<sup>285</sup>

For Bakhtin, carnival and other marketplace festivals represented a space where it was possible for the life of the people from lower classes to be lived free from the strictures of the official hierarchy of the day. It was a space where the world could be stood on its head, overturning the normal hierarchies and restrictions where everything that was fixed and established was open to change and transformation. As Bakhtin suggests, ‘carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.’<sup>286</sup> During the period of carnival, Bakhtin continues ‘People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination

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<sup>285</sup> Pam Morris, (Ed.), The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov, London, New York, Sydney, Auckland, 1997, p. 197.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.’<sup>287</sup>

Bakhtin asserts that carnival laughter was characterised by three connected factors. Firstly, that it is not the action of an individual, but is the collective laughter of the people. Secondly, that it is universal in nature and is directed at everyone, including those who participate. Thirdly, that it is ambivalent. For Bakhtin, carnival laughter ‘is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.’<sup>288</sup> Bahktin also suggests that folk laughter was associated with the bodily stratum and what he describes as grotesque realism.<sup>289</sup> For Bakhtin, grotesque realism was born of an association with all that was the opposite of official culture, opposed to all that was regarded as high or abstract culture. Grotesque realism was culture transferred to a base material level, often associated with the body, in particular, the lower part of the body including the genital organs, the stomach and the buttocks. Whereas the body, and bodily functions, are often written out of official culture, in folk culture the body is not to be hidden from, but celebrated. Bakhtin suggests that the bodily element is a deeply positive component of life, something universal, affecting all of the people. Eagleton argues that Bakhtin celebrates what he describes as ‘A vulgar, shameless materialism of the body – belly, buttocks, anus, genitals – rides rampant over ruling-class civilities; and the return of discourse to this sensuous

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 206.



root is nowhere more evident than in laughter itself, an enunciation that springs straight from the body's libidinal depths.'<sup>290</sup>

Bakhtin points out that laughter was originally condemned during early Christianity and that by the Middle Ages,

Laughter was eliminated from religious cult, from feudal and state ceremonies, etiquette, and from all genres of high speculation. An intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness is characteristic of medieval culture. The very contents of medieval ideology – asceticism, somber providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering as well as the character of the feudal regime, with its oppression and intimidation – all these elements determined this tone of icy petrified seriousness. It was supposedly the only tone fit to express the true, the good, and all that was essential and meaningful. Fear, religious awe, humility, these were the overtones of seriousness.'<sup>291</sup>

Although Spain may have moved on somewhat since, censorship in Franco's regime ensured that although the population were permitted to laugh, it was only at state-sanctioned humour or in underground publications.

Bakhtin's account of Rabelais suggests that there is an inherently subversive quality to carnival, regardless of the fact that this mockery takes place with the prior approval of the official state machine. Eagleton argues, however, that 'carnival is so vivaciously celebrated that the necessary political criticism is all too obvious to make. Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art.'<sup>292</sup> If carnival is revolution,

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<sup>290</sup> Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, Verso, London, 1981, p. 150.

<sup>291</sup> Morris, p. 208.

<sup>292</sup> Eagleton, 1981, p. 148.

or revolution is carnival, the state is hardly likely to license revolution and Eagleton's argument seems undeniable. Carnival may not lead to revolution, nevertheless, it can create a space for the transgression of established norms which can also call into question the legitimacy of existing codes of sexuality, property etc. This suggests that even if carnival is a licensed affair it can still possess liberating qualities.

Developing his work on comedy, Eagleton highlights that Brecht used comedy as part of the alienation techniques already referred to in chapter three. Eagleton quotes Benjamin's assertion that 'there is no better starting point for thought than laughter; speaking more precisely, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances of thought than spasms of the soul.'<sup>293</sup> Eagleton continues to develop the political side of the comic when he writes

Comic estrangement allows the audience to 'think above the action', which clearly entails physical expenditure; but since thinking itself is pleasurable, this does not wholly dissipate the comic effect. Moreover, thought is freer than pity or fear: it is a matter of thinking around, across and above the dramatic action, of a certain relaxed, digressive speculation that blends the vigilant expertise of the football fan with his or her casual at-homeness.<sup>294</sup>

## **Comedy and War**

In October 2002 I presented a paper on comedy and war at a conference in Finland.<sup>295</sup> During the course of the discussion I asked the audience if there were any films that utilised comedy in dealing with the Finnish civil war, a short,

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<sup>293</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>295</sup> David Archibald, unpublished paper, 'No Laughing Matter? The Spanish Civil War in Cinema', History in Words and Images Conference, University of Turku, Finland, 28 September 2002.

brutal conflict fought over a few months in 1918. The general feeling among the assembled historians and film academics was that it was still too early to make films about the civil war, never mind films that included comic elements. Yet in the history of cinema, a number of films have utilised humour to heighten the agony of war, inviting the audience to 'think above the action' as Eagleton suggests. In certain of these films it is almost as if laughter is the only sane response to the madness or the absurdity of war.

Over the years audiences have been presented with a number of now famous films that have coupled comedy and war; The Great Dictator (Chaplin/USA /1940), Doctor Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (Kubrick/UK/1964), Oh! What a Lovely War (Attenborough/UK/1969) and MASH (Altman/USA/1970) are among the most famous examples. In recent years a number of new releases have emulated this cinematic trend, for instance in No Man's Land (Tanovic/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Slovenia/Italy/France/UK/Belgium/2001) set during the Bosnian conflict or Buffalo Soldiers (Jordan/USA/2001) a black comedy set against the fall of the Berlin Wall. What all of these films have in common is a level of bruising humour that accentuates the tragedy at the heart of the films.

There is also in the films a tendency to suggest that war is some kind of absurd event. On one level it is difficult to argue that war is in any way rational; starting with the notion of war as absurd, however, incurs the danger of negating any responsibility to work out why wars occur. Are they really the results of the deranged actions of crazed or deluded individuals? Is there no rational



explanation behind mass slaughter and bombing campaigns? No doubt war contains elements of absurdity; but as I outlined in chapter one, the Spanish civil war was far from simply absurd. Rather it was a calculated response from the military, backed by the landlords and the capitalists who wanted to keep hold of the reins of power.

It is possible for films to deal with comic elements in wars when the filmmakers are on the winning side. Oh! What a Lovely War, for instance, deals with the slaughter of the first world war, but from the position of the victors, at least at the level of the nation state. It is more difficult to deal in the same way with wars in which there has been defeat. But it is not impossible. MASH, although ostensibly set during the Korean War, was most commonly viewed as a commentary about the US's inglorious debacle in Vietnam. Although it is noticeable that in the abundance of films dealing with what has come to be known as the Vietnam War, only Good Morning Vietnam (Levinson/USA/1987) utilises elements of comedy. But it is certainly less common and it appears to be much easier in the world of cinema to laugh about horrendous events when you have been on the winning side. But now I want to turn to deal specifically with the films that touch on the Spanish civil war.<sup>296</sup>

## **Belle Époque**

Belle Époque is a conventional comedy that opens with a misfortune - the comic shooting of two members of the *Guardia Civil*, a young man and his father-in-

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<sup>296</sup> Although it is outwith the parameters of this thesis it is interesting to note the debate that followed the release of La Vita è bella/Life is Beautiful (Benigni/Italy/1997), a vehicle for the comic actor Roberto Benigni set during the Holocaust which sharply divided critics over its use of comic elements in its death camp setting.

law - and concludes with a happy ending as a young honeymooning couple prepare to depart Spain. Set in 1931 around the time of the election of the Republican Government, the cinematic world created in Belle Époque is a million miles removed from the harsh and hungry experience of rural life in early thirties Spain.<sup>297</sup> The central characters inhabit an imaginary world free from financial worry, where an abundance of good food is washed down with good wine and where personal freedom is closely identified with sexual liberation. It is an idyllic world successfully shaking off the repressive strictures of the Catholic Church and joyfully transgressing historically established patriarchal restrictions.

Although the anarchic world of strikes and demonstrations sweeping through Spain in this period is referred to, it is located in the urban centres far removed from this pre-modern idyll on the outskirts of Madrid. It is an idealised sleepy hollow where, as with Bakhtin's favoured carnival, everything is stood on its head. It is a world where the patriarchal figurehead Don Manolo, says 'we get the papers three days late' but where no one seems the worse for it. Central to this world of libertarian freedom is Don Manolo's family which represents the antithesis of the strict bourgeois model supported by the Catholic Church. His may be a fractured family - the wife travels the world with her boyfriend, returning occasionally for sexual encounters with Don Manolo while the 'cuckolded' lover waits outside - but it remains happy, kept together by mutual consent, not legal stipulation.

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<sup>297</sup> For further details see Gerald Brenan's The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background to the Spanish Civil War, Cambridge University Press, 1990, in particular Chapter VI. For a sharp cinematic contrast see Luis Buñuel's enigmatic 1931 documentary Las Hurdes/Land Without Bread, which focuses on the appalling living conditions of the rural population of Spain.

There exists a romanticised world of gender reversal where, with the exception of the youngest, Luz, none of the daughters fulfil traditional female roles. They are neither dull nor domesticated, but confident, independent young women whose culinary shortcomings are contrasted sharply with the cooking skills of Fernando, the young army deserter who arrives in the village. This reversal of identities is illustrated when, following Fernando's sexual frolics with all four daughters, it is he who fulfils the traditional female role of actively pursuing marriage, while most of the daughters content themselves with the transient joys of carnal pleasure.

The potential fluidity of gender identities is illustrated in the sequence that occurs, appropriately enough, on the night of the village carnival. Bedecked in Fernando's army uniform and sporting a thin black pencilled moustache is Don Manolo's lesbian daughter, Violeta. She leads Fernando, dressed in a maid's uniform, to a quiet barn, throws him to the straw covered floor, straddles him as he lies on his back, and has sex with the bemused but delighted young man. As the couple's copulation reaches its orgasmic heights, Fernando needs to show Violeta how to blow his army regulation horn, thus re-empowering the male with climactic control. It is, nevertheless, a fundamentally more progressive representation of women than in most mainstream Spanish cinema. Indeed, Jacky Collins and Chris Perriam argue that, while the film is conformist in many ways, this particular scene 'contains some of the most advanced representations of lesbianism in Spanish cinema.'<sup>298</sup> It is noteworthy that Violeta's lesbianism is completely socially acceptable within the family structure and within the world

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<sup>298</sup> Jacky Collins and Chris Perriam, 'Representations of Alternative Sexualities in Contemporary Spanish Writing and Film', in Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas (Eds.), Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies, Arnold, London, 2000, pp. 214-222, p. 218.



of the film. Rob Stone points to the use of stereotypes in the film suggesting that Fernando is seduced by a sex-hungry widow, a nymphomaniac and a lesbian before heading off into the distance with the fourth stereotype – a virgin bride.<sup>299</sup> Stone also criticises this particular scene stating that ‘Trueba would have his audience believe that a lesbian would be desirous of a man if he dressed up as a woman.’<sup>300</sup> Although this scene is clearly palatable to a male audience and, perhaps, if the scene was really to stand sexual relations on their head Violeta would be penetrating Fernando anally with a large dildo from behind - although I imagine that might have interfered with the film's commercial success. From a Bakhtinian perspective this scene revels in elements of the carnivalesque. But rather than simply reversing the natural order of things, the fluidity of the sexuality in the scene breaks down binaries between straight and lesbian, suggesting that Violeta’s sexuality is much more fluid.

The film does contain references to the political events of its time, but Trueba may not be particularly concerned about commenting on the Spain of the 1930s. Rather than addressing historical concerns, the film clearly returns to the past to address contemporary issues; presenting a utopian family as an alternative model to the modern bourgeois family structure. It is a representation of the past that does not revel in a wistful longing for a bygone era, but one that comments forcefully on the nature of contemporary Spanish society. As Marsha Kinder argues ‘This film figures Spanish history not as a noble object of tragic pity for complacent global spectators but as an enviable source of unrestrained pleasure for a world plagued by AIDS and by waves of a neo-conservative backlash.

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<sup>299</sup> Rob Stone, *Spanish Cinema*, Longman, Harlow, 2002, p. 130.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Thus, the so-called new liberated mentality of Socialist Spain is shown to have historic roots in the pre-Civil War era.<sup>301</sup> As Marsha Kinder suggests, this is not a past that, as Marx comments, weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living, but a comic, romantic account that elides the experience of the thirties, makes a historical connection with the nineties, thus, suggesting a temporal continuity between both periods. In doing so Belle Époque appropriates its pre-civil war setting in an attempt to comment on contemporary concerns.

Thus the precise historical location is far from irrelevant and it is no accident that the action takes place on the cusp of the establishment of the Second Republic and the abdication of the monarchy in April 1931. And so when Fernando teams up with Luz, because of the impending period of political turmoil, the young couple must make their dream world elsewhere. And perhaps with an eye on the American market (indeed Belle Époque won the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar in 1993) the couple depart for another mythical utopian world where dreams are often dreamed but rarely fulfilled, the United States of America, leaving Don Manolo slowly driving his horse and trap as he returns to his tranquil pastoral world. Thus, Belle Époque can satisfy one of the traditional conventions of comedy, the inclusion of a happy ending by using the approximate setting of the thirties, but also by studiously avoiding the years of the war itself. It would simply not have been possible to make the same film if it had been set between 1936 and 1939, the setting of the three remaining films in this chapter.

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<sup>301</sup> Marsha Kinder, Refiguring Spain: Cinema, Media, Representation, Duke University Press, 1997, p. 5.

## ¡Ay Carmela!

On its release in 1990, ¡Ay Carmela! met with both critical and popular acclaim inside Spain, picking up 13 Goyas in the process. If Belle Époque creates a romanticised world far removed from the harshness of rural life in early 30s Spain, ¡Ay Carmela! creates a quite different image of Spain as the civil war draws to a close. Partially shot on the remnants of the battered town of Belchite (located 30 - 40 kilometres outside Zaragoza, and left untouched as a monument to the war<sup>302</sup>) this grim setting is fore-grounded in the opening sequence as the camera pans over the war-ravaged town. Depressed, dejected soldiers squat at street corners. An armoured Republican car sits immobilised. The walls are covered in torn and tattered left-wing posters. Intertitles locate the film on the Aragon Front in 1938; not a pleasant place for Republican soldiers caught in a war that seems increasingly unwinnable. Yet the non-diegetic singing of '¡Ay Carmela!', a popular song amongst Republican soldiers, introduces a lighter, comic side; a contrast in tone that is developed continually until the film's tragic, but, arguably, inevitable conclusion.

Director Carlos Saura's *oeuvre* includes a number of films touching on the civil war from a perspective sympathetic to the Republican side and often castigating life under Franco. These films included La caza/The Hunt (1965), Jardín de las delicias/Garden of Delights (1970), La prima Angélica/Cousin Angelica (1973) and Dulces horas/Sweet Hours (1982). Saura again enlisted the assistance of scriptwriter Rafael Azcona with whom he had worked initially on Peppermint Frappé (1967) but also on Jardín de las delicias/Garden of Delights and La prima

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<sup>302</sup> See [www.geocities.com.lshofstra/belchite](http://www.geocities.com.lshofstra/belchite).



Angélica/Cousin Angelica. Saura's films that deal with the conflict tend to adopt a serious tone, often centring on the desire to remember and the fallibility of memory itself. Rather than examining the conflict head on, his films often use metaphor and allusion to grapple with the politics of the period and its political and social fallout. Saura points out that 'The Spanish civil war appears in many of my earlier films, but in a different way. But it has never been spoken of in the same way as I do in ¡Ay Carmela! It was only after Franco was dead that you could make ¡Ay Carmela!'<sup>303</sup> A 1986 stage play by José Sanchís Sinisterra was the starting point for Saura to represent the civil war differently, and the key difference is the inclusion of comic elements within the narrative. 'I would have been incapable a few years ago of treating our Civil War with humour,' states Saura, 'but now it is different, for sufficient time has passed to adopt a broader perspective, and there is no doubt that by employing humour it is possible to say things that it would be more difficult if not impossible to say in another way'.<sup>304</sup>

One of the ways humour is utilised in the film is in the blurring of the lines between 'good' republicans and 'evil' fascists. Carmela, Paulino and Gustavete, are members of the Tip-Top Variety show, a travelling theatre show performing cabaret acts for Republican soldiers. Eager to depart the dangerous situation they face at the front, they attempt to flee to the relative safety of Valencia only to be captured by Nationalist troops on the way. Their far from heroic departure involves Carmela offering sexual favours to distract a sleazy Republican driver while Paulino and Gustavete siphon much-needed petrol for their intended escape. Thus, the central characters are presented as deserting the sinking ship

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<sup>303</sup> Interview with Author, London, 2002.

<sup>304</sup> Quoted in Gwynne Edwards, Indecent Exposures: Bunuel, Saura, Erice & Almodovar, Marion Boyars Publishers, London, 1995, p. 116.

while the Republican soldier who asks of Carmela, 'let me warm my hands on your titties', is represented as little more than a frustrated sex pest. 'Evil' may remain, illustrated when a group of Republican sympathisers are taken from a converted school which is being used as a temporary prison and executed against a wall, but not all the fascists fall into this category. This is exemplified by the character of the Italian officer, Lieutenant Amelio di Ripamonte, a former theatre director turned soldier, and his comically camp troupe of soldiers who are disparagingly described as a 'bunch of fairies' by a Spanish Nationalist officer. In the past this may have attracted political condemnation; but enclosed in a comic wrapper Saura has the scope to break with black and white categorisations, free from the risk of harsh political criticism. The best way to break down these categories while still inviting the audience to identify with the plight of the central protagonists, and, consequently, the Republican side in the war, is through the use of comic elements.

¡Ay Carmela! is no neutral, apolitical comedy, however, and it clearly illustrates the foreign influences on Spain that helped shape the civil war's outcome. Thus, the conflict is not represented as a solely Spanish affair, but as an arena of international battle which preceded the larger conflagration of World War II. This is hinted at initially in the opening theatre scene when the Republican soldiers sit in fear of the planes overhead and Paulino states, 'It sounds like one of those German turkeys'. The level of international involvement becomes crystal clear in the closing theatre sequence where the acting troupe, ably assisted by Lieutenant Amelio di Ripamonte, are forced to perform before an audience comprising an international collection of German, Italian, Moroccan and Spanish

soldiers. The military support Franco received from Germany and Italy is clear by the physical presence of their troops and highlighted further when Paulino exhorts, 'three peoples, three cultures and one single victory'. Captured members of the Polish International Brigades represent the other side of the divide, the forty thousand international volunteers who fought for The Republic. To represent the Brigaders as Polish, however, also connotes a link with Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, the event that marked the start of World War II. The Soviet Union's support for the Republican government is also suggested through Gustavete's hammer and sickle adorned red sweater that he wears in the theatrical sketch 'The Republic Goes to the Doctor'. Thus, rather than representing the war as a solely Spanish affair, it locates it within a wider international perspective.

This closing theatre sequence is also utilised to raise questions about the role of artists living under dictatorship and presents two possible alternatives. Firstly, the pragmatism of Paulino who only signed up to avoid being drafted to the front in the first place and, although his sympathies are with the Republic, moves relatively effortlessly between Republican and Nationalist sides. He is more prepared to compromise stating, 'We're artists, we do as we're told'. On the other hand is Carmela, a complex character, who embodies many traditional beliefs: she is still religious and yearns for a Catholic marriage to 'upgrade' her existing state wedding to Paulino. Carmela may be prepared to compromise, but she has her limits.



José María Pérez González points out that Spain has a long literary tradition of protagonists who ‘repeatedly find themselves in an impecunious situation, or simply end up penniless and hungry, and devote all their waking hours and best efforts in trying to avoid its awful consequences.’<sup>305</sup> It is a description that fits perfectly with the character of Paulino. As Saura comments, ‘at the heart of much of the comedy is the fact that Paulino is not a hero but a small, very ordinary man who merely wants to survive. As such, he is driven by very ordinary feelings which force him to desperate measures to save his own skin. All human pretensions to bravery and dignity fly out the window.’<sup>306</sup>

According to Pam Morris, Bakhtin recognised that folk culture formulated a perception of human existence which finds representation in the mode of grotesque realism and in particular its central image, that of the grotesque body.<sup>307</sup> Morris writes,

The exaggerated bodily protuberances, the emphasis on eating and excrement, the frequent physical abuse in the form of beatings and comic debasements are all elements of a complex communal perception of communal life. The grotesque body is not individualized; it is the undying body of all the people, comically debased so that it may be festively reborn. For this reason all the elements of folk humour are deeply ambivalent; ridicule and abuse are always the other side of praise and celebration, death is always associated with birth.<sup>308</sup>

Paulino’s character is characterised by all the aspects of grotesque realism referred to by Bakhtin. His constant hunger for food, which leads to him inadvertently eating a cat, is only matched by his seemingly insatiable desire to

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<sup>305</sup> José María Pérez González (Peridis), p. 18.

