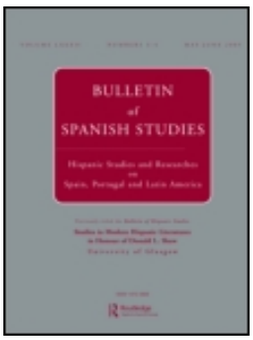

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¿Una agonía esperpéntica? Shifting Memory Horizons and Carnivalesque Representations of the Spanish Civil War and Franco Dictatorship

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Laughter, Carnival, and Memory

Is it permissible to laugh at a traumatic past? More concretely, is it acceptable to use comic excess or satirical deformation to explore or depict the death-throes of the Spanish Second Republic, the nation's descent into Civil War in 1936, or the subsequent Franco dictatorship? The notion of 'agonía', as defined in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* would seem to suggest not. 'Agonía', we read, from the Latin *agonĭa* and the Greek *áYωνία*, designates 'angustia y congoja del moribundo; estado que precede a la muerte', and also 'pena o aflicción extremada'. This emphasis on an anguished but combative demise—suggested by the Greek *áYωνία*, meaning 'lucha, combate'—would appear to indicate that difficult memories and humour are mutually exclusive, for the latter points to joviality, laughter, fun. Only via the variant, 'black humour'—defined by the *DRAE* as 'humorismo que se ejerce a propósito de cosas que suscitarían, contempladas desde otra perspectiva, piedad, terror, lástima o emociones parecidas'—would comedy seem at first sight to have any role to play in, for instance, cultural representations of the collapse of the Second Republic, the Civil War, or the brutal dictatorship of the victorious Nationalists. Much of the twenty-first-century wave of historiographic discussion, critical commentary, political and civic debate, and artistic representation in the field of what Spaniards have come to term 'memoria histórica'—and what I would argue can more helpfully be understood as collective and cultural memory[1]—is profoundly serious, and rightly so. Paul Preston's recent volume, *The Spanish Holocaust* may stand

1 See Alison Ribeiro de Menezes, 'From Recuperating Spanish Historical Memory to a Semantic Dissection of Cultural Memory: *La malamemoria* by Isaac Rosa', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 16:1 (2010), 1–12.

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here as shorthand for the nature of the issues in play.[2] The questions raised by the possibility of retrospective redress for violence, persecution, and atrocity during much of the twentieth century in Spain, as with many of the instances of our contemporary 'politics of regret',[3] are ethically complex, and the possible resolutions are far from morally straightforward. As Jerry Palmer succinctly observes, 'a playful war memorial is a contradiction in terms'.[4]

Nevertheless, both light-hearted and decidedly humorous depictions of the Spanish Civil War and Francoist dictatorship certainly exist, the most notable perhaps being in film, including Luis García Berlanga's *La vaquilla* (1985) and Carlos Saura's *¡Ay Carmela!* (1990), both set during the war itself, and Fernando Trueba's *Belle époque* (1992), set in 1931, the year of the declaration of the Second Republic.[5] *¡Ay Carmela!* is, of course, based on José Sanchis Sinisterra's eponymous play of 1986;[6] also in theatre we have Andrés Sopeña Monsalve's 1994 amusing drama of Francoist education, *El florido pensil*, adapted for the cinema in 2002.[7] Looking to other visual media, we find Carlos Giménez's cartoon strip, *Paracuellos*, which appeared in several series from the late 1970s into the new millennium.[8] It draws upon the artist's experiences in a postwar Francoist Auxilio Social orphanage. More recently, two novels have appeared: José Ovejero's *La comedia salvaje* of 2009, and Eduardo Mendoza's critically acclaimed *Riña de gatos: Madrid 1936* from 2010.[9] In the latter year, Álex de la Iglesia also launched *Balada triste de trompeta*, which, like Albert Boadella's slightly earlier film, *¡Buen viaje, excelencia!*, of 2003, includes a satirical depiction of Franco.[10] Most recently of all, in 2011, the Spanish national broadcaster, Radio Televisión Española, launched a half-hour sitcom set during the war and entitled *Plaza de España*, although it was axed after the first season because of cuts to funding.[11]

2 Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: Harper Press, 2012).

3 See Jeffrey Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

4 Jerry Palmer, 'Parody and Decorum: Permission to Mock', in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Laughter*, ed. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 79–97 (p. 93).

5 Marsha Kinder even views the violent fight with legs of ham at the end of Juan José Bigas Luna's *Jamón Jamón* (1992) as a parodic staging of Goya's *Duelo a garrotazos*, a picture that is clearly linked to the theme of war, in Kinder, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 157.