<sup>306</sup> Edwards, pp. 122/3.

<sup>307</sup> Morris, p. 94.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94/5.

take Carmela on frequent trips to ‘Uruguay’ – a reference to sexual intercourse between the couple. Paulino’s insatiable desire for food and sex is only equalled by his startling ability to fart at will - and in key, thus further connecting his character to Bahktin’s beloved base organs. Except that they are not base. For Bakhtin,

To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.<sup>309</sup>

These issues of death and re-birth are raised towards the conclusion of the film when Carmela removes her militia costume to reveal a Republican flag wrapped around her body, provoking a cacophony of jeers and abuse from the fascist troops. As the Polish prisoners burst into a rendition of ‘Ay Carmela!’, she joins their defiant chorus and bares her breasts to the prisoners, their last sexual treat before death. Her actions are not motivated by an obscure idealism, she is simply not prepared to see others humiliated and idly stand by.<sup>310</sup> In contrast, Paulino attempts to deflect the situation by resorting to ‘The Farts’, a comic routine which utilises his powers of flatulence to great effect. When a Spanish officer fires a solitary pistol-shot from the theatre auditorium the camera cuts to a slow-motion shot of Carmela’s life-less body falling to the stage floor as the bullet

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>310</sup> With her bare-breasted body wrapped in the Republican flag Carmela is reminiscent of Eugene Delacroix’s painting Liberty Leading the People (1830) where a semi-naked female figure is wrapped in the French tricolour.

strikes her forehead. The comic tone is instantly transformed into tragedy with Carmela's death standing as representative of the countless numbers who died fighting fascism in this bloody conflict.

It is perhaps a weakness of the film that as the narrative moves towards its closure there are repeated references to Carmela's impending period, thus partially placing her heroism at the door of some kind of biologically induced emotionalism rather than the noble act of a traditional heroine. Despite this she is presented as a positive figure who cannot be bought and sold. She is not prepared to compromise her art, and dies; Paulino toes the line and lives. ¡Ay Carmela! raises questions, however, about the quality of life that he will lead. This is clearer in José Sanchís Sinisterra's play, where the story is told in flashback with Paulino sweeping the floors of an old theatre, his status reduced from that of proud performer to humble, defeated janitor. In the closing scene of the film, Paulino and Gustavete lay flowers at Carmela's graveside before they drive off into a barren land, a metaphorical wasteland made desolate by war and the impending conquest of fascism. The possibility of flowering, of building a new world, lies hopelessly crushed. Yet the closing upbeat non-diegetic singing of '¡Ay Carmela!' strives to break the potential despondency, suggesting that inspiration can be found from the example of those prepared to make a stand against oppression, regardless of the personal consequences. Moreover, Carmela's death is linked to re-birth through the character of Gustavete, a child-like figure, parented by both Carmela and Paulino. As Saura states of the scene where she is shot, 'When Gustavete speaks he recovers his speech, he lost it with a tragic event and he recovers it with another tragic event and obviously it is the



memory of Carmela that remains.’<sup>311</sup> Carmela is both sexist stereotype and carrier of revolutionary spirit. Thus, in the same way that carnival suggests a dialectical link between death and birth, the voice of Carmela, of defiance, of opposition to the regime will continue in the character of Gustavete. And therefore in the closing scene we have a tragic conclusion in the shot of Paulino and Gustavete laying flowers at Carmela's graveside before they drive off into a barren Spanish wasteland. But with Gustavete reborn, the impact of Carmela's struggle is not wasted but carried in his voice, re-born for future struggles.

Saura credits the original playwright with developing the contrast between the tragic and the comic when he comments

Something very intelligent is done by José Sanchís Sinisterra. If it had come just from myself I would never have been able to do that sort of tragic-comic style. But after watching the play and reading it, I realised the amazing possibilities that working along those lines had. Because there is this double game, you find the humour that you can find everywhere in life, even in the most tragic situations. And sometimes that's exciting. It's what reinforces the most tragic moment because of the contrast.<sup>312</sup>

¡Ay Carmela! highlights how art and culture can be appropriated for political ends, with both Republicans and Nationalists keen to utilise theatre for propaganda purposes. Spanish audiences may have moved on from the agit-prop theatrical projects of the thirties, however, it is an indication of the importance of cinematic images in creating an understanding of past events. This is also the case with Libertarias and La vaquilla to which I now turn.

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<sup>311</sup> Interview with author, London, 2002.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

## Libertarias

Set in Barcelona at the outbreak of the civil war as the fascists' military revolt is met by a revolutionary response from workers throughout Catalonia, Libertarias focuses on an assorted group of women, notably anarchist militiawomen, prostitutes and a nun, fighting with Mujeres Libres (Free Women), the women's section of Spain's anarchist movement. In Chapter seven I offer an analysis of the politics of the film, but for the purposes of this chapter suffice to say that Libertarias attempts to analyse the position of women in the civil war. It also strives to recover, and indeed celebrate, the neglected history of Spanish anarchism.

But despite its apparent desire to re-examine Spanish civil war history, its focus on women is undoubtedly at the level of caricature. The central characters are all textbook male fantasy figures thrown together in a completely incongruous manner. Comedy is often born from figures being in the wrong place at the wrong time or as Neale and Kutnik suggest 'comedy necessarily trades upon the surprising, the improper, the unlikely, and the transgressive in order to make us laugh; it plays on deviations from socio-cultural norms, and from the rules that govern other genres and aesthetic regimes.'<sup>313</sup> Libertarias derives much of its comic comment from the notion of Franco been fought by an unlikely assortment of prostitutes and nuns. The film is awash with incongruous moments:

\*A nun, Maria, is forced to flee her convent. She accidentally finds herself in a brothel and is forced to hide from the anarchist militia by climbing into bed with

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<sup>313</sup> Neale and Kutnik, p. 3.

a sparsely clad fat priest who, undertaking a short sabbatical from his religious duties, is visiting the brothel to sample the sinful pleasures of the flesh.

\*Maria undertakes a transition from Catholic nun to nun of the revolution and she moves rapidly from the word of God to the word of the anarchist theoretician Kropotkin, citing his writings as she persuades peasants to feed the militia and appeals to the Nationalist troops to come over to the Republican side.

\*The women are required to undertake a mass urine sample to test for any possible sexually transmitted diseases they may have contracted at the front.

\* The almost obligatory 'comic' sexism when one of the militiamen shouts 'Comrades, don't your tits get in the way when you shoot?'

The political issues at stake are alluded to when, in a speech given to the liberated prostitutes by the chronically caricatured anarchist, Concha croaks to the cynical hookers, 'Our country is now in revolt. The symbols of repression are burning. The workers have occupied the factories and barracks. Freedom has broken out. A word is heard repeatedly in homes, factories and workshops: revolution.' Whilst Concha's political polemic falls on deaf ears, Pilar, her fellow militiawoman, skilfully wins them over to the side of the revolution with a more basic appeal to their immediate self-interest when she says 'What do you want? To be whores all your life? To have cocks stuck up you 10 or 15 times a day? And all for a bowl of stew.'



Thus, although the film raises serious subject matter, it is introduced in a whimsical and light-hearted fashion, until the ultimately tragic conclusion when, as the militia prepare to slaughter a lamb, a group of Moroccan troops arrive and brutally attack the militia. Pilar is violently raped and has her throat slit, Floren has a dagger thrust into her body and Maria is raped while another Moor holds a knife against her lips. In the following scene Pilar lies dying as Maria cradles her almost lifeless head, non-diegetic, choral music fills the air and Maria says

One day in the time of the Lord, this planet will no longer be called Earth. It will be called Freedom. That day the exploiters of the people will be cast into the outer darkness where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth and the angels of heaven on the most high will sing in joy as they behold the star Freedom, more blue and more radiant than ever. Because peace and justice will reign there. Because paradise will always be there and death will no longer exist.

Richard Porton describes Libertarias as, 'a curious amalgam of historical epic and mildly risqué sex farce...The film takes a salacious pleasure in highlighting the comic incongruousness of former nuns and prostitutes fighting alongside Bakunin-spouting women at the front'<sup>314</sup> There is something salacious about presenting militiawomen, nuns and prostitutes, stereotypical male fantasy figures, in any examination of sexual and revolutionary politics; yet it is the inclusion of these elements which provides comic relief. Despite its early comic content, however, as Libertarias moves towards closure, as with ¡Ay Carmela!, it must end tragically.

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<sup>314</sup> Richard Porton, Film & the Anarchist Imagination, Verso, London, 1999, p. 96.

## La Vaquilla

La vaquilla was one of the big success stories of Spanish cinema in the 1980s. Although it failed to gain a general release outside Spain, it was one the country's best-selling films inside the country.<sup>315</sup> Prior to La vaquilla the director, Luis García Berlanga, was most famous for the comedy Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall/Welcome Mr. Marshall (1953) but he had also laughed at the Franco dictatorship in films such as La escopeta nacional/National Shotgun (1978), Patrimonio nacional/National Patrimony (1981) and Nacional III/National III (1983). This was the first film, however, in which he chose to focus specifically on the civil war itself. García Berlanga states that the film is based on a script that he wrote as early as 1956 that had been rejected by the censors.<sup>316</sup> By the mid 1980s, however, the absence of state censorship (it had been abolished in 1977) created a new opportunity and, like Saura, he enlisted the services of Rafael Azcona to work on and develop the script.<sup>317</sup>

Set on the Aragon front in 1938, La vaquilla centres on the exploits of a group of Republican soldiers who surreptitiously venture into Nationalist territory in order to steal a bull that the Nationalists are planning to use in a bull run during a local town festival. The film suggests that the civil war is dividing Spain down the middle and tries to point to the absurdity of a nation carved in two. This absurdity is highlighted in an early exchange of supplies between the two sides brought on by the fact that the Republican soldiers have tobacco, but no cigarette

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<sup>315</sup> Thomas G. Deveny, Cain on Screen, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J. and London, 1993, p. 46.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>317</sup> García Berlanga was a frequent collaborator with Azcona who also worked on La escopeta nacional/National Shotgun, Patrimonio nacional/National Patrimony and Nacional III/National III.

papers, the Nationalists papers, but no tobacco. Thus, comedy is wrought from the absurdity of the position.

Central to the plot is the character of Mariano, an innocent, naive young man who has a girlfriend in the local town and who is worried that he will lose her to another man, particularly during the impending festivities. Mariano initially ponders deserting but cannot because he did not vote for the marquis, thereby illustrating the power of the local landlords. The troops hear that the Nationalists are planning a special dance and Sergeant Castro worries that his troops will defect if they hear about the dance. He assembles a motley crew of volunteers who construct a plan to steal the bull in order to quash the festivities of the fascists whilst simultaneously attempting to raise the morale of his own troops. Thus the war becomes emplotted into an absurd tale of cattle rustling, more reminiscent of the popular US television series The Phil Silvers Show (De Caprio and Hicken/USA/1955-59) featuring the eponymous actor as Sergeant Bilko, than a serious anti-war film such as the first world war drama All Quiet on The Western Front (Milestone/USA/1930).

Throughout La vaquilla narrative identification is with the Republican soldiers, thus inviting sympathy with their position; but the film generally steers clear of any heavy-handed or overt politicising. Mariano may have voted for the left in the elections, but he is primarily concerned about the potential sex-life of his girlfriend. His worst fears are confirmed when he arrives at his girlfriend's home and discovers that she is engaged to be married to a Nationalist officer. He then embarks on a madcap plan to kidnap her and prevent any potential wedding from



taking place. As with Libertarias the audience is invited to laugh at people caught up in the wrong circumstances, in the wrong time. Thus as the soldiers venture further into enemy territory they find themselves, inadvertently, in a brothel where one of the characters, Donato, says, 'Aristotle had it right. You work for two things; to eat and to make it with charming females,' to which Sergeant Castro replies, 'you're so right, forget communism and fascism, when it comes to getting it on, we all agree.' Thus the film suggests that there are universal human desires which run deeper than ideological divisions and that can unite all Spaniards.

La vaquilla does not deal with the horror of war, and although it is set on the front line, there is not a single shot fired during the film. Indeed the civil war becomes a calamitous adventure carried out by politically unaware combatants. But there are moments, such as when the link between fascism and the church is highlighted when the priest blesses the military aircraft, that puncture the generally apolitical nature of the narrative. Moreover, much of the humour is derived from poking fun at the marquis who is connected to the church and whose corruption is signified by his gout. Despite his rhetoric he is represented as far from supportive of the war effort and even hides meat from the army, thus putting his own selfish interests before that of the war effort.

As with the carnival theme present in Belle Époque, the bull run is due to take place on the day of a local festival to mark the day of Our Lady of the Assumption. The event ends in chaos however and the Republican soldiers decamp to the home of Mariano's father, who we learn is caretaker to the

marquis and has been in hiding since the war broke out. Deveny points out that the film has often been characterised as a comedy, but has also been cited as an example of the *esperpento*, a term coined by Ramón del Valle-Inclán. Deveny suggests that the *esperpento* ‘represents a systematic distortion of characters and indeed reality that Valle-Inclán created in his dramas and novels.’<sup>318</sup> Deveny suggests that, for Valle-Inclán, it was necessary to use ‘the grotesque, the absurd, and the ridiculous’ in order to get to the reality of Spain.<sup>319</sup> This absurdity becomes apparent when the soldiers end up taking the marquis hostage, strapping him in his wheelchair and pushing him through a minefield before leaving him in no-man’s land. As the film draws towards a conclusion, the Republicans make their way back to their own lines and the cow arrives on the horizon. There ensues a bullfight before two bullfighters depart the scene leaving the small animal lying dead on the grass. Thus, one of the most famous symbols of Spain, the black bull, is left dying as vultures arrive and pick over the dead carcass that stands, metaphorically, for Spain.<sup>320</sup>

La vaquilla is certainly less overtly political than either ¡Ay Carmela! or Libertarias. The film mocks the church, Franco and the landlords, but it is perhaps easy enough to watch for everyone who does not fall into one of these categories. There is no sense of what the Republic is fighting for and while the film tends to sympathise with the plight of the Republican soldiers, it is more for their plight than for their politics. As with Paulino, in ¡Ay Carmela!, we have characters caught in a conflict in which they have no real interest. The war is presented simply as divisive and tragic. It is a relatively unproblematic film that

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<sup>318</sup> Deveny, p. 47.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>320</sup> It is also reminiscent of the bull in Picasso’s Guernica.

poses no complex or difficult questions about Spain's fractured past. Its significance lies in being the first film in which audiences can begin to laugh about the past, even if, like the other films in this chapter, it does not end as light-heartedly as it begins.

### **Happy Endings?**

I have suggested that in films set during the civil war it is not possible to have a happy ending. The films that utilise comic elements only do so to reinforce the tragedy which then packs a more powerful punch. Thus, three of the films end in death; Carmela shot through the head with a single shot from the Spanish officer, Pilar who has her throat slit by the Moors and, in La vaquilla, the film closes with a shot of the dead calf, which stands symbolically for the death of Spain. The only film that does not end in death is Belle Époque which, due to its 1931 setting, allows Don Manolo to return to his home, as the couple escape to find 'happiness' in the US. Belle Époque is more of a traditional comedy because it starts with death but ends with a happy ending, and, in that sense, it is the only film that fulfils the traditional conventions of a comedy outlined by Neale and Kutnik. The endings of all three films set during the war stand in stark contrast to the heightened beautiful tree-lined avenues of the Spanish countryside in the opening sequence of Belle Époque. The possibility of flowering, of building a new world in Spain will be hopelessly crushed in the impending period of right-wing rule, the *bienio negro* (two black years) from November 1933 to February 1936, then dealt a final, fatal blow by Franco's victory in March 1939. If Belle Époque raises the possibility of what might have been and what may be possible



in the present, then the ending of *¡Ay Carmela!*, *Libertarias* and *La vaquilla* serve to remind the audience of the terrible price that was paid for failure.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest that a number of conditions need to exist before it becomes possible to laugh about the civil war in the cinema. Firstly, that the war itself had to be concluded. Secondly, that democracy had been restored, and the return of the dictatorship was not a possibility. Thirdly that censorship had been relaxed and it was possible for filmmakers to make films without government interference.<sup>321</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, that time had allowed some of the wounds to heal. I also argue however, that it is still not possible to cinematically represent the Spanish civil war as a comedy in the sense outlined by Neale and Kutnik. Comedy can be allowed to surface, but, ultimately, it must end in tragedy. As I outlined in chapter one White suggests that ‘Since no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning.’<sup>322</sup> Thus, for White, it is the imposition of the tragic or the comic narrative that ensures that it is not possible to make the Spanish civil war comedy, it could just as easily be replayed as comedy. In this chapter I have suggested that the inability to represent the conflict as a comedy in the traditional sense has less to do with subjective

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<sup>321</sup> Although Franco died in November 1975, censorship was not officially abolished until 1977. The threat of a return to military rule remained high throughout the late seventies and it is not until the defeated coup d'état in 1981 led by a lieutenant-colonel in the Civil Guard, Antonio Tejero Molina, that this threat genuinely subsided.

<sup>322</sup> Quoted in Jenkins, *On 'What is History?': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 160.

narrativisation processes and more to do with the nature of the event itself. For as Eagleton reminds us

it is not of course true that all tragic concerns are changeable, just as carnival is wrong to believe that anything can be converted into humour. There is nothing comic about gang rape, or Auschwitz. There are always blasphemies, words that must on no account be uttered because they defile the tongue. Those who believe that the sacred and the profane belong to a benighted past need only to consider whether they would be prepared to pronounce certain words about Auschwitz even as a joke.<sup>323</sup>

We can laugh about elements of the tragic political events that shook Spain between 1936 and 1939, and the establishment of distance, whether temporal or geographical, allows greater opportunity for the construction of new narratives about the past. But so far, at least, films set during the Spanish civil war may allow audiences to laugh momentarily, but ultimately, they must end in tears.

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<sup>323</sup> Eagleton, 1981, p. 161.

## Chapter Six

### Ghosts from the Past: El espinazo del Diablo

#### Introduction

In earlier chapters I examined how the Spanish civil war has been represented in different cinematic narrative forms. In the previous chapter I specifically looked at the possibility, or otherwise, of representing the civil war as a comedy. In this chapter I explore what happens to the civil war when it is represented in the genre of horror. My particular focus is on El espinazo del diablo/The Devil's Backbone (del Toro/Spain/Mexico/2001), a ghost story set during the final year of the civil war, and I draw extensively on an interview that I conducted with the film's Mexican director at the 2001 Edinburgh Film Festival. But I begin by making some comments about the relationship between ghosts and the past before proceeding to an examination of how ghosts operate in the film. I also explore how the civil war is represented in the film, in relation to both aesthetics and politics. I conclude the chapter by examining the extent to which allegorical storytelling can adequately deal with the complexities of past events, in this specific instance the Spanish civil war.

#### Synopsis

El espinazo del diablo opens with a young boy, Jaime, staring into an underground pool of water. Set in the closing days of the civil war the film centres on a group of young boys in a remote Spanish orphanage. Carmen and Dr. Casares, who have been together since the death of Carmen's left wing



husband twenty years previously, run the orphanage. Their sympathies lie with the Republic and Carmen safeguards Republican gold in the orphanage safe. A Republican fighter, Mr. Ayala, brings a young boy, Carlos, to the orphanage after the death of Carlos's father at the front. After initial conflict with the boys, Carlos becomes accepted into the group. The janitor of the orphanage, Jacinto, has secret sexual encounters with Carmen during which he attempts to steal the safe keys. Throughout the film the ghost of Santi, a young boy killed by Jacinto, haunts the boys. Fearing the impending victory of Nationalist forces the old couple attempts to escape with the boys. Jacinto prevents their departure, killing Carmen, the maid and a number of the boys in an explosion. Dr. Casares is seriously wounded in the explosion and later dies of his injuries. After initially fleeing, Jacinto returns and takes control of the orphanage. He locks the boys in a cellar while he searches for the gold. Released by the ghost of Dr. Casares the boys escape and collectively overwhelm and wound Jacinto. Jacinto falls into the pool of water and the gold that he has stolen weighs him down. As he struggles to rid himself of the gold, Santi's ghost appears and pulls him deeper underwater to his death. The boys depart the orphanage, walking off into the Spanish landscape leaving the ghost of Dr. Casares, shotgun in hand, standing guard over the orphanage.

### **Ghosts and the past**

El espinazo del diablo is a film that looks at the past obliquely, a film that utilises allegorical storytelling to strive to reach the horror of the events it represents. Del Toro states that 'Every real event in humanity, no matter what it is, needs an imaginary re-telling of itself...the Spanish civil war needed its own fictionalised

retelling. It really completes the horror of it to a much deeper mythological way. It takes it to a different level. The horror of the war is not only physical it is also spiritual.’<sup>324</sup> Del Toro’s use of the word ‘spiritual’ is noteworthy because the film attempts to explore the spiritual side of the war through the use of spirits, more commonly referred to as ghosts.