6 José Sanchis Sinisterra, *Ñaque; ¡Ay, Carmela!*, ed. Manuel Aznar Soler (Madrid: Cátedra, 2004).

7 Andrés Sopeña Monsalve, *El florido pensil* (Barcelona: Rocabolsillo, 2008).

8 Carlos Giménez, *Todo Paracuellos* (Barcelona: Random House/Mondadori, 2007).

9 Eduardo Mendoza, *Riña de gatos, Madrid, 1936* (Madrid: Planeta, 2010).

10 *Balada triste de trompeta* (Álex de la Iglesia, 2010).

11 See <http://www.formulatv.com/noticias/23981/tve-cancela-plaza-de-espana-recorta-prespuesto-juegos-olimpicos/> (accessed 19 March 2013).

Cultural representations of Spain's traumatic twentieth-century history have, then, drawn on comic techniques across the spectrum, from wry observation, through parody and tragi-comedy, to satire. What is notable, however, is that there seem to be two phases of production here, the first largely ending in the mid 1990s (the cinema adaption of Sopeña Monsalve excepted), and the second emerging from 2009 on. These latter works—Ovejero's and Mendoza's novels, de la Iglesia's and Boadilla's films, and TVE's *Plaza de España*—have all appeared after the 'irruption'[12] of new cultural memories of the war and dictatorship that emerged in Spain around the turn of the millennium.[13] An examination of comic approaches to the recent past in Spain can thus act as a weather vane, highlighting the shifting nature of the country's memory horizons across the past three and a half decades. In approaching this latter issue, I focus in this essay on a tradition of 'esperpentic' depiction of violence and brutality that traces its roots back beyond the writer Ramón del Valle-Inclán, who actually coined the term *esperpento*, to at least the eighteenth-century painter, Goya, and possibly even to the Golden Age.[14] Of the comic works that I have mentioned, I discuss three—Mendoza's *Riña de gatos*, Berlanga's *La vaquilla* and de la Iglesia's *Balada triste*—taking, as the point of departure for my analysis, recent discussions of ways in which the limitations of prevailing accounts of memory debates, conflicts and challenges within the public sphere—particularly the Habermasian view—may be opened to new perspectives through a reevaluation of the carnivalesque, drawn ultimately from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.[15]

The notion of 'memory contests'[16] has been proposed in the German context to explain the contemporary nature of debates about the past that are characterized by an ongoing clash between divergent interpretations that co-exist in an antagonistic and 'noisy' relationship. These memory contests, which are played out in the public sphere, flaunt generational contrasts,

12 See Alexander Wilde, 'Irruptions of Memory: Expressive Politics in Chile's Transition to Democracy', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 31:2 (1999), 473–500.

13 In Ribeiro de Menezes, 'From Recuperating Spanish Historical Memory'.

14 Kinder traces esperpentic elements back to the theatre and painting of Counter-Reformation Spain (*Blood Cinema*, 138–39), and Wolfgang Kayser's wide-ranging study includes Velázquez (*The Grotesque in Art and Literature* [Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1963]). One might further reference Quevedo's satirical vision in the *Sueños*.

15 I have not included Ovejero's *La comedia salvaje*, as its comic approach is less relevant than the other three to a consideration of the role of the comic and burlesque within Spain's shifting memory horizons. Nevertheless, its allusions to Valle-Inclán's *Tirano Banderas* and its echoes of a quixotesquely bumbling odyssey across Spain do connect it to Mendoza's literary practice.

16 See Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove, 'Introduction' to *German Life and Letters*, 59 (2006), 163–68 and Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove and George Grote, 'Introduction: Germany's Memory Contests and the Management of the Past', in *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film and Discourse since 1990*, ed. Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove and George Grote (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), 1–21.

highly personal perspectives, and motivated appropriations of the past for particular, and frequently politicized, purposes in the present. They often foreground a disruption of tradition, or a strong sense of rupture and loss, as part of the dynamic renegotiation of memory.

I wish to explore here how the use of *esperpento* might fit into such a landscape of contested pasts and contestatory positions on the past in Spain. Critiques of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere frequently[17] highlight limitations in its acknowledgement of the extent to which questions of power and access are important in determining who has the opportunity to speak publicly on issues of concern, and who might listen. Recent work comparing Habermas' thought to that of Mikhail Bakhtin opens up potentially productive perspectives on how memory contests might work within the public sphere, intersecting with and subverting hegemonic memory horizons through the use of the burlesque and carnivalesque. The ability of a Bakhtinian perspective to valorize what Nielson has called the 'unfinished residue' of utterances,[18] and thus to expand the bounds of speech-act validity beyond the limitations of a Habermasian rational intelligibility, are relevant here. In particular, the two films that I discuss below appear to push at the boundaries of communicative competence or acceptability, if we accept that Nielson's overall exploration of transculturalism—understood as 'the process that leads to hybrids when different lifeworlds come into contact'[19]—can have a temporal dimension that, in my argument, derives from shifting interpretations and the fluid nature of Spain's memory horizons in the late twentieth century. Nielson's proposition that, in Bakhtinian thought, transcultural actions require us to 'act in an aesthetically convincing manner',[20] helpfully raises the questions, convincing for whom, and from which (temporal, geographical, social, class, gendered…) perspectives? To be purposely—indeed, purposefully—unconvincing is thus a means to open up a space in which to pose challenges to prevailing interpretative norms or horizons of expectation. If, as Douglas noted several decades ago,[21] to be effective, humour must not only be understood but also permitted, then the self-conscious flouting of a recognized boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable can clearly serve to posit new discursive and interpretative horizons. Palmer

17 Selya Benhabib, 'Towards a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy', in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Selya Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1996), 67–94; Michael Gardiner, 'Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on Dialogue, Everyday Life and the Public Sphere', *The Sociological Review*, 52 (1994), 28–48.

18 Grieg Nielson, 'Bakhtin and Habermas: Towards a Transcultural Ethics', *Theory and Society*, 24 (1995), 803–35 (p. 813).

19 Nielson, 'Bakhtin and Habermas', 818.

20 Nielson, 'Bakhtin and Habermas', 819.

21 Cited in Palmer, 'Parody and Decorum', 80.

has argued, with considerable relevance, as we shall see, to critical judgments on *La vaquilla* and *Balada triste de trompeta*, that 'both incomprehension and ethical refusal threaten humour's communicative success, as does aesthetic refusal, where humour is rejected on the grounds that it is boring, stupid or childish'.[22]

In this essay, I argue that the esperpentic mode of representing the Civil War and Franco dictatorship in contemporary Spain, far from being vacuous, can be understood as a productive form of engagement with the past that employs satirical deformation, the carnivalesque, and the burlesque to engage with and challenge prevailing memory horizons, and so make a serious and meaningful contribution to memory debates. An esperpentic approach to war memory is, in fact, a potentially productive one.[23] As Anthony Zahareas noted of Valle-Inclán some time ago:

> The world of the esperpentos is an unsettling world: there is tragedy and there is travesty, side by side, while man's anguish and man's blundering are constantly played off against each other […] A harsh and playful tone in them yokes dread with amusement, despair with inanity, and hilarity with consternation; traditional certainties are disparaged while injustices and blunders are simultaneously flayed and burlesqued.[24]

Critics, Zahareas argued, failed to take seriously the extent to which Valle-Inclán's *esperpentos* exposed an 'intellectual emergency' because they insisted on viewing his use of comic, absurd, and burlesque deformation as a purely aesthetic exercise.[25] In *Luces de bohemia*, Max Estrella resorts to the metaphor of a concave mirror as a better means of reflecting the grotesque nature of Spanish reality than straightforward realism; as Estrella observes, Spain is a 'deformación grotesca de la civilización europea'.[26] But Zahareas also notes that the *esperpento*, with its instilling of laughter in the spectator, allows for a momentary liberation from the depressing weight of a grotesque situation.[27] It can offer, in this sense, existentialist release not only from absurdity, but also from intellectual abstraction; it permits, in short, at least temporary liberation via an embodied and affective response. 'Valle-Inclán', Zaraheas states, 'always brings his absurd vision down to the concreteness of

22 Palmer, 'Parody and Decorum', 80.

23 There has been extensive discussion of the meaning of Valle-Inclán's term; for a good survey, see Christina Karageorgou-Bastea, 'Historia y valor de la ironía en *Luces de bohemia*', *Hispanic Review*, 73:1 (2005), 65–89 (pp. 66–67, notes 2–4). I view it here as an artistic deformation of reality aimed at offering a particular critique of historical circumstance.

24 Anthony Zahareas, 'The Esperpento and Aesthetics of Commitment', *Modern Language Notes*, 81:2 (1966), 159–73 (p. 159).

25 Zahareas, 'The Esperpento and Aesthetics of Commitment', 160.

26 Ramón del Valle-Inclán, *Luces de bohemia*, ed. Gerald Gillespie and Anthony Zahareas (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1976), 182.

27 Zahareas, 'The Esperpento and Aesthetics of Commitment', 171.

humour and grotesquerie so that circumstances never become abstract on behalf of "human solidarity" or "the tragic sense of life" '.[28] The question that I explore here is the extent to which the adoption of a similar approach by Mendoza, Berlanga and de la Iglesia highlights valuable new perspectives on Spanish memory debates. I begin with Mendoza's novel as a means of setting out issues related to burlesquing the past, before moving on to discuss the two films, since my concern is not to chart the chronological development of esperpentic approaches, but the conceptual implications of their use and what they tell us about shifting memory horizons of the Spanish Civil War in the late twentieth century.