According to Jules Michelet, historiography is a discourse with the dead.<sup>325</sup> It is a discourse, however, that might be considered more monologic than dialogic, unless ghosts are factored into the equation. The figure of the ghost has haunted art and literature for some time, although they have not always been held in the same regard. In A Cultural History of Ghosts, R. C. Finucane points out that in The Odyssey, Homer’s ghosts were not figures that provoked fear or terror, but were ‘whining impotent things of little use except when, occasionally, they were called up to assist the living, usually by giving advice or information. When they *did* appear they were as imposing as puffs of smoke. No right-thinking Greek was afraid of them’.<sup>326</sup> In contemporary cinema ghosts seem relatively harmless compared with the other massed ranks of the undead, for instance, the various manifestations of Count Dracula, werewolves or Frankenstein-like monsters, or the mutant vampire, The Daywalker, from del Toro’s Blade II (del Toro/USA/Germany/2002). Certainly there are none so harmless in the realm of cinematic spirits as the friendly ghost in Casper (Silberling/USA/1995), adapted from the cartoon series and comic book. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott suggest that in contemporary culture ghosts have been eclipsed by the increased prevalence of

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<sup>324</sup> Interview with author, 17 Aug. 2001, partially published as ‘Insects and Violence’, The Guardian, 28 Nov. 2001. All subsequent quotes from del Toro are from this interview.

<sup>325</sup> Cited in Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (Eds.) Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History, Macmillan Press, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1999, p. 5.

<sup>326</sup> R. C. Finucane, A Cultural History of Ghosts, Prometheus Books, New York, 1984, p. 5.

aliens and creatures from outer space.<sup>327</sup> In comparison to these modern-day extraterrestrial threats, ghosts seem almost antiquated, yet they have not been completely exorcised. In the world of cinema, the release of The Others (Almenábar/USA/France/Spain/2001) suggests that the old-fashioned gothic ghost story may have some life in it yet. Yet the ghosts who appear within this Victorian setting are not intrinsically evil or spectacularly spooky. As is often the case, the ghosts in The Others are forces from the past who return to the present to correct wrongs, undo mistakes and set the world back on a right and proper course.

The Reformation and with it the accompanying, if only partial, death of purgatory diminished the idea of the return of the dead, yet ghosts will not lie down quietly. In western culture ghosts continue to appear, a process which takes place more regularly in Catholic countries where the chances of a dialogue with the dead, or a discourse with the deceased, seems both more possible and plausible.<sup>328</sup> Indeed, as recently as 1997 the Reverend Gino Concetti, chief theological commentator for the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, stated that the Catholic Church is against, possibly even dead against, the raising of spirits from the dead. Despite this position, however, he adds “Communication is possible between those who live on this earth and those who live in a state of eternal repose, in heaven or purgatory. It may even be that God lets our loved ones send us messages to guide us at certain moments in our lives.”<sup>329</sup> Concetti’s comments suggest some kind of temporal continuity between

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<sup>327</sup> See ‘Introduction: A Future For Haunting’ in Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (Eds.), 1999.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> John Hooper ‘Dialogue With the dead is feasible, Vatican spokesman says’, London Observer Service. Article viewed on <http://www.after-death.com/articles/vatican.htm>. 11 August 2001.



past, present and future; that ghosts appear to act as guides for the living. It is a connection made apparent in Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol where the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future revisit Ebenezer Scrooge in an attempt to place him on a more righteous path. The hauntings of Dickens's ghosts also suggest some kind of historical trajectory, albeit a disjointed, discontinuous one. Thus the figure of the ghost can problematise conventional historical thinking because it appears to call into question a linear historical process that separates out past, present and future. Instead, the return of the revenant can be seen to represent some kind of anachronistic haunting, where someone, or something, from the past is stuck in the present, where it is, so to speak, out of time. Buse and Stott argue that 'anachronism might well be the defining feature of ghosts, now and in the past, because haunting, by its very structure, implies a deformation of temporal linearity'.<sup>330</sup> They go on to develop, and problematise, this notion of anachronism when they state that

Ghosts arrive in the past and appear in the present. However, the ghost cannot be properly said to belong to the past, even if the apparition represents someone who has been dead for many centuries, for the simple reason that a ghost is clearly not the same thing as the person who shares its proper name. Does then the 'historical' person who is identified with the ghost properly belong to the present? Surely not, as the idea of a return from death fractures all traditional conceptions of temporality. The temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical, as at once they 'return' *and* make their apparitional debut.<sup>331</sup>

Yet this is only one way of looking at ghosts. If you believe in them, and even then if they exist, perhaps they are not out of time, perhaps they are just out of sync with the world of the living in which they appear. Thus, their difference is

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<sup>330</sup> Buse and Stott, p. 1.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

ontological not temporal. One problem with this discussion is that it can get bogged down in ghosts as a phenomenon in their own right as opposed to ghosts as the fictional constructions of artists, writers, or filmmaker. I do not want to explore the question of what exactly a ghost may, or may not, be. And this chapter is not concerned with metaphysical discussions about whether ghosts exist. What is not debatable, however, is that they exist in another realm of the 'unreal', that is, in the world of fiction and in the world of cinema. I want to explore how we might conceive of ghosts in popular culture as representing the return of the past, or what is commonly referred to as history.

It is not only popular culture that suggests a link between the dead and the past. Politicians and political commentators often invoke the memory of the dead for their own political agenda. Marx, for instance, makes the following statement 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.'<sup>332</sup> And in this sense it is possible to make a connection between ghosts, or the dead who will not die, or the memory of the dead, and the past; to see how ghosts can operate as a metaphor for how the past impacts on the present. As I mentioned in chapter one, Eagleton suggests that 'if the past itself – by definition – no longer exists; its *effects* certainly do.'<sup>333</sup> And we can read ghosts, or the undead, as traces of the past operating in the present, or, more particularly, as the effects of

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<sup>332</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Mark and Frederick Engels, Marx/Engels: Selected Works in One Volume, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1980, p. 96.

<sup>333</sup> Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, New Left Books, London, 1981, p. 51.

a past that has not been settled, a past that has not yet been laid to rest, a past that continues to haunt the present.

Jo Labanyi suggests that, in relation to Spain, there are three ways to deal with ghosts/the past:

One can refuse to see them or shut them out, as the official discourses of the State have always done with the official manifestations of the popular imaginary, where for good reasons ghost stories are endemic. One can cling to them obsessively through the pathological process of introjection that Freud called melancholia, allowing the past to take over the present and convert it into a “living death.” Or one can offer them habitation in order to acknowledge their presence, through the healing introjection process that is mourning, which, for Freud, differs from melancholia in that it allows one to lay the ghosts of the past to rest by, precisely, acknowledging them as past.<sup>334</sup>

Labanyi suggests that her first two options, in conflicting ways, result in a denial of history, however, the third option suggests a more fruitful alternative in that it is possible to exorcise the ghosts of the past, not by denying them, or hiding from them, but by having a constructive engagement with them. In chapter two I suggested that in cinema under the dictatorship there was an attempt to shut out the ghosts of the civil war. This process was continued to a lesser degree after Franco’s death during the *pacto del olvido*. Now like the ghosts of the past, in the world of the cinema the civil war increasingly returns to haunt Spain. Its hauntings, however, are not born of malicious intent, but born of a need for an acknowledgement of past crimes and in an attempt to seek reparation and to ensure that similar crimes do not occur in the future.

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<sup>334</sup> Jo Labanyi, ‘History and Hauntology; or, What Does One Do with the Ghosts of the Past? Reflections on Spanish film and Fiction of the Post-Franco Period’ in Resina, Joan Ramon Resina (Ed.) Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy, Radopi, Amsterdam & Atlanta, 2000, pp. 65-82.



## Ghosts in El espinazo del diablo<sup>335</sup>

The general and most straightforward definition of a ghost is that of the return of a person from the dead to intervene in the affairs of the living. Thus ghosts generally return from the past, rarely do ghosts return from the future. In the world of fiction, however, ghosts are not present for the sake of the past, but for the sake of the future; they return from the past to make demands on the present in order to recast what is yet to come. The narrator in El espinazo del diablo, however, presents a different way of thinking about ghosts when, in the opening sequence, he poses the following question

What is a ghost?

A tragedy condemned to repeat itself time and again?

An instant of pain, perhaps

Something dead which still seems to be alive

An emotion suspended in time

Like a blurred photograph

Like an insect trapped in amber

These opening words are far removed from the idea of a ghost as a literal manifestation of a dead person. Instead the narrator presents ghosts as a much more complex phenomenon, although the definition is provisional and somewhat elusive – what would an emotion suspended in time either look or feel like? The opening words of the narrator also suggest the idea of temporal dislocation and

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<sup>335</sup> Ghosts from the cinema are not only present in El Espinazo del Diablo, they also surface in both Vacas, and Libertarias (discussed in chapters four and seven). In Vacas the presence of the ghosts suggest a never-ending historical cycle of death and re-birth, but they do not have the transformative powers of the ghosts in either El espinazo del diablo or Libertarias.

open up a way of thinking about the use of ghosts in the film. Del Toro himself states his own personal belief in ghosts, and while he makes no claim to have seen one, he does claim to have heard one when he ‘heard a disembodied voice in the room that my dead uncle used to live in. I’m 100% sure that it was not a natural phenomenon...I believe in ghosts very firmly.’ Del Toro is also clear, however, that he is not trying to answer the question that the film poses. To the question ‘What is a ghost?’ he responds, somewhat elusively, that ‘they can be an event, they can be something else, that’s why when the movie asks that question, it tries to give you an answer that gives you clues to other answers. I don’t think a movie is a thesis’.

El espinazo del diablo contains a wide variety of different ghosts. There is the ghostly presence of the flickering shadows on a cinema screen, photographs moving at twenty-four frames a second, images that are both there and not there. One of the definitions of a ghost offered by the film’s narrator is ‘a blurred photograph’. Photographs signify both the presence and the absence of that which they refer to and, like ghosts, they are, simultaneously, both present (in the form of the ghost/image) and absent (in the form of the ghost’s material body/the referent). The notion of the blurred photograph also raises ideas about the referential and iconic capacity of photography to represent the real. If a blurred photograph is an image of the past that does not exactly equate with the past itself, the ghost returns as a presence which carries similarities and differences with what it is the ghost of.

In addition to the flickering shadows there are also fictional characters from the 1930s who would probably be 'ghosts' by the start of any fictional twenty-first century. As Del Toro states 'I believe that everybody in the movie is a ghost, I'm not saying objectively, I'm saying that all of the movie is a memory, the entire movie is about dead people. We are in 2001 and these are people who lived in 1939.' Another ghostly presence that appears in the film is the bomb that is dropped in the opening sequence and which seems endowed with mystical powers. The bomb, despite being deactivated, makes an eerie, supernatural noise and continues to tick; even after its own death it breathes and it sighs, like Santi who the boys call 'the one who sighs'. The bomb also seems able to suggest to Carlos where Santi is by flying a streamer in the direction of where he is hiding. Sitting obtrusively in the orphanage courtyard for the duration of the entire film, the timing of its arrival reinforces the suggestion that war is an inevitable consequence of human action. Of the presence of the bomb del Toro comments that 'The best way to see an event like that war is not to see it frontally but to see it obliquely. The more absent the war is geographically from that place, the more that bomb in the middle of the patio becomes important because it is a movie that tells you that war doesn't need to be close-by to be important.' This is further developed by the bomb's exaggerated presence; it looks five feet tall when the majority of bombs dropped during the civil war were considerably smaller. The bomb's presence becomes the central focus of the courtyard, haunts the boy's daily life and dominates the *mise-en-scène*. Del Toro states that 'The size of everything is exaggerated, even the unexploded bomb in the centre of the courtyard. The real bombs dropped by the Italian fascists in the civil war were about 18 inches high. Mine is massive, because everything is massive to a child.'



The key ghosts in the film, however, are of the traditional variety, the ghosts of Santi and Dr. Casares.<sup>336</sup> I want to offer a reading of the film that equates the two (non) human ghosts in the film with the past. It is a reading that suggests that the ghosts of Santi and Dr. Casares represent the return of history, that, although they are both killed in the film, they return from the dead, as traces of an immediate past that will not go gently into the night but which returns to haunt the living, or the present. The two ghosts have clear, if different, reasons for returning; Santi's ghost's is motivated by a desire for vengeance for his brutal death at the hands of Jacinto. Dr. Casares's ghost, however, is a more noble, benevolent ghost, driven, not primarily by personal revenge born of past crimes, but by a desire to salvage a future for the boys in an attempt to continue to guide or steer their future development.

Dr. Casares is a man whose career would suggest a scientific rejection of ghosts and the world of the irrational; nevertheless, he seems to have his own doubts. Thus he readily drinks the rum-laced liquid in which he keeps the dead infants who have been born with bifurcated spines and that he sells in the village to raise funds for the orphanage.<sup>337</sup> In Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious Freud highlights the example of a man who responds negatively to the question of whether he believes in ghosts. The man proceeds to add that he's not even afraid of them. Dr. Casares may not believe in the viagric potential of his medical potion, but he is not afraid to experiment with it in an attempt to cure his impotence and develop his sexual relationship with Carmen. Thus, despite his

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<sup>336</sup> Carmen states that Casares is from Argentina, as is Federico Luppi, the actor who plays him.

<sup>337</sup> The devil's backbone of the title refers to children born with what is now called spina bifida, but in the past was often regarded as the curse of the devil.

medical background, the doctor displays a common response to the world of the irrational; to deny its existence, but to keep an eye on it anyway, just in case.

El espinazo del diablo presents two options for how to deal with ghosts/the past.

The first is the position taken by Jaime who adopts Labanyi's first option and initially refuses to confront the memory of Santi's death for fear of what his own involvement will bring. Thus, although witness to his death, Jaime denies any knowledge of Santi's whereabouts. Despite his best efforts to bury this memory, however, Jaime's traumatic experience surfaces in his comic book drawings. With blood flowing from the wound in Santi's head, the drawings represent the return of Jaime's repressed trauma through art; suggesting that it is impossible to deny the past, that the past will always return in some shape or form. In contrast, Carlos has a contradictory approach towards the past. When Carlos first arrives at the orphanage he has no background knowledge of Santi's existence and is prepared to confront the mysterious presence which first appears in the courtyard doorway. But after he first hears about Santi's disappearance, he runs from him, hiding in a linen cupboard to seek refuge, or to cut himself off from the past for fear of what his involvement with it will bring. However, once he has learned more about the past (the circumstances of Santi's death) he decides that it is necessary to stand up to Santi, despite the dangers that may flow from this. It is only when Carlos embraces the past that he can begin to move forward, into a future that has been liberated from the dead weight of the past.

When Santi predicts that 'many of you will die', it is possible to see how the past intervenes in the present and foretells, or at least seeks to guide, the future. Thus

Carlos's search can be read as a metaphor for the historical process. This search suggests that past, present and future may not form one simple linear trajectory, nor are they parcelled off from each other, but are woven together dialectically. When Marx writes in The Manifesto of The Communist Party 'a spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism' he forewarns of a ghostly presence yet to come. For Marx this spectre would take flesh in the shape of the rising industrial working class that would become, what he describes as 'the gravediggers of capitalism'. Marx's perspective implies that the future that he foresees as yet to come, communism, is the result of past activity, in this instance the continuous exploitation of the proletariat which would result in them overthrowing capitalism. Similarly, Santi's ability to correctly predict the future (a number of the boys are later killed in an explosion) further highlights the interconnectedness with past, present and future. A view of history that allows the past to determine the future leaves out the factor of human agency, which, as I argued in chapter one, has a major role to play in the historical process. But that does not negate the prognosis that the seeds of the future are sown in the past. Whether these seeds take root and develop depends on a multitude of factors operating in the present. The factor of human agency is embodied in the film by the actions of the group of boys who overcome Jacinto. But they are only successful after the intervention of the past in the shape of the doctor's ghost who then releases them from their makeshift prison cell. Similarly the past (Santi's ghost) does not single-handedly destroy Jacinto, he also needs the actions of those in the present, represented by the boys who force Jacinto into the pool. Thus in El espinazo del diablo it is the interaction of the past and the present that shapes the future.



## **The return of cyclical history**

El espinazo del diablo suggests that history is a never-ending repetitive cycle.

This is evident when the bomb that is dropped in the opening sequence appears just before Santi's death and when the narrator says, 'A tragedy condemned to repeat itself time and again?' The bomb may not be human, but is born of human action, thus the tragedy condemned to repeat itself time and again is of human origin, perhaps suggesting, as del Toro argues, that war is a constant of human life, continually resurfacing though a constant and never-ending historical cycle.

In a comment reminiscent of the view of history represented in Vacas, del Toro states that

I think that, sadly or not human life occurs in cycles and there is no possibility of stopping that and that's true for violence and sex and all of that. The more you deny something the more it comes back, a little late in its cycle, but it comes back and that is true for me in history. I think that war is bound to occur, again and again and again and it's impossible to not have it. I think that we can have long periods of understanding and peace, but war is eventually inevitable because comfort breeds discomfort. For me when you are in a comfortable situation, most humans, we don't learn to enjoy it, we feel unsatisfied, we feel the need for something else and it is apparent that that something else – your neighbour has it. It is a very human, I'm not saying understandable or great, but it's a very human trait.

Del Toro suggests that it was inevitable that the Republic was defeated because of the failings of human nature when he comments

I tried to make the orphanage in the film a microcosm of the war. I wanted to create a situation where the republican figures in the movie allowed for this fascist creature to grow and nurture, and ultimately take over. The Republican government represents the best possible leftist government that has ever taken place on earth - women were

emancipated, education was very experimental, culture was booming - and yet it all went to hell.

If we accept del Toro's beliefs about human nature then we would have to conclude that the Republic was doomed from the start. It did not have a ghost of a chance. And yet perhaps no war has illustrated more clearly than the Spanish civil war that people are prepared to fight for what they believe in, best exemplified outside of Spain by the International Brigaders, many of whom died fighting for their political convictions. Therefore these actions contradict del Toro's essentialist position.

That humanity is never content with its lot and is engaged in an unquenchable search for something more, even through pain and destruction, appears to be a reasonable reading of the film. This is exemplified in the character of Jacinto; he is safe from the war, he has food and he has shelter, he has a young and beautiful fiancé, Conchita, and he also has secret sexual encounters with Carmen on the side. Yet he is not satisfied and within him lies the greed of human nature that ensures the inevitability of recurring war, flowing from an insatiable thirst for more. Thus Jacinto begins on a voyage of selfish, violent destruction, which is illustrated in his callous killing of Santi, then again in his willingness to blow up the orphanage. It becomes most manifest, however, in the brutal murder of Conchita as she tries to escape to raise help. Jacinto's cold-blooded actions parallel the execution of the Republicans by the Nationalist firing squad earlier in the film. That humanity is selfish, violent and greedy is quite a bleak reading based on pessimistic and essentialist notions of human behaviour, which del Toro seems to suggest and which the text justifies.

El espinazo del diablo can also be read, however, as representing the idea that it is necessary to face up to the past, not as individuals, but on a collective basis. Within the film human nature is not simply represented as constant. Jacinto, who Carmen describes as a ‘prince without a kingdom’, is what Jaime could have become. Like Jacinto, Jaime is a loner, who says ‘I don’t need anyone’ and states that he will not need help to produce comics when he is older. His only human interest lies in his sexual infatuation with Conchita, highlighted when he stares longingly at Conchita and Jacinto and made apparent when he offers her a cigar wrapper as a pretend ring and as a token of his affection. His animosity towards Jacinto is deepened by violent, adolescent, sexual jealousy about Conchita. Jaime initially exhibits the limitations of an individual response, the explosion forces the boys to act together and both Casares and Jaime abandon their previous passive stance and prepare to kill Jacinto.

Filmmakers under the dictatorship were often forced to use metaphor to refer to the civil war obliquely. This is evident in La caza where the hunting metaphor is used to critique the activities of a group of Nationalist army officers who are veterans of the civil war. In La caza their increasingly violent hunt invites parallels with life under the dictatorship. In El espinazo del diablo, however, the hunting metaphor is used to highlight that individuals grouped collectively can achieve far more than if they stand alone. Thus, when the boys are initially divided and fight among themselves they are useless in the face of a stronger force. In the brutal hunting and killing of Jacinto, however, the boys emulate the collective approach of the primitive mammoth-hunters in a previous classroom



scene. As the hunters kill the mammoth in their desperate struggle for food, the boys hunt Jacinto. When Jacinto falls into the pool in which he drowned Santi, he suffers his death at the hands of a combination of those who hunt him and those who haunt him. Fredric Jameson comments that 'history is what hurts' and it does indeed hurt for Jacinto as the past, Santi's ghost, pulls the janitor to his ghostly, and ghastly, watery death.<sup>338</sup> In Greek mythology ghosts were appeased and given blood to drink; Santi is appeased by the body (and blood) of Jacinto. But by rejecting the limitations of individual action and uniting together the boys are victorious and consequently learn about the potential benefits of cooperation and solidarity, thus presenting an alternative model of human nature to that displayed by Jacinto.