Eduardo Mendoza's *Riña de gatos*: Taming the Past through Laughter

Eduardo Mendoza's *Riña de gatos, Madrid 1936* is a burlesque comedy of intrigue set in Madrid in the spring of 1936, just before the outbreak of the Civil War. Englishman Anthony Whitelands, an expert in Golden-Age Spanish art, travels to Spain to authenticate a Velázquez painting owned by a Spanish nobleman, the Duque de la Igualada, who wishes to sell it secretly to buy arms. Whitelands' misplaced sense of his own importance, his bumbled handling of the attribution of the picture (a nude he views as complementary to *The Toilet of Venus*), and his manipulation by various interests (including the Falange, the local police and British spies), lead to a comedy of errors in which the adoption of a stage comic-outsider perspective—the Englishman abroad—facilitates a parody of national stereotypes. Although Whitelands attempts to outline the characteristics of a Spanish artistic sensibility, based on his interpretations of Velázquez's masterpieces in the Prado Museum, he reveals little more than his own ignorance of Spain as she teeters on the precipice of war. Whitelands' departure from Madrid at the end of the novel, which he imagines as commanded by the Conde-Duque de Olivares from astride his horse in the famous portrait of him in the Prado, humorously underlines his lack of any significant understanding of the tragedy about to befall Spain.

Nevertheless, Mendoza's narrative is more than a burlesque intrigue that ends inconclusively. The novel's Bakhtinian dimensions include significant esperpentic intertexts from Spanish culture that give a sense of the heritage of this perspective. Mendoza ranges across visual art, where Velázquez is the most prominent figure, but Goya the most significant; and he alludes to literary antecedents, in that Whitelands' encounter with the ridiculously named pimp, Higinio Zamora Zamorano, recalls the carnivalesque brothel scenes in Luis Martín-Santos' *Tiempo de silencio* as well as Berlanga's *La vaquilla*, not to mention the broader ludic echoes of Cervantes' Maritornes

28 Zahareas, 'The Esperpento and Aesthetics of Commitment', 171.

from *Don Quixote*, and Fernando de Rojas' eponymous heroine in the *Celestina*. Such a dizzying array of carnivalesque allusion in *Riña de gatos* is clearly connected to the literary origins of the *esperpento* in Valle-Inclán. If, as José-Carlos Mainer has noted, *madrileños* are known as 'gatos',[29] in *Luces de bohemia*, set in the Spanish capital of course, we find the observation, '[e]l esperpentismo lo ha inventado Goya. Los héroes clásicos han ido a pasearse en el callejón del Gato'.[30] Indeed, this allusion to a dearth of heroism is highly appropriate to Mendoza's novel, for the effect of his mocking parody is to cut down to size a number of historical figures who might otherwise be regarded as threatening: José Antonio Primo de Rivera is presented as an irresponsible dandy, half concerned with lofty politics and half with affairs of the heart; Francisco Franco, Emilio Mola and Gonzalo Queipo de Llano appear as incompetent but dangerous generals, plotting a coup yet oblivious to farcical events around them; Manuel Azaña intervenes in the *dénouement*, arresting José Antonio, not for political reasons, but at the request of his friend, the Marquesa de la Igualada. Politics is thus transformed into a charade by Mendoza.

In *Riña de gatos*, the farcical and theatricalized nature of events emerges most clearly in the scene in the Marqués' garden when Whitelands, hiding from the Marqués' daughter Paquita, of whom he is enamoured, is pursued by Coscolluela, a former *africanista* soldier who now works at the sinister Dirección General de Seguridad. The Marqués' butler causes a significant brouhaha by threatening Coscolluela, who has attempted to follow Whitelands over the garden wall but has found himself stuck on the top. The three plotting generals then enter the scene, with Franco attempting to take charge but Queipo and Mola also intervening to prevent themselves from being upstaged. The situation descends quite literally into a catfight, the theatrical scenario echoing the Goya cartoon, *Riña de gatos*, that gives the novel its name. This particular allusion to a work that shows two cats fighting on a brick wall is clearly a mocking deflation of the heroic protagonism of war. Mendoza depicts the conflict not via the discourse of trauma that has come to prevail in post-millennium fiction—for instance, in Alberto Méndez's *Los girasoles ciegos*, or Almudena Grandes' *El corazón helado*—but as the result of the unheroic, selfish and petty behaviour of key players. Hence, it is a desire for personal protagonism on the part of the generals, and an irresponsible disregard for the consequences of their actions, comparable to the childish behaviour of José Antonio on other occasions in the novel, that will ultimately plunge Spain into tragedy. Having recourse to a very different Goya from the much better known war artist of the *Desastres de la guerra*, Mendoza offers a vision of the Spanish Civil War

29 José Carlos Mainer, 'Un cuadro de Goya (Eduardo Mendonza, 1926)', *El País*, 20 de noviembre 2010, <http://elpais.com/diario/2010/11/20/babelia/1290215544_850215.html> (accessed 22 January 2013).

30 Valle-Inclán, *Luces de bohemia*, ed. Gillespie and Zahareas, 182.

as a calamity, subversively undermining bellicose notions of heroism without attributing responsibility or guilt for the conflict to society as a whole. One may wish to object ethically to this latter position, but Mendoza's appeal to a tradition of esperpentic deformation of reality also serves to create the space, in a memory horizon currently dominated by discourses of trauma and human rights,[31] within which to tame and control the legacy of the past through laughter. As many critics of trauma studies have noted, an over-emphasis on trauma can leave victims burdened with the legacy of the past and condemned perpetually to 'act out' rather than 'work through' past suffering; Mendoza's narrative, on the other hand, opens up a valuable narrative space in which esperpentic distancing permits a *complementary* perspective and thus establishes a dialogue between different views on the past. This is not to say that Mendoza refutes the validity of a traumatic perspective, but simply that his work supplements it by offering a different vision and, hence, a different means of working through history's problematic legacy.

Having explored the benefits of this approach in a recent novel, I wish now to move back in time, to consider these possibilities with regard to Berlanga's *La vaquilla*, a film in which engagement with the prevailing Civil-War memory horizon is more complex but, because of that, potentially more instructive in terms of elucidating the mechanisms by which a purposeful flouting of spectator expectations may open up new interpretative possibilities on the Spanish Civil War.

Luis García Berlanga's *La vaquilla*: The Ghost of Spain's Shifting Memory Horizons

Like Valle-Inclán's *esperpentos*, Luis García Berlanga's 1985 film, *La vaquilla*, has been dismissed as lacking a serious socio-political dimension.[32] The movie depicts the hilarious antics of five Republican soldiers on the Aragonese front who decide to steal a bull that their Nationalist enemies are saving for a village *fiesta* and *encierro*. As the first comic film of the Spanish Civil War, the work is a milestone in the conflict's cultural representation. Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas view the movie as largely frivolous, arguing that Berlanga's 'combination of a comedy of distanciation and the nostalgic effects of period iconography create the image of a past made up of quaintly antiquated ideas and behaviour—simultaneously inspiring both fond recollection and critical laughter at its absurdity'. They go on to disparage Berlanga for merely

31 Francisco Ferrandiz, 'Guerras sin fin: guía para descifrar el Valle de los Caídos en la España contemporánea', *Política y Sociedad*, 48:3 (2011), 481–500.

32 Bernard Bentley, *A Companion to Spanish Cinema* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), 260–61.

recycling tired, slapstick techniques to no innovative end.[33] And Vicente Sánchez-Biosca has complained that in *La vaquilla* Berlanga seemed to have lost his touch, reducing the war to mere colourful backdrop by using an 'estética "fallera", colorística, excéntrica, "valenciana" que viene en detrimento de la tonalidad esperpéntica, de cuño valleinclanesco, que caracterizó antaño a las películas de Berlanga durante los años cincuenta'.[34]

The emphasis of *La vaquilla* is certainly on embodied and carnivalesque humour.[35] A series of folkloric stereotypes are parodied, including popular religiosity and ritual; so, too, are different social classes, particularly evident in the ridiculing of the *marqués*; and the levelling effect of soldiers on both sides washing together in a river, or visiting a brothel, is clearly flaunted. There is plenty of subversive and scatological humour, not least the opening exchanges between the Nationalist and Republican fronts and the discussion on the swapping of products, including toilet paper across enemy lines. Furthermore, the Republican soldiers' attempts to capture what they think is a young *bravo* leads to injury not as a result of war, but as a result of cowardice and clumsiness. Nevertheless, there is a self-reflexiveness to the film's depictions of stage Spanishness, slapstick carelessness, popular songs and the scatological consequences of cowardice that undermines interpretations of *La vaquilla* as little more than comedy.[36] Indeed, it is precisely in the application of frivolity to a serious theme that the significance of the use of carnivalesque and esperpentic deformation lies. The Bakhtinian dimension of *La vaquilla*, particularly its subversiveness in the context of mid 1980s Spain, is signalled by the over-determined, stylized nature of the film's focus on performativity—this itself, being a characteristic of Transition-era cultural expression and, hence, a potential butt of parody. The plot of the film—the theft of what the Republican soldiers assume to be a bull that their Nationalist enemy has acquired for an *encierro*—revolves around various scenarios of concealment, masquerade and performance. These include Republicans dressed up as Nationalists, several village rituals and processions, an archly camp Republican soldier who can sew and who parades around in a pink shirt (both stage allusions that self-consciously flaunt gender-bending), and the supposed bull itself, which turns out to be a young female totally unsuited to an *encierro*. The camp Republican adds a

33 Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, *Contemporary Spanish Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 1998), 56, 76.

34 Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, 'La ficcionalización de la historia por el nuevo cine español: de *La vaquilla* (1985) a *Madregilda* (1994)', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 20:1 (1995), 179–93 (p. 185).