A Canadian journalist, Pierre van Passen, once suggested to the anarchist leader, Buenaventura Durruti, that even if the anarchist strategy was successful it would leave them 'sitting on a pile of ruins'. Durruti responded

We have always lived in slums and holes in the wall. We will know how to accommodate ourselves for a time. For, you must not forget, we can also build. It is we who built these palaces and cities, here in Spain and in America and everywhere. We, the workers, we can build others to take their place. And better ones. We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the

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<sup>338</sup> The on-screen violence of the children is unusual in contemporary cinema, however, the appearance of children in ghost stories is not. Del Toro states that 'It is one of the most ancient conventions in the genre that, for a horror tale to work, it needs the eyes of an innocent; in fact it needs pure eyes. I hate the word innocence - it's so relative. But purity is not. I believe that children are pure and yet I don't believe that they are innocent. Purity is like an amplifier of horror and I have lived the most horrifying chapters of my life being a child, so those are the chapters I can relate to the best.' It does not easily fit in the horror genre, yet *Espiritu de la colmena/Spirit of the Beehive* (Erice/Spain/1973), similarly displays the childish fascination and 'pure' eyes of Ana (played by Ana Torrent) with her fascination for both Frankenstein's monster, and later, a Republican maquis.

stage of history. We carry a new world, here, in our hearts. That world is growing this minute.<sup>339</sup>

In El espinazo del diablo the surviving boys emerge from the ruins of the orphanage and into the golden sunlight that is cast across the arid Spanish landscape. And the camera slowly pulls back to reveal Casares, who we now know to be the narrator, as he repeats the opening words to the film and adds ‘A ghost. That’s what I am’, suggesting that, in this instance, the ghosts are the losers, or the memories of the losers. Earlier Casares comments ‘all my life, I’ve always stopped short, left things unfinished’ and it is only now that he sees things through to a conclusion, his life becoming wholly worthy only in death. He watches over the boys as they head off from the darkness of the orphanage into a new world. A sorry assortment of orphans, limping, walking with wooden sticks carrying a powerful lesson in their heart as they walk into an unknown future. Buse and Stott suggest that ‘fictional phantoms are usually banished by the imposition of closure at the end of the narrative’<sup>340</sup>, however, at the end of the film the narrative remains somewhat open-ended. Thus the ghost of the doctor still stalks the earth, his impotence now channelled into his shotgun, and suggests that the ghosts of the civil war are very much alive.

Labanyi suggests that ‘In a country that has emerged from forty years of cultural repression, the task of making reparation to the ghosts of the past - that is, to those relegated to the status of the living dead, denied voice and memory – is considerable.’<sup>341</sup> This is evident in the work of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (Association for the Recovery of

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<sup>339</sup> Quoted in Morrow. p. 209

<sup>340</sup> Buse and Stott p. 12.

<sup>341</sup> Labanyi, p. 80.



Historical Memory) to which I referred in chapter one. Del Toro states that ‘the last image of the movie is, in essence, the new Spain – of the children that are crippled, damaged, bleeding and groping against a plane of nothing with little lances. That, for me is the new Spain, that it has a ghost behind it that is never going to die. I really believe that the civil war is going to haunt Spain for generations to come.’<sup>342</sup> In the world of cinema the appearance of these ghostly characters mirrors a wider process of excavation and reparation.

### **The Spanish civil war or The Ghost of The Mexican Revolution?**

In El espinazo del diablo, there is little in the way of direct political references to the events in Spain. There is a sense that this is the Spanish civil war haunted by the ghost of the Mexican revolution, which was the setting for the first drafts of the screenplay that Del Toro developed fifteen years previously. He amended it to the Spanish civil war setting when, at the 1994 Miami Film Festival, Pedro Almodóvar invited him to make a movie in Spain on the back of the success of his arthouse vampire movie Cronos (del Toro/Mexico/1993).<sup>343</sup> In relation to the civil war itself, the film does not dwell on the political details of the conflict. It does reveal Carmen and the doctor’s Republican sympathies, but there are few direct political or historical references to the war. Casares says to Carmen that ‘England and France might still intervene’ suggesting a naive hope in the

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<sup>342</sup> The notion of the civil war haunting future generations is also made explicit in El Mar (Villaronga/Spain/2000). Set in Mallorca during the civil war, El Mar relates the traumatic experiences of three young children who secretly witness Nationalist death squads executing Republican prisoners and are also witness to the subsequent death of two children. The violence of the civil war years lays the basis for their increasingly violent, dysfunctional lives in later years. This violence returns as they grow old, regardless of their attempts to suppress their experiences. Thus the film suggests that the violent lives that they lead are rooted in the violence the children witness in their early years and acts as a metaphor for the violent years under the early Franco period.

<sup>343</sup> Information from interview with the author. The film is produced by Pedro Almodóvar and his brother Agustín.



willingness of either to intervene;<sup>344</sup> he also witnesses the execution of a group of International Brigade members and Republican fighters. These political references, however, seem somewhat shoehorned into the text and it would be easy enough to watch the film without worrying too much about the civil war, certainly for international audiences who are removed both historically and geographically from the events. Indeed without these direct references we could be in Mexico after all.

The film may be short on references to the civil war, it does, however, contain a number of cinematic references including: Carmen's one-legged lady is reminiscent of Tristana (Buñuel/France/Italy/Spain/1970); Jacinto is dragged down by the weight of the gold as in The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (John Huston/USA/1948); the brutality of the boys is reminiscent of the violence perpetrated by the children in the adaptations of William Golding's novel The Lord of The Flies (Brook/UK/1963) and (Hook/USA/1990) and the doctor guards the boys like the old woman (Lillian Gish) protects the children from the evangelical preacher (Robert Mitchum) in The Night of the Hunter (Laughton/USA/1995).

Del Toro points to his use of the war background when he says 'I always wanted to make a ghost story against a historical background. I truly believe that the best ghost story is a ghost story that is set against a war, which leaves shit-loads of ghosts behind.' Certainly by 1939 there were many on both sides that had lost

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<sup>344</sup> Although there were high hopes among some on the left that England and France would come to the rescue of the Republic it was never a genuine possibility because they were more comfortable with a victory for Franco than a victory for a radical government which could have threatened their economic interests.

their lives in the war. But del Toro conjures up the spirits, or the memory of the civil war, with one eye on international distribution as the civil war still arouses a great degree of interest outside Spain.<sup>345</sup> From the opening pan across the Spanish landscape as Ayala drives his car across the wasteland to the orphanage, there is an unmistakable ‘Spanish’ aesthetic, initially characterised by the rural landscape, the dry earth, the clear blue sky and the golden fields. This ‘Spanish’ aesthetic is consciously utilised by del Toro who comments

the whole movie is supposed to be about ghosts that are supposed to be like insects trapped in amber. So I wanted to make the whole movie in amber and therefore the colours of the movie are amber, white, black, and earth most of the time. Then we have the green and the very, very pale green-blue to be favourable to night scenes, but everything in the movie was meant to look, in terms of light and shadow, like a Goya painting. To make it really black with just hints of light, so we went for a very dark movie because, again, one of the great painters of war is Goya. I was very keen to find an aesthetic that was Spanish, but not like any other Spanish movie. And for the exteriors what we did was we filtered them with a filter called chocolate that made all the light outside gold, or amber and gave it the aesthetics of a western, a kind of deranged western instead of a civil war movie feeling.

Thus the film is conscious of its own ‘Spanishness’ as a cinematic construction connotative of other Spanish arthouse films which touch on the civil war. This is not to fall into the trap of suggesting that there is a genuine ‘Spanish’ aesthetic; the aesthetic style in the films of Pedro Almodóvar or Juan José Bigas Luna, Alex de Iglesia’s La comunidad (Spain/2001) or Santiago Segura’s box-office smash Torrente, el brazo tonto de la ley (Spain/1998) clearly demonstrate that there is a wide use of aesthetic styles in contemporary cinema in Spain.

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<sup>345</sup> The interest is exemplified by Preston’s estimate that there are 15 000 books written about the conflict.



With the ever-increasing globalisation of cinema, notions of Spanishness, or a Spanish cinematic aesthetic are increasingly problematic. There is little doubt, however, that a sense of a Spanish aesthetic remains. Thus Paul Julian Smith writes of The Others that it 'is reminiscent of Spanish child-centred chillers haunted by war, from Victor Erice's The Spirit of the Beehive (1973) to Butterfly's Tongue (directed by Almenábar's long-term producer Jose Luis Cuerda). With exteriors shot in a gloomy Cantabria, doubling for Jersey, and a Spanish crew, The Others brings a distinctly Spanish sensibility to its material.'<sup>346</sup> Yet although The Others has a Spanish crew, Spanish cinematographer and Spanish art director it was made with an English-speaking cast and a Peruvian director. For Paul Julian Smith, the film represents a Spanish aesthetic, or as he puts it, 'a Spanish sensibility'. This, somewhat elusive, sense of a Spanish arthouse aesthetic also permeates El espinazo del diablo. It is difficult to pin down exactly, however, there is a demonstrable connection with the aesthetic style of, for instance, Pascal Duarte or Espiritu de la colmena. This is best exemplified in the contrast between the darkness of the interior shots and the brilliant colours of the exteriors. It is also evident in all three films in the relative stillness of the camera and in the use of long shots over the landscape, such as the scene when Jacinto murders Conchita. Thus del Toro consciously employs an aesthetic style that suits his subject matter. But his tale of ghosts and greed can travel easily from the Mexican revolution to the Spanish civil war precisely because it steers clear of extensive period detail, opting to use allegory in an attempt to generate some form of greater truth about human nature.

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<sup>346</sup> Quoted in Núria Triana-Toribio, Spanish National Cinema, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 162. Although not set during the war itself, Cría Cuervos/Raise Ravens (Saura/Spain/1975) could also be added to this list.



## The uses of allegory

Monegal writes that ‘To make a film about a war, any war, may involve the challenge of representing the unrepresentable.’<sup>347</sup> But it is almost becoming a cliché to talk about war and trauma as unrepresentable. Why are war and death unrepresentable, but representations of love and life less problematic? Perhaps the most obvious answer is that they are not. Both are unrepresentable in terms of producing carbon images of themselves, but, of course, they are re-presentations which can never correspond to the original. Monegal calls for allegorical accounts of the past and states that ‘Poetic figuration emerges as an inescapable element in the work of analysis, because only poetry can meet the challenge of exceeding the limits of representation.’<sup>348</sup> It is questionable, however, whether this storytelling method has the ability to deal with the specificity of complex political events. When Jaime attempts to get the boys to rebel against Jacinto he says ‘Do you think it will work out if we behave? To which Galvez replies ‘they have the rifle. They’re bigger and stronger than us.’ Jaime then retorts ‘Yes, but there’s more of us.’ This could be read as an oblique and highly political reference to the Republican in-fighting during the May Days in Barcelona in 1937; on the other hand, it is also the common theme of countless Hollywood films.<sup>349</sup> That is perhaps the problem with allegorical accounts of complex political processes; if there is always a potential polysemy in any text that creates the space for a multitude of responses, allegorisation multiplies this process to an

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<sup>347</sup> Antonio Monegal, ‘Images of War: Hunting the Metaphor’ in Jenaro Talens and Santos Zunzunegui (Eds.), *Modes of Representation in Spanish Cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, pp. 203 – 215, p. 214.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214

<sup>349</sup> The May Days refers to the period in May 1937 in Barcelona when the Republican government, acting under the influence of the PCE, launched a counter-revolution against the institutions that were in the hands of the anarchists, most notably the city’s telephone exchange. It led to bitter internal fighting on the Republican side and the suppression of the revolutionary left. It is outlined in greater depth when I discuss *Land and Freedom* in the following chapter.

endless degree. The film represents various allegorical parallels. Thus Santi can be read as an allegory for the thousands of innocents murdered by fascism and Jacinto can be read as representative of the brutality of the regime. The horror inside the walls of the orphanage is a microcosm of the world outside; thus when the narrative does venture outside it is for the brutal execution of Conchita by Jacinto, which illustrates the potential horror of human action rather than the dangers of the supernatural.

Moreover, the use of insects in the film can be equated with fascism.<sup>350</sup> Del Toro's fascination with insects is illustrated by the appearance of slugs throughout the film.<sup>351</sup> Of insects Del Toro states that

I think they are perfect. Humans are imperfect because we have two sides; insects are one-sided. If creation was perfect there would be creatures that would be purely spiritual, that would exist like angels in harmony with nature, and there would be other creatures that are just physical, their pure purpose embodied in the physical. Some insects are so specialised that they are born without a mouth or sexual organs because they only live for a few hours. They don't feed because they shouldn't take food from the colony, and they don't reproduce because they're useless. They finish their work and die, and then they are eaten by the others. They are almost like the perfect fascist creature.

Thus even the insects can be read metaphorically to suggest a link between the cold, rational brutality of fascism and the methodological movement of insects. Within the film insects operate as a motif of death, thus Santi is killed on the night that he secretly goes with Jaime to gather slugs at the pool and witnesses

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<sup>350</sup> Del Toro again returns to the nature of fascism in Hellboy (del Toro/USA/2004) an adaptation of the comic of the same name.

<sup>351</sup> Insects also feature strongly in del Toro's debut feature Cronos and in Mimic (del Toro/USA/1997) which features giant cockroach-like creatures. In Cronos he had wanted to film a scene where flies surrounded a body, but only with the development of CGI technology does this become possible in El espinazo del diablo.

Jacinto attempting to open the orphanage safe, thus guaranteeing his death. Insects also surround the ghostly presence of Santi and as the doctor dies, the camera follows the flight-path of a fly as it enters a window and joins a small group of flies crawling around his mouth. Further when the cupboard door opens to release the boys from Jacinto's makeshift prison, we do not see the doctor, but the appearance of a number of flies operate to signify his ghostly presence.

The benefits of allegory and metaphor are apparent in La caza when, owing to censorship under the dictatorship it was impossible to directly confront the politics of the war and its aftermath. But its political effects seem somewhat limited when open exploration of the past is now possible. But then perhaps we expect too much from the cinema. Can it really answer detailed questions about complicated political and historical processes? Can the ghosts of the past be exorcised and laid to rest through cinema screens? Perhaps not entirely, however, the dead from the civil war are alive enough to reappear, to engage in a fight for their own memory, for their own past. In popular culture, cinema is a space where the ghosts of the civil war should not be laid to rest, but should remain, not so that they can be exorcised and put to rest, but as a haunting reminder of a tragic and brutal period in Spanish history.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion I have outlined how in El espinazo del diablo ghosts are used as a metaphorical representation to make connections between the past and the present. I have argued that the film offers a view of the past as cyclical – the result of an essentialist human nature, but that the film is also open to readings



which suggest that human agency allows the possibility of breaking out of predetermined cyclical behaviour patterns. I have illustrated how ghosts can be employed as a useful fictional tool for contextualising the historical process, for linking the past to the present. I have also argued that there are problems with allegorical accounts of the civil war. While allegory was a useful way for filmmakers to discuss the civil war under the censorship restrictions imposed by the regime it cannot deal with the intricacies of specific historical events. Thus El espinazo del Diablo offers a view of the war that does not deal in any way with the complexities of the conflict. In contrast, Land and Freedom attempts to deal with the complicated events surrounding the disarming and defeat of the revolutionary left during the civil war. It is these events that I now turn to in chapter seven.

## Chapter Seven

### Cinematic Politics: Revolution Revisited in

#### Land and Freedom and Libertarias

##### **Introduction**

In this chapter I examine a film which looks at the Spanish civil war with an overt political agenda. In contrast to the dominant view of the war as a conflict between fascism and democracy, exemplified by For Whom the Bell Tolls, Land and Freedom excavates the revolutionary aspects at the heart of the civil war. In this chapter I explore the film's political content and the film form utilised by the filmmakers. I also outline the political controversy that surrounded its release. I explore the possible progressive possibilities of looking back to the past, comparing Land and Freedom with Libertarias, a Spanish film that also touches on the revolution in its exploration of the anarchist women's movement during the civil war. I conclude by examining the extent to which political cinema can successfully represent complex and detailed political processes.

##### **Synopsis**

Liverpool 1996. An old man, David Carr, suffers a heart attack and dies on his way to hospital. Following his death, his granddaughter, Kim, sorts out his belongings. She finds a box with newspaper cuttings about the Spanish civil war and a handful of earth wrapped in a red handkerchief. The box also contains a number of letters that David has sent to his then girlfriend, Kitty. Flashback to the start of the civil war where, after hearing a Spanish Republican speaking at a labour movement meeting, David decides to travel to Spain to fight Franco.

Despite his membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), David enlists in the anti-Stalinist Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (Workers Party of Marxist Unification/POUM). He is involved in a number of battles and also falls in love with a Spanish anarchist militiawoman, Blanca. After receiving a shoulder injury from a misfiring rifle he leaves the POUM militia and travels to Barcelona where he joins the Communist-led International Brigades. After participating in the Republican in-fighting in Barcelona he returns to fight with his former POUM comrades who are later disarmed by government troops. During this dispute Blanca is shot in the back by government troops. David travels to Blanca's village and at her funeral gathers a handful of collectivised earth from her grave and places it in a red handkerchief. David returns to Britain. Flashforward to 1996 and David's funeral. As Kim lowers the handful of Spanish earth into her grandfather's grave she raises a clenched fist alongside his former comrades.

### **Loach/Allen Background**

On its release Land and Freedom prompted a flurry of critical praise, winning the International Critics prize at Cannes, but it also provoked sharp political controversy. Despite the appearance of the civil war in many films, Porton points out that 'even the free-wheeling post-Franco Spanish cinema has been extremely reluctant to tackle some of the thornier issues of the Civil War period.'<sup>352</sup> It is the revolutionary history of the civil war that Land and Freedom attempts to document. Indeed the introductory intertitles state that it is 'A Story From the Spanish Revolution', not the civil war. In the process it focuses on the 'thorny

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<sup>352</sup> Richard Porton, 'Revolution Betrayed: An Interview with Ken Loach', Cineaste Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter 1996, p. 34.



issue' of the disarming of the revolutionary left in Spain in May 1937 and the accusation that the revolution was crushed at the hands of the Soviet-controlled Spanish Communist Party (PCE). The film is the final instalment in a long line of Loach/Allen film and television productions that sympathetically represent the lives and struggles of working class people.<sup>353</sup> It also flows from a desire to tell stories about the labour movement that remain largely untold. Loach has a long record of political involvement in the labour movement and Allen, a former coal-miner turned scriptwriter, has a history of thirty or so year's involvement in the Trotskyist movement.<sup>354</sup> One of the central themes running through much of their previous work, including The Rank and File (Loach/UK/1971), Days of Hope (Loach/UK/1975), Questions of Leadership (Loach/UK/1983) and Which Side Are You On? (Loach/UK/1984) is the constant betrayal of working class people by their own leaders. It is a theme that is again addressed in Land and Freedom. But it is not the first time that either Loach or Allen has explored the Spanish civil war. In the British television soap opera, Coronation Street, on which he worked as a scriptwriter for 18 months, Allen introduced the character of Stan Ogden, the work-shy window cleaner, who had fought in Spain with the International Brigades.<sup>355</sup> Loach first makes reference to the civil war in Fatherland (Loach/UK/Germany/France/1987), a tale about an East German

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<sup>353</sup> Allen died of lung cancer in 1999. For background to the development of the finished script see Jacob Leigh, The Cinema of Ken Loach: Art in the Service of the People, Wallflower, London, 2002, pp. 68-9.

<sup>354</sup> Loach also stood as a candidate for the left-wing, anti-war coalition, Respect at the 2004 European elections.

<sup>355</sup> John Newsinger, 'Scenes From the Class War: Ken Loach and Socialist Cinema' in International Socialism Journal, Issue 83, Summer 1999, <http://www.isj1text.ble.org.uk/pubs/isj83/newsinger.htm> 04/06/02. Even following the death of Allen, Loach's films are still an attempt at an active intervention into political debates and class struggle politics. His 2002 film, Bread and Roses, relates the story of the Los Angeles Justice for Janitors Campaign, a movement formed to fight against the exploitation of immigrant cleaners. According to Chris Kaufman, the Transport and General Workers Union national secretary, the film was the inspiration for a political campaign launched by higher education members of that union to attack corporate fundraising functions and to highlight the low pay facing their members. See 'Phil Baty, 'Union to use Stunt Tactics'', The Times Higher Education Supplement, 28 June 2002, p. 5.

protest singer, scripted by Trevor Griffiths in the days before the collapse of the Berlin Wall.<sup>356</sup> Land and Freedom, however, is a detailed analysis of the Republican side of the civil war and, in particular, attempts to outline the reasons for the defeat of the Republic.