35 See Luis M. González, '*La vaquilla*: memoria histórica y humor carnivalesco', *Quaderns de Cine*, 3 (2008), 73–79.

36 A similar argument is made by Sarah Wright in 'Zombie Nation: Haunting, "Doubling" and the "Unmaking" of Francoist Aesthetics in Albert Boadella's *¡Buen viaje, excelencia!*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17 (2007), 311–22.

particular note of visual anachronism that shatters the illusion of a realistic 1930s backdrop, since he seems more appropriate to a Spanish movie of the 1980s. Furthermore, the symbols of each warring faction are subject to parodic subversion, as Nationalist reds and golds become overlaid with Republican purples, but also with brightly-coloured shawls. This not only undermines simplistic reverence towards either flag, but in fact reverence towards any flag, since the flamenco shawls displace both Republican and Nationalist versions. The characters of *La vaquilla* seem, then, to stride jovially across the screen in ignorance of the true tragedy of the war in which they find themselves, and they cross supposedly entrenched battle-lines in a manner that demystifies the conflagration.

Amid this joviality, the image of the dying cow in the film's final frames comes as a deliberate jolt to the viewer. The image is clearly an allusion to Strabo's famous comparison of the geographical shape of the Iberian Peninsula to an ox-hide, or *piel de toro*, pointing to the tragedy of the war as the death of the nation and begging a number of questions, the most immediate of which is, with whom does the responsibility lie? As González has suggested, the image could be taken to suggest a sense of collective guilt (the animal dies because the soldiers cannot agree to rescue it); but I am not convinced that the image straight-forwardly affirms the consensus view of the past that is conventionally taken to underpin the period of the Transition.[37] Rather, I propose that *La vaquilla* offers an implicit dialogue between *two* pivotal moments in the shifting memory horizons of the Civil War: the Transition of the 1970s and early 1980s, and an earlier shift in the late 1950s and 1960s when there first emerged the proposition of collective guilt for the war that would underpin the discourse of *25 Años de Paz* in 1964 and, ultimately, the consensus of the Transition itself. This dialogic view of Spain's memory horizons was explicitly examined by Jorge Semprún in his recent novel, *Veinte años y un día* (2003), where he notes the Communist Party's involvement in the articulation of such a discourse. It is also a spectre behind Berlanga's reworking of *La vaquilla*, which was initially written in 1956—two decades after the outbreak of the Civil War—but not produced until 1985—ten years after the death of Franco. *La vaquilla* thus engages not only with a carnivalesque approach to the representation of the Spanish Civil War, but also with the extent to which static memory horizons and fixed metaphors may fail fully to understand the conflict. A comparison of the original film script and the 1985 realization is particularly instructive in this regard. Berlanga's original script describes, not the decaying body of the cow as shown in the final cut, but only its bones, 'mondos y lirondos',[38] picked clean by vultures. A temporal dimension is added in the 1985 film. The camera pans round the landscape, suggesting the forward

37 González, '*La vaquilla*: memoria histórica y humor carnivalesco', 78.

38 <http://video.berlangafilmmuseum.com/archivos/archivos/documentos/La-vaquilla/#/185/zoomed>, 185 (accessed 19 March 2013); this script is labelled 'Maquillaje' and dated 1958 rather than 1956.

march of time, before then settling on a decaying cow, haunted by vultures, its bones not yet fully picked clean. As Rosi Braidotti notes of embodied monstrosity, 'a signpost at the crossroads of the supernatural with the earthy, the monstrous body is a textual body'.[39] The addition of a sense of temporal distance, created by the camera's panoramic shot, thus draws attention to the inherent nature of memory as something that is not fixed, but changes over time. The metaphorical Spain for which the cowhide stands is at a crossroads, highlighting the monstrosity of Spanish history, written on the skin of the animal. And the crucial questions that must be answered are: What is the legacy of the past, and what are its implications for the future? How is this legacy to be confronted, and how will it be worked through? In short, Berlanga's final frames take the viewer back to the moment of death—the moment of the end of the war—and garner their impact precisely from their jarring contrast with the comic main body of the film. They suggest that, just as in the 1950s and 1960s when a new memory discourse shifted culpability for the Civil War from the victors onto the whole of Spanish society, the consensus of the Transition has achieved precisely the same evasion of responsibility. This interpretative line reaches its most forceful and esperpentic expression in the last work I discuss here, de la Iglesia's *Balada triste de trompeta*, which deploys a circus thematics, alongside references to the monstrous, to political effect. Recalling Braidotti, 'the circus inaugurated the commercialization of monstrous bodies, which will culminate in the motion picture industry'.[40]

Álex de la Iglesia's *Balada triste de trompeta*: The Monstrous Trauma of the Past

This issue of employing laughter to tame and work through a difficult past surfaces in Álex de la Iglesia's 2010 esperpentic film, *Balada triste de trompeta*, which the director has said is both a highly personal film and an 'exorcización de los monstruos del pasado'. The particular past to which he refers in this quotation is the Spain of 1973, a time he says, 'cuando tenía ocho años y vivíamos aparentemente tranquilos en un entorno de gran hostilidad y violencia'.[41] Critics have tended to view *Balada*'s two protagonists—a happy clown and a sad one—as two faces of Spain, evoking a broader discourse of *dos Españas* condemned to violent conflict.[42] While

39 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2011), 220.

40 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 220.

41 Isabel Landa López, 'El circo de Álex de la Iglesia', *El País*, 11 December 2010, <http://elpais.com/diario/2010/12/11/paisvasco/1292100014_850215.html> (accessed 22 January 2013).

42 See José Manuel de Prada, 'Álex de la Iglesia: "¿Por qué no nos reconciliamos de una maldita vez?" ', *ABC*, 17 December 2010, <http://www.abc.es/20101217/cultura-cine/reconciliamos-maldita-20101217.html> (accessed 22 January 2013); Verónica Martínez Monferrer, '*Balada triste de trompeta*', *Ecléctica: Revista de Estudios Culturales*, 1 (2012), 127–28.

this is certainly one possible reading, the film's early scenes, set during the Civil War, seem to me to focus not on the notion of a conflict between the two clowns, but on an intergenerational contrast between a father and his son, both of whom find their lives traumatically shaped by the contingencies of history. The father becomes accidently drawn into the Civil War (rather like the actors in Saura's *¡Ay, Carmela!*), and pointedly transmits to his son the need to 'burlarse del destino' and exact revenge for the brutality inflicted upon him and fellow prisoners. His son, Javier must live with this burden of trauma, working through it in scenes in which he comes face to face with a weak and ailing Franco and finally exacts revenge on Colonel Salcedo, the Nationalist officer who brutalized his father. In this sense, the film depicts the legacy of twentieth-century Spanish history as endemically violent, and posits the Civil War as an originary trauma to be confronted. Background references to the renowned criminal, 'El Lute', extend this sense of latent violence in Spanish society into the 1970s, but are an issue which space precludes me from addressing here.

In the context of contemporary Spanish memory debates, one of the most striking dimensions of *Balada* is the incorporation not only of scenes depicting the construction of Franco's Civil War monument and mausoleum, the contentious Valle de los Caídos, but also the dramatic *dénouement* of the film, staged on the Valle's enormous cross at Cuelgamuros. The monument is presented in both cases through the lens of esperpentic deformation. In the first instance, in neo-gothic style, its underground tunnels consist literally of walls of skulls embedded in mud; the mausoleum, we hear, is a 'cueva excavada en una roca […] acaban aquí todos, es lo que tiene la muerte'. In the second instance, the staging of the action on a national monument supposedly erected to celebrate bellicose heroism, and the melodramatic plot and sound-track, all evoke Hitchcock's *North By Northwest* (1959)—a cinematic homage certainly, but also a means to flaunt, through comparison, the sheer monstrosity and grotesqueness of the *Valle* as a war memorial. If Mount Rushmore, upon whose sculpted faces Hitchcock's film ends, was carved to celebrate 150 years of the US Republic along with four figures central to its building, the basilica and cross at Cuelgamuros stand for the destruction not only of the Spanish Republic, but also of its memory, definitively buried beneath their colossal bulk. The overblown nature of the film's ending is clearly meant to subvert any sense of reverence for the monument, undercutting its celebration of a National Catholic victory through open disrespect. The melancholy repetition of the song, 'Balada triste de trompeta', by Raphael, with its simple lament 'por un pasado que murió', further reinforces the film's depiction of an almost existential sense of traumatic loss.

Balada employs *esperpento* techniques—most evident in the use of the circus motif, with its accompanying metaphors of performativity, excess, concealment, and disguise—in order to highlight, not issues and concerns

that arise out of a new crossroads in Spain's confrontation with the past (as in Berlanga), or in order to tame that past through laughter (Mendoza), but a more forceful and less modulated argument indicating the insidious nature of the legacy of the Francoist past and the ineffectiveness of current memory debates in unseating it from a dominant position in Spain's memory horizon. In this regard, the use of excessive violence, grotesque blood spattering, what many critics have called the deliberate 'bad taste'[43] of de la Iglesia's works—a feature that is most effective against a backdrop of viewer expectations of moderation, akin to the contrastive functioning of the Bakhtinian carnival—and above all the use of facial deformity, serve as metaphors of Spanish history conceived of as monstrous trauma. This is not, however, the grim, postmemorial trauma of Méndez's *Girasoles* or the haunted and haunting *leitmotifs* of Guillermo del Toro's *El espinazo del Diablo* (2001). In *Balada*, Sergio (the 'happy' clown), who is savagely wounded with a meat hook by Javier (the 'sad' clown) in a tussle over Natalia, the trapeze artist they both love, is told that his scarred face 'parece el mapa de la batalla del Ebro'; he is thus literally branded with Civil-War battle topography. When Javier finally snaps mentally, and decides to exact revenge on Colonel Salcedo, he burns clown-like markings onto his face with caustic soda and a smoothing iron. But this literal embodiment of clownery, the turning of the innocent facial make-up of the circus into a deadly rebellion, becomes the moment when Javier asserts agency, when he is most fully alive and able to confront life, something which Sergio had previously told him he was unable to do because 'te da miedo la vida'. There is, in de la Iglesia's film, no sense of a new climate of confrontation with the past, nor of the emergence of new processes of remembrance or new memory horizons in post-millennium Spain. Despite the film's 2010 release date, it postulates, instead, the need for a violent overturning of the prevailing memory horizon, in order to expose buried, concealed and disguised aspects of the past that have not begun to receive proper recognition. It is as if the consensus of the Transition that Berlanga queried in 1985 is still too solidly in place in 2010 for Spanish history to be anything other than a horror story for de la Iglesia, a horror story full of the esperpentic monsters that Spanish society was too anxious to confront during the period of the Transition, the backdrop to much of *Balada*, and that Spain remains too cowed to confront properly, at least in our director's view, even as late as 2010.