Land and Freedom flows from the same political perspective that informed their previous work. Here, however, the filmmakers attempt to put flesh on the analysis, developing a more personal touch in the process. For Loach and Allen, the key element in their non-documentary films is to take important political issues and weave them around the personal lives of their characters in an attempt to strike a balance between the dramatic and the didactic. Writing on the nineteenth century novel Lukács argues that ‘the problem is to find a central figure in whose life all of the important extremes in the world of the novel converge and around whom a complete world with all its vital contradictions can be organised.’<sup>357</sup> Thus, for Lukács, it was important to find a ‘typical’ figure who could stand as representative of an entire class. In the world of cinema, Loach utilises a similar approach in the character of David. Through this methodology Loach attempts to develop an audience response that will be sympathetic to David’s plight as he progresses on his political journey through the complexities of the conflict.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> The influence of an alternative artistic aesthetic is brought to the film by Griffiths’ script. The film’s dream sequences, for instance, seem almost un-Loachian in comparison with any of his other features.

<sup>357</sup> Quoted in Terry Lovell, Pictures of Reality, BFI, London, 1980, p. 71.

<sup>358</sup> A similar strategy is employed in Carla’s Song, (Loach/UK/1996) where George, a Glaswegian bus driver, falls in love with Carla, a Nicaraguan refugee. He subsequently travels to Nicaragua with Carla and through George’s eyes the audience is introduced to the political complexities of the civil war in Nicaragua.



Historicising the narrative through the use of David's letters to Kitty, flashbacks link the battlefield of 1930s Spain with life in the 1990s. The opening sequence presents the decaying housing schemes of Merseyside where, as the camera tracks ambulance workers climbing the stairs to David's flat, background graffiti from the neo-nazi National Front is seen scrawled on the walls alongside anarchist symbols and anti-racist posters. Thus the film locates the dangers of fascism and racism in the present and highlights the anti-fascist struggle as an on-going political project. Framing the Spanish events with Kim's life in the 1990s, the film also connects past and present as Kim strives to uncover her grandfather's hidden past. Kim's initial interest in David's past is sparked as she reads articles left behind by her dead grandfather on a variety of previous struggles; British industrial disputes and national liberation struggles in Ireland and Palestine, among others. Her interest is increased further when she discovers an old shoebox with David's mementos from the Spanish civil war.<sup>359</sup> David's 'history', located in his letters and newspaper cuttings, is only accessed after his death. That his grand-daughter salvages them from an old box hidden above a wardrobe in his bedroom can be read as a metaphor for the way in which Land and Freedom attempts to re-capture the hidden history of the Spanish revolution. The box carries traces of a factual past (newspaper clippings from the thirties) with fictional additions (black and white photographs of the film's 1930 characters, and the handful of earth wrapped in a red handkerchief, which we later learn is collectivised land that has been taken from Blanca's grave.) These traces of times past are then linked to the past itself by a cut to black and white

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<sup>359</sup> In an inter-textual reference unusual in Loach films, scriptwriter Jim Allen is highlighted as the author of one of the articles from The Miner.



actuality footage of the revolutionary movement in Catalonia in July 1936 and music from the period.

The filmmakers attempt to create a world as real, and believable, as possible in order to convince the audience of the authenticity of their argument. Thus, the film is characterised by a number of aesthetic features that cinematically recreate a sense of the everyday experience of real life: jerky movements from the use of a hand-held camera; natural lighting; overlapping dialogue; a rejection of star casting; the use of a number of non-professional actors and a very limited use of stylisation.<sup>360</sup> The use of improvised acting techniques, combined with an insistence on linear shooting enhances the original and authentic effect.<sup>361</sup> One example of this is that the actors were unaware of the planned death of the Irish Republican, Coogan, until the day of the shoot. Paul Laverty, the actor who plays the Scotsman, Jimmy, outlines that

We didn't find out until that very day. But I remember when it happened that everybody was absolutely gob-smacked. We were really surprised and shocked and saddened by the whole thing. I know it is acting and it is a pretend thing, but you try and enter into the spirit of the whole thing and then when something does take place – you see someone lying there – it does actually help you find some emotion.<sup>362</sup>

This was also the case with the death of Blanca; Laverty states that ‘we had no idea what was going to happen at the end so when we saw these people coming

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<sup>360</sup> In a notable exception, the slow-motion sequence when Blanca is shot, while obviously introduced for emphasis, seems almost out of place in a Ken Loach film.

<sup>361</sup> During an on-location visit to the set of *Ae Fond Kiss* (Loack/UK/2004) I observed that Loach's final instruction to his crew before the camera starts to turn over is ‘tuck away’. After this command I noticed that all the crew hid from the view of the actors, or crept down so that their presence would be as unobtrusive as possible. The desired effect is to increase the authenticity of the actors' performances.

<sup>362</sup> Interview with author, April 2000. All subsequent quotes from Laverty are from this interview.

down we thought “What the fuck’s going on here?” When Blanca was shot none of us knew and so when it first happened we were all really, really gobsmacked.’ Loach goes to extraordinary lengths to engender this sense of authenticity, pointing to the casting methods he employs he highlights that ‘we tried to find the people who if it happened now, would go and fight.’<sup>363</sup> Moreover, in the sequence where the Spanish anti-fascist shows footage of fascist atrocities to a crowded meeting in Liverpool, the extras were composed of members of the local labour movement, thus attempting to generate a more spontaneous and plausible response. A mixture of historical footage, contemporary non-diegetic music and explanatory intertitles enhances the naturalistic effect.

### **Politics and Film Form**

In chapter four I examined debates surrounding the film forms utilised by political filmmakers. In relation to this debate Mike Wayne argues that ‘The tension between a necessary attention to form and the dangerous lure of formalism can be traced back to Trotsky’s debate with the Russian avant-garde in the 1920s, and it drove much radical film theory and practice in the 1970s into something of an elitist cul-de-sac.’<sup>364</sup> In his polemic with the Russian Formalists, Trotsky argues that the concentration on form itself is an inadequate approach, thus he writes

The architectural scheme of the Cologne cathedral can be established by measuring the base and the height of its arches, by determining the three dimensions of its naves, the dimensions and the placement of the

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<sup>363</sup> Interview with author, April 2000. Interview with author, partially printed as ‘Match Made in Heaven’, *Sunday Herald*, 29 September, 2002. All subsequent Loach quotes are from this interview unless otherwise stated. Paul Laverty informed me that as a further example of this the drill sergeant from the early training sequences was a soldier in the Spanish army.

<sup>364</sup> Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, Pluto Press, London, Sterling, Virginia, 2001, p. 10.



columns, etc. But without knowing what a medieval city was like, what a guild was, or what was the catholic Church of the Middle Ages, the Cologne cathedral will never be understood. The effort to set art free from life, to declare it a craft self-sufficient unto itself, devitalises and kills art. The very need of such an operation is an unmistakable symptom of intellectual decline.<sup>365</sup>

Referring to the debate that took place around Days of Hope, John Newsinger suggests that

There was a brief furore around the notion of 'the classic realist text', occasioned by Colin McCabe's indictment of Loach's failure to develop a revolutionary cinematic form that would somehow endow the audience with a revolutionary awareness of contradiction. Two problems arose from this scholasticism, problems that, it must be said, never seemed to trouble Loach: first, those few films that ever attempted to fulfil McCabe's ambitions proved incomprehensible and, second, far from advancing working class struggle, the whole exercise proved more adapted to advancing academic careers.<sup>366</sup>

As Newsinger suggests, Loach has little time for academic arguments about the pros and cons of film form. Of film academics who have been critical of the form of his work he comments that

They are not interested in content; they're interested in form. So when you try and make the content as clear and as complex as it is, to try and unravel something and clarify something and distil something they shy away from confronting it because they don't want to talk about it. They don't feel safe, because then they've got to talk about something other than film. So consequently they kind of hide their eyes from what's in front of them and find some kind of peripheral subject to discuss. If you spend all your time in semiological disputes, then you can't see anything else. But they aren't the audience; they're just a little academic byewater.

What remains of interest is why filmmakers committed to a left-wing political project should utilise a form rejected by left-leaning theorists such as McCabe.

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<sup>365</sup> Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, RedWords, London, 1991, p. 209.

<sup>366</sup> John Newsinger, 'Scenes From the Class War: Ken Loach and Socialist Cinema' in International Socialism Journal, Issue 83, Summer 1999, <http://www.isj1text.ble.org.uk/pubs/isj83/newsinger.htm> 04/06/02.



Despite the desire for a new type of cinema that foregrounds its representation, sees itself as a construct and challenges dominant specularity, these criticisms were rejected by some leftist filmmakers who attempted to operate within popular cinematic forms. Gillo Pontecorvo, for example, argues that 'To renounce films that are made for the normal market in the normal way - narrative, dramatic, etc. - to consider them not useful is a luxury of the rich, of people probably not interested in political results...hyper-criticism for rich kids, for sons of the bourgeoisie.'<sup>367</sup> Wayne argues that 'The difficulty with simply 'injecting' progressive content into forms whose political implications have not been understood is that it is a strategy which considers form and content to be separate rather than dialectically related.'<sup>368</sup> Responding to questions about the undialectical nature of his work, Loach argues that his films are 'about a process that is dialectical: that is, the struggle between opposing forces to push events forward. But they're more a description of one side of that process, which is the working class side...they're films that show or describe that dialectical struggle rather than embody it.'<sup>369</sup> Replying to theorists who, he argues, prioritise form over content he states: 'even the more serious critics always avoid confronting the content of the film and deciding if they think it's truthful. They'll skirt around it by talking about realism and the function of the film.'<sup>370</sup> Allen echoes this prioritisation of content over form when he states that 'it is the content that any serious writer should concern himself with'.<sup>371</sup> Eagleton suggests, however, that

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<sup>367</sup> Quoted in Dan Georgakas, and Lenny Rubenstein (Eds.), 'Gillo Pontecorvo: Using the Contradictions of the System' in Art, Politics, Cinema: The Cineaste Interviews, Pluto Press, London & Sydney, 1984. pp. 87-97, p. 95.

<sup>368</sup> Wayne, p. 148.

<sup>369</sup> Graham Fuller (Ed), Loach on Loach, Faber and Faber, London, 1998, p. 12. Loach's approach can be contrasted with that of Eisenstein who argued that his theory of montage embodied Marxist dialectics.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>371</sup> Paul Madden, 'Jim Allen', in G. W. Brandt (Ed.), British Television Drama, Cambridge

to understand works of art 'It is first of all necessary to understand the complex, indirect relations between those works and the ideological worlds they inhabit – relations which emerge not just in 'themes' and 'preoccupations', but in style, rhythm, image, quality and...*form*.'<sup>372</sup> If some film theorists were perhaps too keen to prioritise form, Loach and Allen's prioritisation of content is slightly one-sided. What is necessary, is not to isolate content from form, but, as Wayne suggests, to understand them as interacting in a dialectical relationship.

Brecht is often cited as the proponent of an alternative and revolutionary political aesthetic. However, when he turned his attention to the Spanish civil war in the play Señora Carrar's Rifles he adopted a more naturalist style in his attempt to intervene directly in an immediate struggle. Brecht dispensed with a number of the alienation devices he had developed in his Epic Theatre, such as intertitles, songs and heightened language. John Willett comments that of all Brecht's theatrical productions only Señora Carrar's Rifles 'follows the Aristotelian conventions of what he termed "empathy drama".'<sup>373</sup> Although Brecht considered some theatrical forms as eternally loathsome, Monteath suggests that, for Brecht, 'the form a literary work took would depend upon the particular set of historical circumstances which prevailed at any particular time...if a certain social situation had reached a very ripe stage the Art works could be employed to trigger a practical response.'<sup>374</sup> It is this notion of a practical response that appears to drive the actions of both Brecht, in this specific instance, and Loach and Allen generally.

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University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 51.

<sup>372</sup> Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, Methuen, London, 1976, p. 5.

<sup>373</sup> John Willett, Brecht in Context: Comparative Approaches, Methuen, London, 1998, p. 235.

<sup>374</sup> Peter Monteath, Writing the Good Fight: Political Commitment in the International Literature of the Spanish Civil War, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut & London, 1994, p. 115.

## Political Content

There are striking similarities between Land and Freedom and Orwell's Homage to Catalonia. Indeed, Loach acknowledges that Orwell's autobiographical account 'stands as an absolute kind of strength' and was the 'starting point' for the script. The main threads of Homage to Catalonia run through the film: an idealistic young Englishman travels to Spain to fight in the civil war and, by chance, enlists in the anti-Stalinist POUM militia. As with Orwell, David witnesses the betrayal of the revolution at the hands of the PCE and, finally, ends up fleeing Spain, pursued, not by the fascists, but by the Communists as part of their persecution of Anarchist and Trotskyist revolutionaries.

The character of Bernard develops the main criticisms of Stalinism. Alluding to Stalin's desire to limit the Republican programme, Bernard argues that 'Stalin fears us because he wants to sign treaties with the West...he needs to be respectable.' An attempt to re-appraise the role of the Soviet Union was critical in determining the content of the script. Allen outlines why he believes the Soviet Union was keen to limit the demands of the war when he suggests that 'They knew that if a democratic revolution had succeeded in Spain then Stalin's days were numbered. It was the last thing he wanted because then the dictatorship in Russia would not have been tolerated.'<sup>375</sup> The fact that the Spanish Communists were working under the tutelage of the Soviet Union led them to violently curtail the revolution. Paul Preston points out that they justified their position with the statement that 'the war must be won first in order to give

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<sup>375</sup> Quoted in Land and Freedom production notes, Parallax Pictures, London, 1995.



the revolution any possibility of triumphing later.’<sup>376</sup> The American International Brigader, Lawrence presents this position in the film when he states that ‘we’re here to defeat the fascists. If you want help you have to moderate your slogans because you’re scaring them away.’ It is a position similar to that held by Hemingway and put forward by the character Robert Jordan in For Whom the Bell Tolls. Reflecting his naiveté, David initially echoes this position stating: ‘we need to win the war first...ideology is useless.’ David’s comments also mirror the early thoughts of Orwell who wrote that ‘the revolutionary purism of the POUM, although I saw its logic, seemed to me rather futile. After all, the one thing that mattered was to win the war.’<sup>377</sup> As the political arguments unfold, however, the film suggests that extending the social programme of the revolution was not an added extra, but given the international context, a necessary pre-requisite for a Republican victory.

This is exemplified in the twelve-minute sequence where the villagers meet to debate the collectivisation of land. In this meeting POUM militia members exchange arguments with peasants who both support and oppose the collectivisation of land. Patricia Knight points out that

in the Summer and Autumn of 1936 about 2,500 agrarian collectives were set up covering 9 million acres, the process going further in Aragon and Andalusia. The establishment of such a collective was typically preceded by the arrival of an anarchist militia column which would burn the church, drive out any known right-wingers and call an assembly to discuss collectivising the land (a process depicted in a lively scene in the film Land and Freedom).<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Paul Preston, A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War, Fontana Press, London, 1996, p. 168.

<sup>377</sup> George Orwell, Homage to Catalonia, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989, p. 206.

<sup>378</sup> Patricia Knight, The Spanish Civil War: Access To History in Depth, Hodder & Stoughton, Oxon, 1998, p. 48.

This scene is indicative of the style utilised by Loach and cinematographer Barry Ackroyd. The scene is shot in such a way that the camera appears to follow the action, even on occasion seemingly being caught out by the movement of the characters. This aesthetic style heightens the suggestion that the audience are witnesses to events as they are unfolding rather than the events being carefully constructed in advance.

In the days immediately prior to the shooting of this scene Andy Durgan, the historical adviser to the film, worked with individual actors on their improvisations, helping to establish what each of the characters might argue. Lavery suggests, however, that, although the structure of the scene was established by Loach, ‘most of us were not told to say anything. It very much developed according to the personalities of the film.’ In its attempt to portray the motivation behind the conflicting Republican forces this scene stands poles apart from any other film that touches on the civil war. A space is created for the presentation of a number of conflicting political positions that strive to get to the heart of the politics of the conflict. Bernard argues in relation to land reform that ‘private ownership must be given up, cancelled...it maintains people in (a) capitalist mentality.’ Pointing to the political advantages of collectivisation, Jimmy states that ‘we need to look to two million landless peasants...need to harness their energy.’ The authority of the Spanish peasantry is added to this position when an older peasant, played by an anarchist who had fought during the civil war, interjects: ‘we need to collectivise in order to keep the revolution going. The revolution is like a pregnant cow. If we don’t help out, the cow and

its calf will be gone and the children will be left hungry.’<sup>379</sup> It is a common-sense notion of conventional politics that if you moderate your demands you can only increase your support. The position of the majority of the peasants in the film, however, would suggest an alternative strategy: guaranteeing social reforms for the majority of workers and peasants as the only way to increase Republican support within Spain itself. It may not have increased support from capitalist countries in Europe; but they were never going to intervene anyway. As the social demands of the Republic were continually weakened it proved subsequently unable to appeal to its natural basis of support.

Land and Freedom presents a political perspective which is sympathetic to the revolution and to the POUM. Thus, although the camera is generally placed in a position that keeps a critical distance between the audience and the events, during the battle scenes it is situated alongside the POUM militia, attempting to place the audience in the shoes of the POUM. David, however, begins the film assuming that all the anti-fascists are fighting a common foe and says ‘I’m not in a communist brigade, but it doesn’t matter because we’re all fighting the same enemy’. As the narrative develops, however, he is forced to confront the bitter conflicts within the Republican forces that culminated in the ‘civil war within the civil war’. Thus there are numerous references to the presence, or absence, of guns: as David arrives at the POUM training camp the militia members have to train with wooden sticks; at the front Lawrence describes their weapons as ‘antiques’ and David comments that ‘we’re holding our own on the Aragon front. If only we had decent arms.’ The arm wound that David suffers, as the result of a

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<sup>379</sup> Although these lines certainly sound like a perfectly scripted simile, Lavery informed me that the old anarchist who spoke them had improvised them on the day.



backfiring rifle is indicative of the inadequate state of the military hardware held by the POUM at the front. This is contrasted, however, with what David sees in Barcelona and says that 'the Assault Guards have guns sticking out of their arses'.

The suggestion in the film that the PCE used their influence to withhold guns from their political opponents was one of the central points that provoked a bitter debate in the pages of the labour movement press following the film's release. Writing in the Morning Star Jeff Satwell comments that 'Allen and Loach, in standard Trotskyist fashion, claim that the POUM was denied weapons'.<sup>380</sup> The process of concentrating weaponry in the hands of 'safe' allies, however, was part of a wider attempt by the Communists to circumscribe the revolutionary left. This was part of a wider attack that Isaac Deutscher sums up when he writes

the contradictions in which Stalin involved himself led him to conduct from the Kremlin a civil war within the Spanish Civil War...Stalin undertook the suppression of these unorthodox elements on the left. He made their elimination from the republic's administration a condition of the sale of Soviet munitions to its Government. He dispatched to Spain, together with military instructors, agents of his political police, experts at heresy hunting and purging, who established their own reign of terror in the ranks of the republicans.<sup>381</sup>

Deutscher's comments can be used to illuminate the sequence where the militia discuss their reorganisation into the regular army and comments such as Bernard's argument that 'the new army will destroy the revolutionary spirit of the people'. Satwell objects, however, to this interpretation of these events when he writes that 'to add insult to injury they maintain that the republican attempt to

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<sup>380</sup> Morning Star, 4/8/95.

<sup>381</sup> Deutscher, Isaac. Stalin: A Political Biography, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 416.

modernise and discipline the army...was a crime against the revolution.'<sup>382</sup> In an exchange of letters in the Morning Star, Tom Sweeny responds to the initial condemnation of the film, however, when he argues that 'what worried the POUM was that the reorganised army would not be used to further revolution but to weaken it'. He argues, moreover, that the POUM feared that 'the dissolution of its militia would be accompanied by the same bloody purges which were then being enacted in the Soviet Union.'<sup>383</sup>

Reflecting the widespread belief that the Communists played a progressive role in the war, David refuses to see the dissolution of the militia as betrayal when he states that 'the Communist Party was set up to inspire revolution - why would it want to suppress the revolution?' He rejects any criticism of the PCE and, in response to Blanca's suggestion that they were arresting and torturing anti-fascists, comments 'I'll wait till I see it with my own eyes...All I can do is believe the party.' But after his involvement in the May Day events in Barcelona, David has a dramatic political conversion and writes to his girlfriend, Kitty, 'I saw a lot of things with my own eyes...the party stinks kid...I saw good comrades snatched off the streets and executed'. His break with the Communist Party is dramatically signified when he tears up his membership card and returns to the front to fight with his former POUM comrades. His reunification with his POUM comrades prepares the way for the tragic conclusion to the Spanish scenes. As Lawrence arrives with regular army soldiers to disband the unit and arrest its leaders for fascist collaboration, the POUM commander challenges the

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<sup>382</sup>Morning Star, 4/8/95.

<sup>383</sup>Morning Star, 9/10/95. This is a reference to Stalin's purges of dissidents during the court cases that took place in August 1936.

nature of the charges when he asks ‘What about Sietamo? Alcubierre? Lecinena? Casteas de Quisena? Tierz? Navatez? They are all places liberated by the POUM.’

The involvement of Lawrence in the counter-revolutionary movement led to further attacks on the film. Stephen Schwartz argues that ‘of all the contested elements in this tapestry, none is more painful and provocative than the point made by Orwell and underlined in Loach’s film: that the American and other volunteers ended up as counter-revolutionary mercenaries who were used against the Spanish people.’<sup>384</sup> Schwartz’s comments are ridiculously exaggerated and clearly cannot be applied to the majority of those who fought Franco, many of whom were anti-fascists with a long history of struggle behind them. But similarly it cannot be denied that the involvement of the International Brigades in the events in Spain was, in part, problematic. For instance when POUM leader Andreu Nin was assassinated, ten members of the German International Brigades were disguised as fascists in a staged kidnapping which allowed the Communists to claim that German fascists had rescued him.<sup>385</sup> Satwell argues that to those who died in the war it ‘is an insult to their memory and a shameful slur on all those who sacrificed much to provide financial and material support.’<sup>386</sup> Pointing to the lack of knowledge in society of this historical period, he argues that ‘because of the ignorance that surrounds the Spanish Civil War and the

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<sup>384</sup> Stephen Schwartz, ‘The Spanish Civil War in Historical Context,’ Critique: A Journal of Socialist Theory, No. 32-33, Centre for the Study of Socialist Theory and Movements, University of Glasgow, 2000, pp. 147-165, pp. 153/4.

<sup>385</sup> The documentary film produced by TV3, the Catalan-language television network, Operation Nikolai deals in details with the kidnapping and murder of Nin.

<sup>386</sup> Morning Star, 4/8/95



prevailing anti-communism in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Loach's film will be seen as based on the truth.'<sup>387</sup>

This point is also echoed by Preston when he asserts that 'Land and Liberty (sic) is probably the only film that most people in the English-speaking world are likely to see on the Spanish Civil War and they have a right to greater accuracy. Ultimately, the problem lies in the fact that Loach's position is virtually identical to that of George Orwell.'<sup>388</sup> Preston further states that 'in both Orwell's book and Loach's film, a minor episode is allowed to dwarf the wider issues of the war. The fact is that the Spanish Republic was abandoned by the Western powers and faced a military rebellion backed unstintingly by Hitler and Mussolini.'<sup>389</sup> Preston's position is indisputable, the real question, however, is why the Second Republic was abandoned. The position of both Preston and the Communists flows from a belief that progressive capitalists had an investment in defeating Franco. But even those who did not overtly support him viewed the victory of Franco as far less dangerous than the coming to power of a workers' regime in Spain - of whatever shape or form. The suppression of the Anarchists and the Trotskyists was not a simple sideshow, or 'minor episode' as Preston suggests. On the contrary it was a critical moment that killed off any chance of the war being transformed into a revolutionary war that may have led to a more favourable outcome for the Spanish working class. Defending the film Durgan suggests that 'It may be true that Loach shows only a small part of the war, but it is this part, symbolized in the suppression of the POUM, which explains exactly who was responsible for dividing the anti-fascist struggle and why the Republic

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<sup>387</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>388</sup> Paul Preston, New Times published September 1995. Notes from ALBA list 19/8/98.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

lost.’<sup>390</sup> The final battle sequence, culminating in the shooting of Blanca, reinforces the sense of betrayal: Blanca’s death - a young Spanish revolutionary shot in the back by the communist led Popular Army - stands as a metaphorical representation of the view that the revolutionaries and the revolution were stabbed in the back by the Communists.<sup>391</sup>

The closing sequence continues the historicisation process and as Blanca’s body is placed in the ground, the film dissolves to David’s funeral 60 years later with revolutionary music from the civil war linking the two periods. Although the film rejects the use of Brechtian distancing techniques it also avoids sliding completely into melodrama by refusing to dwell on the emotional impacts of the deaths that occur within its narrative. As I outlined in chapter three, Brecht suggested that the audience should be forced to stand back from an over-emotional response in order to assess coolly what is presented.<sup>392</sup> This method is illustrated in the events surrounding Coogan’s death where the film shows both Blanca’s and David’s grief, but does not dwell on it. Instead the film cuts to Coogan’s funeral where grief is transferred into defiance through speeches and the singing of revolutionary songs. As Kim raises a clenched fist alongside David’s former comrades, the film suggests that his granddaughter has, in some way, taken on board the lessons of the civil war. The film strives to connect these

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<sup>390</sup> Andy Durgan, ‘The Hidden Story of the Revolution’, *New Politics*, New York, Summer 1996, pp. 74-78, p. 78.

<sup>391</sup> Women also feature as a central part of the narrative in *¡Ay Carmela!* and *El espinazo del diablo*, where they also die at the end of the film. These individual women represent not only themselves, but operate as metaphors for the defeat of the Republic (or in Blanca’s case the revolution.)

<sup>392</sup> See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, Edited and translated by John Willett, Methuen, London, 1986.

struggles with a clear eye to the future, an attempt to tie a red thread between past and present.

Despite re-telling the story of one of the labour movement's greatest defeats, the film is far from pessimistic. Ian Christie argues that as Kim reads from William Morris's poem, 'Join in the Battle', 'the film's final message is defiantly optimistic. The spirit of Spain's heroic anarchists and Marxists may be dormant in the Britain of 1994, but it isn't dead.'<sup>393</sup> Loach is open to the accusation of looking back at this past nostalgically with wistful recollections of a long-gone time. It is not the case, however, that nostalgia is inherently conservative. E. P. Thomson argues that 'nostalgic appeals to the past can be progressive under certain circumstances (e.g. the building of a rebellious working class consciousness toward the end of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.)'<sup>394</sup> There are, however, other problems that arise when attempting to deal with the complexity of the civil war in cinema.

### **Complexity**

The condensation of an extremely complex political process into less than two hours of fictional cinema undoubtedly leads to a simplification of these events. Thus, although sympathetic to the general project of Loach, Porton suggests that 'This eminently well-intentioned film merely demonstrates that it is extremely difficult to transform an event as intricate and riven with contradictions into a populist epic.'<sup>395</sup> Antony Beevor suggests that the civil war is 'perhaps the best

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<sup>393</sup> Ian Christie, 'Film for a Spanish Republic' in *Sight & Sound*, October 95, p. 37.

<sup>394</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 223.

<sup>395</sup> Richard Porton, *Film and the Anarchist Imagination*, Verso, London & New York, 1999, p.



example of a subject which becomes more confusing when it is simplified.'<sup>396</sup> The film has certainly created some confusion amongst critics and commentators on the film. Patrick McFadden, for instance, states that David 'and his unit come under heavy fire from the Fascist lines; they are rescued by the arrival of a Popular Army unit only to find that they are forced to hand over their arms. (Among the officers of the Popular Army are Gene Lawrence and the Fascist previously captured by Captain Vidal.'<sup>397</sup> On both points McFadden is mistaken; firstly the group is not rescued by the Popular Army, and has in fact already been incorporated into the Popular Army.<sup>398</sup> Secondly, two separate actors play the different characters.<sup>399</sup> It is understandable, however, that the complexity of the historical period leads to these mistakes, at least in the first instance. Other critics have also factually misinterpreted the film. Writing in The Volunteer: Journal of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Martha Gellhorn, a reporter during the civil war, echoes Preston's position when she accuses Loach of blowing up 'a minor sideshadow of the war.'<sup>400</sup> Gellhorn also takes issue with the representation of the American when she argues that 'Lawrence's mission becomes clear, he is to disband this POUM outfit, since POUM has refused to integrate into the Republic's army.'<sup>401</sup> Gellhorn makes a common

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<sup>396</sup> Antony Beevor, The Spanish Civil War, Cassell, London, 1999, p. 7.

<sup>397</sup> Patrick McFadden, 'Saturn's Feast, Loach's Spain: Land and Freedom as Filmed History', in Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach, McKnight, George (Ed.), Flicks Books, Trowbridge, 1997, pp. 144-159, pp.150/1.

<sup>398</sup> Andy Durgan highlights that the former POUM militia was transformed into the 129<sup>th</sup> brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the Popular Army. They launched an attack just outside Huesca on June 16 1937, which was the basis for the final assault in the film, 1996, pp. 75/76.

<sup>399</sup> This mistake probably arises because the actor who plays the Popular Army captain is not credited in the film. The two actors certainly look alike but, according to Paul Laverty, different actors play the two parts.

<sup>400</sup> Martha Gellhorn 'This is Not the War That I Knew', in The Volunteer: Journal of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, Spring 1996, p.18. Gellhorn worked extensively and intimately with Ernest Hemingway during the period of the Spanish civil war. The couple married soon after.

<sup>401</sup> *ibid.*

misapprehension in critical responses to the film, i.e. that the POUM are being attacked for refusing to disband. It is slightly unclear in the film, mainly because during a discussion amongst the militia they vote to back the POUM leadership in wanting to remain a separate entity, independent of the Popular Army. By the end of the film, however, the unit has been reorganised into the regular army. The arrests are made after the POUM had been made illegal, their leaders arrested, tortured and in the case of Andres Nin, assassinated. If those familiar with the general details of the historical period can make mistakes it is undoubtedly the case that those unfamiliar with it may be confused on some of the minor details.

### **Historical detail**

There are also historical details in the film that are incorrect. Jacob Leigh correctly points out that the towns that the captain claims were liberated by the POUM were taken much earlier than the film suggests. Preston has also taken issue with some historical detail in the film and states that 'It is extremely unlikely that such an idyllic group could ever have existed, let alone survived for months with only one significant casualty. It is equally unlikely that such a group, with a Frenchman, a German, an Italian and a majority of Spaniards would have adopted English as its common language in order to communicate'. But he goes on to suggest that 'for the purposes of film-making, these are permissible liberties.'<sup>402</sup> Like most filmmakers, however, Loach recognises that to heighten the drama it is necessary to play around with some of the timetable. He states that

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<sup>402</sup> Paul Preston, New Times published late September 1995. Notes from ALBA list 19/8/98



Jim Allen and I gradually narrowed it down to what we felt was the crucial issue at the crucial time and then tried to find a way to mirror that in terms of human experience. So that determined the characters that we had. It led us to a character who joined as a member of the Communist Party. But he couldn't join as late as some of the International Brigaders because he would have then missed the moment when the Stalinists attacked the POUM. And so it meant that he had to join the war really very early in the days before the Communist Party started to organise and then because there wasn't any recognised route set up for him to fight though, by chance, he got involved with the POUM. So in a way it was a quite convoluted story we had to set up in order to have the conflict we wanted.

One other complexity of the film is the focus on the POUM. Scriptwriter Jim Allen chose to focus on the POUM rather than the much larger CNT stating that

The only man in the CNT it would have been worth writing about was Durruti: the rest, no. POUM was a highly politicised organisation. They had the theoretical tools to oppose and destroy the Communist Party. Andreu Nin, who directed POUM, an old pal of Lenin's, he was tortured and killed. Now, I wrote some scenes about that. That had to go out. I went into the political differences between them. That had to go. I mean Trotsky hated the POUM: Trotsky said, these aren't Trotskyists. I couldn't go into any of that. Had I gone forward with every particular argument it would have been so dense, people would have walked out. I had to simplify it a lot.<sup>403</sup>

Thus although the film greatly simplifies the conflict, the discussion that it generated is testimony to way that films can influence political debates in the world outside of cinema. The debate that took place in the British labour movement, however, was dwarfed by the debate in Spain where Land and Freedom was the fifth best-selling film of the year. Durgan suggests that

Prior to Land and Freedom no other film director, Spanish or otherwise, had dealt with this aspect of the civil war. The stunning success of the film in Spain was, to a large extent, testimony to the fact that for many

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<sup>403</sup> Quoted in Jacob Leigh, The Cinema of Ken Loach: Art in the Service of the People, Wallflower, London, 2002, p. 175. For a full analysis of Trotsky's position on POUM see Leon Trotsky, The Spanish Revolution (1931-39), Pathfinder Press, New York, 1998, in particular, 'The Lessons of Spain – the Last Warning', pp. 306 – 326.



people, especially the young, this was the first time that they realised that in 1936 there began not only a war against fascism but also a social revolution.<sup>404</sup>

Loach himself comments that ‘the response from young people in Spain was extraordinary. It came as a surprise to a lot of them who hadn’t realised that the civil war had happened in quite that way. That there had been that revolutionary movement which had been sabotaged...why it had been sabotaged was very new to them.’<sup>405</sup> Commenting on the film Loach suggests ‘as regards making history live...what you can do is just sort of throw the odd shaft of light on a moment here and a moment there.’<sup>406</sup> Land and Freedom can be seen as a small, but significant cinematic attempt to throw light onto the conflicting historical perspectives on the Spanish civil war, or more precisely, the Spanish revolution.

### **Libertarias**

The Spanish revolution is also the core content of Libertarias, a film which explores the internal politics of the Republican movement by focusing on an assorted group of women, notably anarchist activists, prostitutes and a nun, fighting with Mujeres Libres (Free Women), the women’s section of Spain’s anarchist movement.<sup>407</sup> The film attempts to analyse the position of women in the war, but it also strives to recover, and indeed celebrate, the neglected history of Spain’s anarchist movement. In doing so, it highlights the revolutionary dimensions of the conflict, which are laid bare in the introductory intertitles:

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<sup>404</sup> Andy Durgan, ‘The Spanish Revolution - Fighting on Two Fronts’, Socialist Review, July/August 1996, p. 23.

<sup>405</sup> Quoted in Scottish Socialist Voice, 21/2/97.

<sup>406</sup> Scottish Socialist Voice, 21/2/97.

<sup>407</sup> For a historical account of the role of women in the war see Shirley Mangini, Memories of Resistance: Women’s Voices from the Spanish Civil War, Yale University Press, 1995 and Mary Nash, Defying Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War, Arden, 1995.

\*Summer 1936

\*18 July. The Spanish army rises against the Republican government

\*19 July. In Barcelona and Madrid the army is defeated thanks to the peoples' heroic efforts.

\*20 July. The masses demand a revolutionary state. The legal government is unable to control the situation.

\*21 July. The Spanish Civil War begins. The last idealistic war. The last dream of a people striving for the impossible. For Utopia.

The opening slow-motion montage sequence of men and women marching defiantly, their raised fists signifying their allegiance to the workers' movement, firmly locates the narrative in the turbulent public sphere of revolutionary Spain. A black and white shot of a church cross falling signifies the Republican movement's anti-clerical aspects. As the image is colourised, a black and red anarchist flag is flown proudly as groups of workers boldly proclaim, 'Down with capitalism! Death to priests! Long live Durruti! Long live the workers!' This is clearly not a representation of the civil war as a conflict between good and evil subsumed within a simplistic democracy versus fascism equation. Instead, Libertarias strives to visually represent this period as revolutionary. Franco highlighted the class nature of the conflict when he argued that 'Our Crusade is the only struggle in which the rich who went to war came out richer than when they started.'<sup>408</sup> The revolutionary nature of the conflict and the class struggles at the heart of it are further alluded to in Libertarias when one of the

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<sup>408</sup> Paul Preston, Comrades: Portraits From the Spanish Civil War, Harper Collins, London, 2000, p. 64.

militiamen shouts across the trenches to Nationalist soldiers on the other side of the barricades, 'you are trying to defend the interests of your millionaire generals'.

The initial sexism they face lays the ground for a more generalised critique on the position of women fighting at the front. The willingness of the anarchists leaders to forego their principles is initially suggested when Durruti asserts, 'if it's necessary we'll impose an iron discipline. I'm willing to renounce everything except victory'. He later decrees that women are to be banned from fighting when he states 'Of 10 militiawomen examined 5 have gonorrhoea and 3 are pregnant. We have more casualties from the clap than from enemy bullets...I want no women at the front'. Thus the liberation movement is seen to be incapable of accommodating half of those sympathetic to the aims of the revolution. The rolling back of the progressive nature of the revolution becomes clearer when one of the prostitutes reads out a letter from one of her co-workers from Barcelona, 'we were amazed to see that the pussy game was more popular than ever. The union guys gave us a house and we've set ourselves up. There is a constant line of militiamen'. The initial gains of the revolution prove to be short-lived as the sexual division of labour and 'natural' order is imposed behind the lines, as it is at the front.

Libertarias's central character, the aptly named nun, María, highlights the potentially liberating qualities of the anarchist movement and the narrative charts her spiritual journey from Christianity and convents, through brothels, trenches and her appropriation of a quasi-anarcho-spirituality, before she reaches her



ultimate destination in a fascist detention centre. Her spiritual transformation begins when she encounters the medium, Floren, who when asked, 'Are you an anarchist too?' replies that she is both anarchist and spiritualist and links the two apparently contradictory philosophical outlooks by asserting that 'Jesus was the first anarchist'. The sexual politics at play are also developed when Floren asserts that 'Jesus isn't a man she's a woman'. María's transition from Catholic nun to nun of the revolution begins and she moves rapidly from the word of God to the word of the anarchist theoretician Kropotkin, citing his writings as she persuades peasants to feed the militia and appeals to the Nationalist troops to come over to the Republican side.

This religious theme is further developed, and the biblical symbolism obvious, when, as the militia prepare to slaughter a lamb, a group of Moroccan troops arrive and brutally attack the militia. By shifting the focus to Moroccan barbarity, the film has been subjected to accusations of racism. Thus Gina Herrman states that 'Not only is the message racist but the film ultimately tries to divert attention away from the crimes committed by Nationalist Spaniards. For Aranda to place the blame on the Moroccans is to seek out a kind of politics of 'reconciliation' that is based on an erasure of responsibility.'<sup>409</sup> The closing sequence attempts to tie the strands of anarchism and spiritualism clearly together as Maria recites her utopian speech cited in chapter four

One day in the time of the Lord, this planet will no longer be called Earth. It will be called Freedom. That day the exploiters of the people will be cast into the outer darkness where there will be wailing and gnashing of

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<sup>409</sup> Gina Herrmann, post to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, [alba@forums.nyu.edu](mailto:alba@forums.nyu.edu) 25 October 2000.

teeth and the angels of heaven on the most high will sing in joy as they behold the star Freedom, more blue and more radiant than ever. Because peace and justice will reign there. Because paradise will always be there and death will no longer exist.

Thus Libertarias concludes on a utopian, spiritual note, continuing the thread that has been developed throughout the film's narrative. Aranda states that 'There are many examples in history of events that seemed impossible, but have happened. That's why we have to keep on believing in utopia. The film talks about two utopias: women's and society's. They both end tragically, but there is still hope enough to keep fighting'.<sup>410</sup> Libertarias's utopian spiritual thread, however, somewhat dissipates this hope and weakens its political analysis, formulating possible solutions to contemporary problems in religious utopian strivings, rather than striving for utopia in the material world.<sup>411</sup> Gina Herrman also notes that in interviewing women veterans of the Republican side 'all, regardless of party affiliation or ideology, disliked the film. Many of them cited Land and Freedom (even the communist women) as a more representative, politically accurate, and intelligent portrayal of the role of women in militias and in the rearguard.'<sup>412</sup>

Fredric Jameson asserts that the role of political art is 'to convey the sense of a hermeneutic relationship to the past which is able to grasp its own present as history only on condition it manages to keep the idea of the future, and of radical

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<sup>410</sup> Quoted in Marina Cameron, '¡Viva la revolución! Vivan la mujeres!', [sic] [www.greenleft.org.au](http://www.greenleft.org.au), 12/2/2000.

<sup>411</sup> Some historians have pointed to this association between anarchism and religion, citing anarchism as the response of people who feel betrayed by the church and whose vision is akin to an early Jewish-Christian utopia. See, for example, Gerald Brenan's The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background to the Spanish Civil War, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 188-189.

<sup>412</sup> Gina Herrmann, post to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, [alba@forums.nyu.edu](mailto:alba@forums.nyu.edu), 25 October 2000.

and utopian transformation, alive.<sup>413</sup> It is a role that Libertarias fails to fulfil. As previously stated, the opening titles describe the civil war as ‘The last idealistic war. The last dream of a people striving for the impossible. For Utopia’. But despite Aranda’s assertions, Libertarias suggests that the ‘impossible’ aspirations of the anarchists were doomed to failure on Earth and are only possible within some non-tangible ethereal space. It is a sentiment that is unlikely to have been endorsed by the anarchist leaders at the time. Durruti states

It may be that we shall lose our next battle, in the bourgeois sense of the word; but to fight and lose a battle must never affect a revolutionary, because he must know that his trusted weapon is always the struggle for the cause he believes in. For a revolutionary, the social motive force of history is never-ending action; and therefore the simple act of joining battle is a victory in itself.<sup>414</sup>

Thus although the revolution was defeated, many of its leaders would have echoed Durruti’s position in stating that it is better to have engaged in battle and failed than never have fought at all. The task in defeat, however, is to work out how victory can be ensured next time. Libertarias appears to give up on the notion of a next time, however it is a possibility that Land and Freedom continues to aim for.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that Land and Freedom represents an important step in cinematically resurrecting a neglected part of the history of the labour movement. It is a task also attempted by Libertarias. Both films resurrect revolution. However, if Libertarias presents a flawed and somewhat flippant

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<sup>413</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism" in New Literary History, Vol. 11, No. 1, Autumn 1979, p. 72.

<sup>414</sup> Quoted in Abel Paz, The Spanish Civil War, Hazan, Paris, 1997, p. 7.



portrayal of the revolution, Land and Freedom represents a more serious attempt to grapple with the reasons behind the collapse of both the revolution and the republic. The controversy surrounding the release of the film is testimony to the power of cinema to represent, interact and, consequently, change the world beyond the cinema screen. It may not itself be without fault, the problems of interpreting the historical detail in the film highlight that, although simplifying the conflict, there is still confusion. This perhaps, highlights the dangers of fictional films dealing with complex historical periods. Nevertheless, Land and Freedom remains a powerful cinematic example of the way that narrative cinema can be utilised to represent events from the past in an attempt to intervene in ongoing political debates and represents a significant milestone in the portrayal of the Spanish civil war in cinema.

## Chapter Eight

### The Search for Truth in Soldados de Salamina/Soldiers of Salamis

#### Introduction

In this concluding chapter I focus on a recent addition to the ever-increasing number of films that deal with the Spanish civil war, Soldados de Salamina. An adaptation of the best-selling novel by Javier Cercas, and Spain's entry for the foreign language category at the 2004 Oscar awards, it is a film that problematises the search for the past. In this chapter I return to some of the questions raised in chapter one in relation to truth and the past. I also return to the debates about film form raised by White and Rosenstone, previously discussed in chapter two. I argue that, although Soldados de Salamina illustrates some of the difficulties in creating totalising narratives about the past, it actively encourages audiences to return to the history of the Spanish civil war.

#### Synopsis

Set in Gerona in the present, Lola, a young writer, has been suffering writer's block since the success of her debut novel.<sup>415</sup> She makes a living by teaching literature and writing features for a newspaper. When Lola is commissioned to write an article on the Spanish civil war it propels her on an investigative journey into the details of the mass execution of fifty Nationalist hostages near the French border during the closing days of the war. Her initial interest lies in the

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<sup>415</sup> It is an interesting aside to note that Lola Films is the Spanish production company behind the film.

fascist writer and ideologue, Rafael Sánchez Mazas, who had escaped the execution. Her focus switches, however, to a young, unknown Republican soldier who had discovered Sánchez Mazas, but allowed him to escape. During her search she writes, and later discards, an attempted third-person, historical account of the events that she finds. As Lola continues searching she thinks she may have uncovered the young soldier when she discovers a civil war veteran, Miralles, in a French nursing home. She visits him, but he denies that he is the man that she is looking for. Although keen to forget the events of the past, Miralles complains that no one remembers his young friends and comrades who fought and died in the civil war. Lola drives off in her car after promising not to forget him and pledging to return to visit. In the concluding scenes she begins writing a new novel, a personalised, first person account of her journey to discover the truth about the past.

## **Content**

By locating Soldados de Salamina in 2002 the film brings the history of the civil war very much into the present.<sup>416</sup> The opening image is of a tattered Spanish flag lying in mud. The subsequent sequence, continually intercut with the opening black and white credits, consists of a lengthy following shot across a barely colourised mass of mud-splattered, male bodies lying huddled together in a muddy field. Over the melancholic score, the buzzing sound of flies is heard hovering over the putrescent corpses of what are subsequently revealed as the fascist victims of the execution. The film form utilised in the opening sequence signifies a dark, murky past; but as Lola's (Ariadna Gil) search gathers pace, the

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<sup>416</sup> More information about the film can be obtained from the website [www.soldadosdesalamina.com](http://www.soldadosdesalamina.com).



flashbacks are slightly colourised. The move from pale, almost black and white shots, to more colourful images connotes a sense that Lola's search is bringing the past to life, making it slightly more comprehensible and, thereby, presenting a clearer picture of events.<sup>417</sup> One central question raised by the film, however, is the extent to which the history of the civil war *can* become clear after a combination of three factors; the passage of such a long period of time (over sixty years), the silence imposed by the Franco dictatorship and the *pacto del olvido* during the transition from dictatorship to democracy.

Lola's initial disinterest in the civil war is signified when she says to her editor 'not the civil war again' after he commissions her to write the civil war feature.<sup>418</sup> Yet, after visiting the library to start her research, she becomes quickly engrossed and by the time she reads her article, entitled 'An essential secret', to her senile father, her interest in the past is apparent. Briefly touching on the theme of *Cainismo*, highlighted in films such as La lengua de las mariposas and Las largas vacaciones del '36, the article begins by discussing the Republican-supporting poet Antonio Machado and his fascist-sympathising brother, Manuel. Actuality footage of the conflict is then shown as Lola proceeds to discuss another real-life writer, the lesser known poet and former minister under Franco, Rafael Sánchez Mazas (Ramón Fontserè). A principal founder and theoretician of the Falange, Sánchez Mazas was arrested in Barcelona in 1938 and was due to be executed along with 50 prominent nationalists in the closing days of the war. The actuality footage is subsequently contrasted with reconstructed black and

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<sup>417</sup> This colourisation effect is also used in the opening scene of Libertarias and, to a lesser degree, in the opening scene of Land and Freedom.

<sup>418</sup> Her retort creates another link with her previous role as the nun-turned-anarchist in Libertarias, discussed in chapter seven.

white footage of Sánchez Mazas, or, more accurately, the actor playing him, against a melancholic, repetitive score of piano and violin. A sepia-filtered flashback sequence shows him escaping, only to be sighted by a young Republican soldier (Alberto Ferreiro) as he hides in a hollow. The sequence proceeds to recreate how the young man refuses to either shoot his prey or even take him into custody. It then shows how the Friends of the Forest, three Republican deserters, subsequently help Sánchez Mazas in return for his promise of assistance after the civil war has ended. The key questions raised in the film are contained in the closing lines of Lola's article when she writes 'who knows what exactly happened on the day when Rafael Sánchez Mazas was due to be shot - but perhaps there lies the essential secret of the Spanish Civil War.' Lola has had her interest provoked by this dramatic episode from the past, however, when she reads the article to her father (Luis Cuenca) and he asks, blankly 'what war?' His inability to remember symbolises both the silence under Franco and the *pacto del olvido*. If her father's senile dementia is symbolic of how an older generation turned their back on the conflict, Lola's growing interest in the civil war stands as representative of how a younger generation can turn to face the past head on.

The article becomes the starting point for Lola's empirical search. In contrast to her fortune-telling friend, Conchi (María Botto), who makes a living predicting the future by reading Tarot cards and states 'They always tell the truth. It's knowing how to read them', Lola becomes increasingly interested in finding the 'essential truth' of the past. She attempts, however, a more scientific and objective approach than Conchi, placing her trust in empirical evidence and facts,

perhaps believing that the evidence may also tell the truth, if only it is read properly. An investigative journalist on a desperate hunt for the full story, Lola mirrors the role of the historian as she trawls libraries, second-hand bookshops, uncovers old newspapers and locates the diary of Sánchez Mazas. As Lola follows in Sánchez Mazas' footsteps, temporal shifts between past and present create a parallel movement between the fascist's frantic journey and Lola's attempt to recreate it. Thus, as Lola visits the church where the fascist prisoners were held, there is a flashback to Sánchez Mazas in the same space. Similarly, as she visits the roof where the prisoners are given their last rites, this event is shown in flashback. Footage of the mass execution, and Sánchez Mazas' subsequent escape, is followed by hand-held shots of Lola as she travels through the forest, battling against foliage and branches and dodging the stray rifle-fire of local hunters. As she becomes increasingly engrossed in the search for the real story of the past, further parallels are apparent when she documents her search in a book, as Sánchez Mazas had done in his diary, second-guessing his movements as he tries to return to Nationalist lines. In one scene in the forest, close editing between past and present also has Lola catching sight of a desperate man fleeing for cover, suggesting that her search is coming closer and closer to the truth. The empirical evidence that Lola uncovers clearly assists her in her task; however, the key that appears to unlock the door to the past lies in the personal testimonies she receives from old men who were either direct witnesses to the events, or who were related to those who had been, creating a real-life continuity between past and present.



She still lacks, however, the key witness she needs, the young soldier. Her friendship with one of her literature students, a young Mexican called Gastón (Diego Luna), appears to lead her one more step in his direction. Lola's thirst for historical knowledge is mirrored by Gastón who is also attempting to locate the details of his grandfather, a civil war refugee from Alkiza in the Basque country. When Gaston tells her of his hero, Miralles (Joan Dalmau), an old Republican soldier who he befriended on holiday, Lola connects the two stories and draws the conclusion that Miralles is the young soldier that she needs to complete her jigsaw - and to complete her book. To help her fulfil her literary strivings Gaston suggests that Lola does not require the exact details of the past commenting that 'Reality always disappoints. What you're looking for is here,' as he softly touches her head. However, Lola's desire for truth and her prioritisation of the real over the fictional is indicated when she responds by saying 'I will not make him up.' Their exchange is indicative of a wider tension in the film between truth and fiction. By advising her that she does not need Miralles, Gaston is suggesting that fiction has no real need to access 'reality' or the referent. But Lola, is reluctant to give up on the possibility of directly accessing the past as she continues to pursue Miralles, her possible new-found hero.

### **I need a hero**

Lola narrativises her search into the past as a search for heroes; she is looking for a hero in an age when there are, as The Stranglers famously sang in 1978, 'No More Heroes'. In Miralles, however, she thinks she has discovered one of a dying breed; a man who fought for the Republic, for the Free French in North Africa and then against Nazi Germany in Normandy. Her romanticised narrative

about the past does not, however, appear to match the evidence she initially finds – an old man, crumpled and beaten, living out his dying years watching television and contemplating opportunities to pinch the backside of his nurse. In a shot-reverse shot sequence between Lola and the old man, Miralles questions her approach when he says ‘Writers. You’re just sentimentalists. What you’re looking for is a hero and I’m that hero, aren’t I?’ Miralles rejects his own heroic status, however, when he continues

It’s the heroes who don’t survive. When I left for the front a lot of other lads went too, all from Tarrasa like me. Though I didn’t know most of them. The García Sugués boys, Miquel Cardós, Gabi Baldrich, Pipo Canal, Fatty Odena, Santi Brugada, Jordi Gudaayol. All Dead. They were all so young. Not a day passes without me thinking about them...Sometimes I dream of them. I see them as they were. Young. Time doesn’t pass for them. Nobody remembers them. And never...not one miserable street of one miserable village in one shitty country will be named after them.

It is a tender and poignant moment in the film, shifting the narrative focus from either Sánchez Mazas or the young soldier to embrace the memory of the countless, nameless young men who died in the civil war. It also disrupts Lola’s preconceived narrative and her attempt to reach the truth. In the closing moments of the film, moreover, Miralles denies that he is the man that Lola is searching for. ‘It was you wasn’t it?’ Lola asks directly, to which he responds, ‘No’. But his denial is couched in a degree of uncertainty and the film concludes with the possibility that he may or may not have been the hero that Lola desperately sought.<sup>419</sup> She is forced to contend with the fact that her empirical search to uncover either her hero, or the precise details of the event is not completely successful. In one scene earlier in the film Lola and Concha are watching

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<sup>419</sup> Notably, in the closing credits the young man is not credited as a young Miralles, but as a ‘Republican Militiaman’, thus fuelling this sense of uncertainty.

television news when a newsreader says of a young man killed rescuing people from a fire, ‘heroes are only rewarded by the memory of others, of those who admire their courage, their instinct to act at decisive times.’ In the concluding scenes of the film, Lola indicates her desire to reward the memory of Miralles when she says ‘I won’t forget you. I won’t forget you. I won’t forget you.’ Her following words ‘I won’t let them forget you’ suggests, moreover, that her approach will be more of a collective nature than simply at the level of individual memory. Moreover, by resurrecting the memory of the forgotten young men who went to their death fighting Franco, the film uncovers fresh heroes. The film suggests that perhaps there is indeed still a need for heroes, and the paucity, if not complete lack, of heroic figures in the modern era, can be countered by resurrecting the anonymous and long-forgotten heroes of the civil war.<sup>420</sup>

## **Truth**

The inability of Lola to uncover all the evidence she searches for suggests that the past cannot be uncovered in its entirety. Nevertheless, her decision to start work on a new book in the concluding scenes suggests that her inability to trace all of the facts does not negate the possibility of telling stories about the past, or making truth claims about what happened in the past. Earlier in the film Concha is dismissive of her first literary account of her experiences and offers Lola the following literary advice: ‘learn to bare yourself in the novel that you are writing’. In the closing scene Lola takes Concha’s advice and begins writing a subjectivised, partial account of her experience, in the first person with the

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<sup>420</sup> At the very beginning of the film Lola watches television footage of what looks like a mass funeral in Palestine, presumably of a Palestinian fighter, or a victim of the Israeli Armed Forces. It is slightly tenuous, but it connects those who gave their lives fighting fascism with those who died fighting for a Palestinian state.



absence of omniscient narration. Lola's attempt to write her account invites parallels with the historian's attempt to write objective accounts of the past, however, her lack of empirical evidence forces limits on the type of book that she can create. Her inability, or the historian's inability, to uncover absolute truth, suggests that the history that can be accessed in the modern era may not be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Lola's novel is reflective of the idea that all that can be accessed are small-scale truths about the past. It is reflective of a more generalised attack on truth altogether, an approach that I outlined in chapter one. Responding to this debate, Eagleton suggests that the possibility of stating an absolute truth has become increasingly maligned. Thus he writes 'No idea is more unpopular with contemporary cultural theory than that of absolute truth. The phrase smacks of dogmatism, authoritarianism, a belief in the timeless and universal.'<sup>421</sup> Eagleton, however, proceeds to reject the notion that absolute truth is, what he describes as 'a special kind of truth.'<sup>422</sup> For Eagleton 'That truth is absolute simply means that if something *is* established as true – a taxing, messy business, often enough, and one which is always open to revision – then there are no two ways about it. It does not mean that truth can only be discovered from some disinterested viewpoint.'<sup>423</sup> For Eagleton, therefore, it is possible to assert truths about the past without laying claim to the idea of a totally objective, all-seeing, all-pervasive truth. The example of Guernica from chapter one can again highlight that it is possible to arrive at an absolute truth; it is an absolute truth that the Luftwaffe

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<sup>421</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, Penguin, London, 2003, p. 103.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

bombed Guernica. Lola's search suggests, however, that it is a different matter to try to assert the absolute truth, or the essential truth, of the civil war.

Cercas states of his novel 'I hope it's contributed with its grain of sand to this facing up to the truth, because my aspiration was to lie anecdotally, in the particulars, in order to tell an essential truth.'<sup>424</sup> Notably Cercas never makes an assertion about what the essential truth of the civil war actually is, or was. Eagleton argues that in a sense 'fiction can be truer than real life, which sometimes gets hopelessly confused or just plain wrong.'<sup>425</sup> Certainly the Spanish civil war can get hopelessly confused. But does Soldados de Salamina or any of the films in this thesis offer up any kind of essential truths? In chapters four and six I discussed how Vacas and El espinazo del Diablo utilise the Spanish civil war to attempt to make allegorical points about human nature, in essence, to make moral truth claims about human nature. These truth claims, however, which point to universalising statements about human nature, are hotly contested. But although Cercas makes claims to attaining an essential truth, it is a claim that is difficult to substantiate under the rules of historiography. Moreover, Soldados de Salamina, more than any other film in this thesis, problematises the possibility of arriving at truth claims. Thus although Cercas and the film raise the possibility of an essential history, a history which would close down possible interpretations of the past, by problematising the search for the past Soldados de Salamina actually opens up the past to a multitude of interpretations. A feature which is reflected in the film form utilised by Trueba.

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<sup>424</sup> Taken from an extract of Diálogos de Salamina: un paseo por el cine y la literatura, an exchange between Cercas and Trueba, translated by Ann McLean, viewed on [www.wordswithoutborders.org/article.php?lab=cercas](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article.php?lab=cercas), 11 July 2004.

<sup>425</sup> Eagleton, 2003, p. 89.

## Postmodern Cinema?

As I outlined in chapter two Rosenstone champions an experimental cinema in which 'Rather than opening a window directly onto the past, it opens a window onto a different way of thinking about the past.'<sup>426</sup> It is a similar position to White who calls for a cinema in which, as he says, 'Everything is presented as if it were the same ontological order, both real and imaginary, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated.'<sup>427</sup> In this new postmodern cinema, he claims, 'What you get is...“History as you like it”, representations of history in which anything goes'.<sup>428</sup> By presenting a number of different types of filmmaking together Soldados de Salamina veers towards this effect and the line between reality and fiction becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish. Thus, in addition to the fictional footage, the film utilises a combination of black and white photographs of the civil war, black and white actuality footage (including excerpts that were also used in The Spanish Earth) and colour television footage of the 1981 coup. The film also contains fictional copies of the Spanish newspaper ABC, reconstructed black and white footage of Rafael Sánchez Mazas in captivity, radio reports deliberately made to sound of the period and reconstructed 8mm colour footage (Gaston's holidays). The mix of film forms creates a disorientating effect that deliberately blurs the line between 'fact' and 'fiction'. This blurring between fact and fiction is also present in the opening credits, which state that the film is based on Cercas' novel, but also on the real-life testimonies of Joaquín Figueras, Daniel Angelats, Jaume

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<sup>426</sup> Rosenstone, p. 63.

<sup>427</sup> Hayden White, 'The Modernist Event' in Vivian Sobchack (Ed.), The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp. 17-38, 1996, p. 19.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., p. 19.



Figueras and Chicho Sánchez Ferlosio. These real-life witnesses also appear in the film providing Catalan language oral testimonies of their recollection of the events, thus developing a higher degree of authenticity for the film and problematising its fictional status. For it is not immediately clear what role these witnesses play. Are they fictional characters acting out fictional lines, or fictional characters speaking real testimonies? Or if they are real characters are they speaking fictional lines or speaking their own testimonies? It is the latter of these four options that appears to be the case, but it is far from clear initially. Thus the inclusion of the witnesses acts as a self-reflexive device that invites reflection of the construction on the film, suggesting that it is, in part, documentary.

This self-reflexivity is reinforced by the number of literary references; thus when Lola hears the details of Sánchez Mazas' escape she says, 'surviving that and then hiding in the forest, it's like something out of a novel.' As Richard Porton correctly observes in relation to the literature of the Spanish civil war, while the novels of Hemingway or Malraux may be well remembered, 'only a few desultory remarks by Evelyn Waugh and Ezra Pound in support of Franco can be cited as memorable examples of pro-fascist sentiment among distinguished members of the intelligentsia.'<sup>429</sup> Referring to this Lola writes of Sánchez Mazas 'he may have won the war, he lost the history of literature.' Another brief reference to fiction is made when Miralles reveals that his literary tastes lie with the nineteenth century novel, exemplified by his admiration for Balzac. Whereas the nineteenth century novel utilised fictional characters within established historical events, thus grounding the fictional within the real, Soldados de

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<sup>429</sup> Richard Porton, 'Land and Freedom', Cineaste, v22, No. 1, Winter, 1996, 32-34, p. 32.

Salamina creates a more fractured, slippery past. But although it veers towards White's postmodern model, it does not travel the whole journey.

Commenting on the novel on which the film was based, Trueba suggests that

The Civil War forms an intrinsic part of present-day Spain and it's absurd to pretend it doesn't. That said, it strikes me as important to emphasize something: Soldiers of Salamis is not about the Civil War. The Civil War as such, as a historical incident, is simply not material for a novel or a movie. Stories are made by good characters, not by good intentions, renowned biographies or historical events...So, for me, the main event of Soldiers of Salamis is the writing of the novel by the character called Cercas.<sup>430</sup>

It is an important formal narrative difference between film and novel. In Cercas' novel, which reads as a true-life account, the author is placed directly in the 'story' and his search (in the novel the narrator is a journalist called Javier Cercas) for the past becomes an individual quest for the reclamation of historical memory. Moreover, in the novel the narrator exists from the opening page. In the film, however, the possibility of a narrator emerging only appears in the final scene. As with the novel, in the film, the main focus is on the central protagonist's journey from frustrated writer struggling to find a voice, to one ready to embark on her next project. Lola's writer's block is cured by her journey into the past, but only when she allows herself the freedom to write a more subjectivised, small-scale personalised account which is free of the burden of the truth, where she puts herself in her book and states 'The first time I heard of Sánchez Mazas and the firing squad I was just...' As she travels back on the bus

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<sup>430</sup> Diálogos de Salamina: un paseo por el cine y la literature. It is, of course, a truism to assert that fiction films are not about any particular event, but about how individual characters behave or operate within these events. I have attempted to outline, however, that the setting of these films within the Spanish civil war is far from incidental. In that sense both film and book are very much 'about' the Spanish civil war.

to Gerona she has put one journey behind her, a journey towards discovering the past, and begins another journey into the future. But it will be a journey that connects past and future dialectically. Arguably, the main event of Soldados de Salamina is Lola's discovery that she does not need to know everything about the past in order to write about it. This is the point which allows the film an element of narrative closure, but in tandem with this event is the assertion that the past is perhaps too distant and complex to really comprehend exactly what happened there. The most important component of the novel is, therefore, not the civil war, but the search for the truth of the civil war, exemplified by the narrator's journey. Writing on the narrator in his novel, Cercas suggests that

At the beginning Cercas thinks, like the majority of people of our generation, that the Civil War is a thing of the past, something as remote and distant as, say, the battle of Salamis, something that no longer affects us... But at the end of the novel he comes to discover that the Civil War is the present, the beginning of the present, something that affects him directly and is alive, something—whether we want to admit it or not—that has influenced the life of almost everyone in this country, including his own.<sup>431</sup>

The film ends with a sense of uncertainty as to the exact nature of the events that Lola has been investigating. Moreover, many of the narrative threads, normally resolved in mainstream cinema, are left untied; for instance, towards the end of the film Lola has an argument and falls out with Conchi, but the pair are not reconciled by the end. There are obviously different ways that audiences can react at the conclusion; perhaps to give one's shoulders a forlorn shrug and complain that the past cannot be accessed, the downside of any postmodern interpretation of the past. A more positive outcome is to accept that the past has passed and cannot be recovered in its entirety, but to strive, nevertheless, in a

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<sup>431</sup> Diálogos de Salamina: un paseo por el cine y la literature.



concerted and collective campaign to bury the *pacto del olvido* and to conjure up the ghosts of the civil war. Thus Lola's search for the past can provoke a collective endeavour by the audience, a journey to rekindle the memory of the civil war.

## Memory

To those who ask the question 'What is the use of history?' Arthur Marwick writes that 'the crispest and most enlightening reply is to suggest that they try to imagine what everyday life would be like in a society in which no one knew any history.'<sup>432</sup> The enforced silence and the *pacto del olvido* denied those who opposed Franco an arena in the public sphere to discuss their own legitimate history and experience, thus effectively clouding the history of the past. Thus as Cercas suggests

The Transition was, effectively, a sort of pact of forgetting, but it wasn't a Machiavellian pact. The politicians didn't sit down and agree: "We're going to obliterate this. No talking about the past allowed, no talking about the war. There were no victors and no vanquished." No, it was more subtle than that. It was an implicit pact, to which, don't forget, we all signed up. Especially the young people; we said to ourselves: "Let's forget all that, it was filthy and repugnant; let's look to the future. We're post-modern, we're the Spain of Almodóvar, we're cool. We're not the nation of goatherds we used to be." The price of this isn't exactly oblivion; it's elusive: it's that fog of mistakes, misunderstandings, half-truths and simple lies that floats over the Civil War and the immediate postwar period.<sup>433</sup>

It is a pact that is increasingly unravelling, exemplified by the increasing number of civil war films and representative of an increased thirst for knowledge of the period. When Lola calls to speak with Miralles in his nursing home, the old man,

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<sup>432</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, MacMillan, London, 1970, p. 13.

<sup>433</sup> *Diálogos de Salamina: un paseo por el cine y la literatura*. Cercas is incorrect in asserting that everyone signed up to the pact, even in cinema directors such as Carlos Saura refused to be silenced.

now 86, says to her ‘and you really think that anybody will be interested in what happened 60 years ago?’ For Miralles the civil war is from a dim and distant age, an age that has been collectively repressed, thus he describes the events surrounding the executions as ‘a murder from 1000 years ago.’ Referring obliquely to the *pacto del olvido* Miralles says ‘years ago people decided that it was best to forget the war. That’s fine by me.’ The film suggests, however, that it is crucial to remember the past. Thus, even in the exchange with Lola, Miralles contradicts his earlier stated desire to forget when he speaks movingly about how he remembers his young comrades and with bitterness about how they have been forgotten. In the closing scenes, as Lola starts writing her novel, she embarks on a process of actively remembering the past. And although her novel is an individualised, personal narrative, the tasks she lays out are of a more collective nature aimed at remembering the civil war.

Memory is a crucial part of the process of historical recuperation. David Lowenthal suggests that 'Memory and history are processes of insight; each involves components of the other, and their boundaries are shadowy. Yet memory and history are normally and justifiably distinguished: memory is inescapable and prima-facie indubitable; history is contingent and empirically trustable.'<sup>434</sup> Lowenthal obviously does not share White’s epistemological doubts concerning historiography, but he points to the collective nature of memory when he states that

we need other people's memories both to confirm our own and to give them endurance. Unlike dreams, which are wholly private, memories are continually supplemented by those of others. Sharing and validating

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<sup>434</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 187.

memories sharpens them and promotes their recall; events we alone know about are less certainly, less easily evoked. In the process of knitting our own discontinuous recollections into narratives, we revise personal components to fit the collectively remembered past, and gradually cease to distinguish between them.<sup>435</sup>

As mentioned previously, Miralles says of his young comrades, 'Not a day passes without me thinking about them...Sometimes I dream of them.' For Miralles the enforced silence and the *pacto del olvido* have forced his memories into the individual realm of dreams and denied him access to a public space where his memories can be discussed and shared. But his meeting with Lola opens up the possibility of actively remembering the civil war as part of a wider collective process of recuperating historical knowledge from this period.

The necessity for remembering individual stories from the civil war was the methodology of Ronald Fraser in Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936-1939 who writes that his aim

was not to write another history of the civil war but a book about how people lived that war. It was *their* truth I wished to record. And what people thought - or what they thought they thought - also constitutes an historical fact. Inevitably memories of thirty-five and forty years past have been 'worked over' in the intervening years; but much less, I am convinced, than might have been the case in other circumstances. This is due, first, to the nature of the war itself; secondly to the political immobilism imposed by the victors in the post-war years and, lastly, to the fact that many of the participants were very young. Memories have 'frozen' as a result...because of the need to make a coherent totality, it may seem as though this book is saying: this is 'how it was'. But no. This is how it is remembered as being.<sup>436</sup>

And for generations growing up with no direct reference to memories of the war the increasing representation of the civil war in cinema can help create a turn to

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>436</sup> Ronald Fraser, Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936-1939, Penguin, London, 1988, p. 32.



history by Spanish audiences. The ghost metaphor, apparent in El espinazo del Diablo, is also utilised by Trueba when he states

We're talking about a country that is confronting its phantoms, its fears and what's been forgotten for the first time. And it's about time too, time to face the consequences. For the first time people are demanding that mass graves full of anonymous corpses be disinterred. I think there's a debt to a lot of people who lost their lives in the Civil War or lost their best years to it. A debt that will never be repaid.'<sup>437</sup>

The debt may never be re-paid, but Soldados de Salamina can partially help the process. Cercas states that 'The Transition wiped the slate clean and didn't judge those who should have been judged...Over the last little while, this has been changing. Other things are surfacing. And it's not that this is good: it's indispensable. The film will contribute to that, it's going to come out at the best possible time.'<sup>438</sup> The film's release in 2002 coincided with the moves to uncover mass graves, thus raising the ghosts of the dead, events that I referred to in chapter one. Thus, although suggesting that accessing the past is a difficult task, the film also drives home the importance of that task nevertheless. Miralles words have raised the ghosts of the countless, anonymous young men from the civil war and the film demands that they be remembered. The closing scene is a slow-motion flashback of the young Republican soldier who saved Sánchez Mazas' life as he dances slowly in the rain against the accompanying melancholic score. The closing image is a mid-shot of the rain-drenched soldier looking directly to the audience, pausing briefly before he turns his back to the camera. Soldados de Salamina invites the audience not to turn away from his memory, but to embrace it.

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<sup>437</sup> Diálogos de Salamina: un paseo por el cine y la literatura.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

If Land and Freedom closes down possible readings of the past, simplifying the events of the Spanish civil war for an explicitly political purpose, Soldados de Salamina opens up history, presenting the past as a complex space where we do not always find what we expect to find. It represents the civil war as far from black and white and easily accessible, on the contrary, the film suggests that the civil war is part of a murky history that is a struggle to access. It suggests, moreover, that it is not possible to gain one hundred per cent access to absolute truths, however, the film suggests that we can access a partial, subjective truth, but a truth that can leave a thirst for more. Thus Lola's attitude at the end of the film suggests that her journey has been a worthwhile one. The film indicates that we have to keep on searching into the past. And although we cannot perhaps make totalising narratives about the Spanish civil war, it should not prevent us from making any narratives at all.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have rejected Jenkins and White's prognosis that the past is a chaotic mass, made sense of through the subjective narrativisation choices of historians working in the present. In contrast, I have suggested that there are referential limits on what histories can be legitimately written about the past. I have rejected White's supposition contained in the following question: 'Can it be said that sets of real events *are* intrinsically tragic, comic, or epic, such that the representation of those events as a tragic, comic, or epic story can be assessed as to its *factual* accuracy? Or does it all have to do with the perspective from which the events are viewed?'<sup>439</sup> In rejecting White's position I have suggested that the Spanish civil war is an intrinsically tragic event. I have argued, moreover, that narratives about the Spanish civil war can be assessed as to their factual accuracy, as the example of Guernica outlines. The past, therefore, is not as promiscuous as postmodern critics might suggest.

I have also highlighted the connection between cinema and history, outlining the importance of screen images to the construction of historical thinking in contemporary audiences. I have proceeded to provide a general overview of how the Spanish civil war has been represented in cinema before presenting six specific case studies. Through the case studies I suggested that there are referential limits which are imposed on films about the civil war, which, as I outlined specifically in chapter five, ensure (at least up until 2004) that there can be no films set during the war which conclude with a happy ending.

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<sup>439</sup> Hayden White 'Probing The Limits Of Representation, Historical Emplotment and The Problem of Truth', in Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution', Saul Friedlander (Ed.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1992, pp. 37-53, pp. 38/9



Nevertheless, this thesis also illustrates that the past is flexible enough to be utilised to intervene in contemporary political processes as is evident from the following: how in For Whom the Bell Tolls Hemingway's novel is adapted to suit America's role in world war two; how the civil war is used in Vacas to comment on the ongoing conflict in the Basque country and how the filmmakers behind Land and Freedom visit revolutionary Spain in an attempt to keep socialist ideas alive in the present. In relation to El espinazo del Diablo I illustrated how the civil war setting can be utilised as a convenient background for filmmakers in the present. In an analysis of Soldados de Salamina I suggested that the complexity surrounding the history of the civil war can be used to problematise the possibility of accessing the truth of the past.

Gerard Brenan declined Raymond Carr's invitation to write a volume on Spain in The Oxford History of Europe, stating that 'You can't get at the truth by history: you can only get at it through novels.'<sup>440</sup> But is it possible to answer how much truth about the Spanish civil war can be accessed through cinema? Many of the films contain their own truths, for instance Soldados de Salamina and the impossibility of accessing the past or Land and Freedom with its own political truth about revolution and betrayal. To think solely in terms of truth or falsehoods can be limiting, however, and can also lead to internecine squabbles about historical detail which miss the broader picture. Thus, it is possible to defend films which depart from factual details in order to dramatise what they see as larger truths. Ultimately, however, fictional cinema will come up against the referential yardstick of historiography, thus it is legitimate to criticise For

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<sup>440</sup> Cited in James K. Hopkins, Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, p. xiii.

Whom the Bell Tolls for the way that it restricts the viewpoint of the civil war to suit wartime America. But all of the films in the six case studies do provide a way into thinking about the Spanish civil war. They may not all contain the central political analyses of the Spanish documentaries of the seventies, but with the exception of El espinazo del Diablo, the setting operates as more than a convenient backdrop. Moreover, in their own way, they each have their political points to make, both about the civil war and about broader issues, for instance the Basque conflict in Vacas. There exist, therefore, different, often contradictory, representations of the Spanish civil war in cinema, and it is not possible to mark out a simple definitive trend, but to recognise a diversity of uses for the past. That the civil war increasingly attracts cinematic attention suggests unease about a past that has not been settled. But it is better to argue about the complexities of that past than to write it of as an area that cannot be accessed. Or, even worse, to forget it, as the *pacto del olvido* demanded.

The Columbian novelist Gabriel García Márquez describes the deteriorating condition of an amnesiac when he writes that ‘the recollection of his childhood began to be erased from his memory, then the name and notion of things, and finally the identity of people, and even the awareness of his own being, until he sank into a kind of idiocy that had no past.’<sup>441</sup> In bringing the civil war to the cinema screen, despite their limitations, all encourage spectators not to forget, but to actively remember. They may not all be the experimental self-reflexive modernist texts that Rosenstone or White demand. They illustrate, however, that cinema has a positive role to play in salvaging a sense of history and struggling

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<sup>441</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Avon, New York, 1970, p. 50.

to ensure that Spain does not live in a perpetual present, but comes to terms with a problematic past.

In the introduction to Jaroslav Hašek's satirical anti-war novel, The Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War, Cecil Parrott points out that, although the novel was an immediate popular success

it was not taken seriously by the literary critics for many years. Indeed, books on the First World War did not begin to attract serious notice until some ten years after it had ended. In the immediate post-war years people were still under the spell of the emotions it had unleashed. It had been grand and heroic, from whichever side you looked at it. Only after a distance of years were people able to free themselves from this obsession and to view it critically and dispassionately.<sup>442</sup>

The Spanish civil war still cannot be viewed dispassionately because of its capacity to release deep emotions, the result of the ongoing struggle to reach the truth of the past. This has surfaced again recently with disputes over whether to open what is thought to be Lorca's grave in Granada.<sup>443</sup> The ghosts of the civil war may only be finally laid to rest when the social antagonisms that created it cease to exist. We may wait some time for that yet. Meanwhile the civil war setting will continue to be one in which filmmakers turn to as the battle for the future of Spain is partially played out in the cinematically recreated battles of the past.

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<sup>442</sup> Jaroslav Hašek, The Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980, pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>443</sup> Giles Tremlett, 'Ghosts of the Civil War', The Guardian, 6 August 2004.



## Filmography

¡A mí la legión! (Orduña/Spain/1942)

Ae Fond Kiss (Loack/UK/2004)

All Quiet on The Western Front (Milestone/USA/1930)

Los Amantes del Círculo Polar/The Lovers of the Arctic Circle  
(Medem/Spain/1998)

Un Año de guerra (Castillo/Spain/1937)

La Ardilla Roja/The Red Squirrel (Medem/Spain/1993)

Aurora de Esperanza/Dawn of Hope (Sau/Spain/1937)

¡Ay Carmela! (Saura/Spain/1990)

Behold a Pale Horse (Zinnemann/France/USA/1964)

Belle Époque (Fernando Trueba /Spain/1992)

Las bicicletas son para el verano/Bicycles are for Summer (Chávarri/Spain/1984)

Bienvenido Mr. Marshall/Welcome Mr. Marshall (García Berlanga/Spain/1953)

Birth of a Nation (Griffiths/USA/1915)

Blade II (del Toro/USA/Germany/2002)

Blockade (Dieterle/USA/1938)

Braveheart (Gibson/USA/1995)

Bronenosets Potyomkin/Battleship Potemkin (Eisenstein/USSR/1925)

Buffalo Soldiers (Jordan/USA/2001)

Casablanca (Curtiz/USA/1942)

Casper (Silberling/USA/1995)

La caza/The Hunt (Saura/Spain/1965)

La comunidad (de Iglesia/Spain/2001)

Cría Cuervos/Raise Ravens (Saura/Spain/1975)

Cronos (del Toro/Mexico/1993)

Days of Hope (Loach/UK/1975)

Doctor Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb  
(Kubrick/UK/1964)

Dulces horas/Sweet Hours (Saura/Spain/1982)

Dragon Rapide, (Camino/Spain/1986)

La escopeta nacional/National Shotgun (García Berlanga/Spain/1978)

El espinazo del diablo/The Devil's Backbone (del Toro/Spain/Mexico/2001)

El espíritu de la colmena/Spirit of the Beehive (Erice/Spain/1973)

L'Espoir/Man's Hope (Malraux/Peskin/France/Spain/1939-1945)

The Fallen Sparrow (Richard Wallace/USA/1943)

Far from Poland (Godmilow/USA/1984)

Fatherland (Loach/UK/Germany/France/1987)

For Whom the Bell Tolls (Wood/USA/1943)

Fünf Patronenhülsen/Five Cartridges (Beyer/GDR/1960)

Los Golfos/The Hooligans (Saura/Spain/1959)

The Good Fight (Buckner, Dore & Sills/USA/1984)

Good Morning Vietnam (Levinson/USA/1987)

The Great Dictator (Chaplin/USA/1940)

Guernica (Resnais/France/1955)

Guerra en el campo (Castillo/Spain/1936)

La guerre est finie/War is Over (Resnais/France/1966)

Hellboy (del Toro/USA/2004)

Henry V (Olivier/UK/1944)

Las Hurdes/Land Without Bread (Buñuel/Spain/1933)

Ispaniya/Spain (Shub/USSR/1939)

Jardín de las delicias/Garden of Delights (Saura/Spain/1970)

Land and Freedom/Tierra y Libertad (Loach/UK/Germany/Spain/1995)

Las largas vacaciones del 36/The Long Vacation of 1936 (Camino/Spain/1976)

Last Train From Madrid (Hogan/USA/1937)

La lengua de las mariposas/Butterfly's Tongue (Cuerda/Spain/1999)

Libertarias/Libertarians (Aranda/Spain/1996)

The Lord of The Flies (Brook/UK/1963)

Lucía y el sexo/Sex and Lucia (Medem/Spain/2001)

MASH (Altman/USA/1970)

Michael Collins (Jordan/Ireland/UK/USA/1996)

Mimic (del Toro/USA/1997)

Mourir à Madrid/To Die in Madrid (Rossif/France/1963)

Nacional III/National III (García Berlanga/Spain/1983)

In The Name of The Father (Sheridan/Ireland/UK/1993)

The Name of the Rose (Jean-Jaques Annaud/France/Italy/West Germany/1986)

No Man's Land (Tanovic/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Slovenia/Italy/France/UK/Belgium/ 2001)

El Mar (Villaronga/Spain/2000)

The Night of the Hunter (Laughton/USA/1995)

Oh! What a Lovely War (Attenborough/UK/1969)

Oktyabr/October (Eisenstein/USSR/1927)

The Others (Almenábar/USA/France/Spain/2001)

Pascual Duarte (Franco/Spain/1975)

Patrimonio nacional/National Patrimony (García Berlanga/Spain/1981)

La Pelota Vasca: La piel contra la piedra/The Basque Ball: The Skin Against the Stone (Medem/Spain/2003)

Peppermint Frappé (Saura/Spain/1967)



The Phil Silvers Show (De Caprio and Hicken/USA/1955-59)

La Plaza del Diamante/Diamond Square (Betriu/Spain/1982)

El Portero/The Goalkeeper (Suárez/Spain/2000)

La prima Angélica/ Cousin Angelica (Saura/Spain/1974)

¿Por qué perdimos la guerra?/Why Did We Lose the War?  
(Santillán/Spain/1978)

Questions of Leadership (Loach/UK/1983)

The Rank and File (Loach/UK/1971)

Raza/Race (Sáenz de Heredia/Spain/1941)

Raza, el espíritu de Franco/Race, The Spirit of Franco (Herralde/Spain/1977)

Reds (Beatty/USA/1981)

El santuario no se rinde (Ruiz Castillo/Spain/1949)

Silencio Roto/Broken Silence (Armendáriz/Spain/2001)

Sin novedad en el Alcázar (Genina/Italy/Spain/1940)

Soldados/Soldiers (Ungría/Spain/1978)

Soldados de Salamina/Soldiers of Salamis (David Trueba/Spain/2002)

Song for a Raggy Boy (Walsh/Ireland/Spain/2003)

Spain in Flames (Prudencio de Pereda/Spain/1938)

The Spanish Earth (Ivens/USA/1937)

Stachka/Strike (Eisenstein/USSR/1924)

Tierra/Earth (Medem/Spain/1996)

Torrente, el brazo tonto de la ley (Spain/ Segura /1998)

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (John Huston/USA/1948)

Tristana (Buñuel/France/Italy/Spain/1970)

Walker (Cox/USA/Spain/1987)

Which Side Are You On? (Loach/UK/1984)

Vacas/Cows (Medem/Spain/1992)

La vaquilla/The Calf (Berlanga/Spain/1985)

El viaje de Carol/Carol's Journey (Uribe/Spain/2002)

La vieja memoria/The Old Memory (Camino/Spain/1977)

¡Viva la muerte!/Long Live Death! (Arrabal/France/1970)

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