Conclusion: The Value of Esperpentic Memories

To posit the value of laughter as a means of approaching a traumatic past might seem morally unacceptable, or at best idiosyncratic, yet laughter is ultimately a means of dealing with the contingency of existence by

43 Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, *Contemporary Spanish Cinema*, 108.

paradoxically taking pleasure in it or even mocking it. This opens up the possibility of what Jeremy Arnold has termed an 'affirmative democratic ethos'.[44] It is in this discursive space—understood as productively contestatory, rather than purely destructive—that Mendoza, Berlanga, and de la Iglesia engage with the various memory horizons of democratic Spain. The tone of the comedy that they employ varies greatly, from mocking irony and slapstick carnival, to the flagrantly grotesque and overblown. The degree to which their works elicit an affective and embodied reaction from the reader or viewer also varies: Mendoza's approach is gentle and is likely to elicit a wry smile or at times a guffaw; Berlanga solicits outright laughter, followed by a shocked silence; de la Iglesia clearly sets out to shock the viewer from the beginning, although his style is well-known, so that those opting to view his works are likely to be familiar with his techniques and their tenor. But, looking beyond the enjoyment which such varieties of affective release may provide, it is evident that all three *autores* also engage the reader or spectator cognitively, for they employ laughter in contexts that push at the boundaries of acceptability and thus raise in readers' and viewers' minds the question of incongruity. It is not my intention here to posit a binary between affect and cognition, but rather to point to the manner in which they are inextricably entwined in certain contexts. Quoting Arnold again: 'To read laughter and judgment together, to see the importance of somatic pleasure to disinterested reflective judgment may open up a more nuanced, richer account of both affective modes of being-in-the-world and the judgments we make about these modes'.[45] Like collective memory,[46] laughter is a social phenomenon,[47] and both are a means to deal with the contingency of life. As Zahareas concluded of Valle-Inclán:

> This incredible zeal to jest in the midst of tragedy is [his] real contribution to us, for in the face of all the helplessness, horror and travesty inspired by the grotesque forces, and in the face of anguish because of commitment, man effects through laughter a secret release. The uncanny has been faced; not eliminated, not alleviated, not even softened, but at least grappled with, step by step, measure for measure […] The esperpento can play with the absurd without saying yes to it, and denies it without saying no to it.[48]

44 Jeremy Arnold, 'Laughter, Judgement and Democratic Politics', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 50 (2009), 7–21 (p. 8).

45 Arnold, 'Laughter, Judgement and Democratic Politics', 80.

46 See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* ed., trans., and intro. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992).

47 Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1940).

48 Zahareas, 'The Esperpento and Aesthetics of Commitment', 172–73.

This approach also takes into account the importance of embodied experience and of affect, key dimensions not only of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque but also of contemporary postmemorial explorations of the past, which are characterized by imaginative and emotive engagement rather than rational cognition.[49] As Gardiner notes:

> Bakhtin consistently argues […] that our access to the world is mediated by our body, and our embeddedness in concrete time/space makes each of our perceptual openings onto the world unique and non-interchangeable. [Nevertheless] we are *co-participants* in a universe that ultimately transcends any particularistic viewpoint. Such an emphasis on intercorporeal 'blending', through which we participate *collectively* in a complexly structured and shared environment, implies that although our placement in the world is not shared identically by any other person, this is no barrier to dialogic exchanges in which the differences between interacting elements are not sublated into an overarching conceptual unity.[50]

In contrast to Habermas' attachment to enlightenment universals, Bakhtinian dialogism thus allows for collective exchange and for the expression of a multiplicity—or in Bakhtin's terminology, a heteroglossia—of viewpoints articulated from a diversity of positions of both power and subalterity. Laughter, which straddles the mind/body divide in that it can be cerebral and affective, can act as a 'weapon of the weak', to borrow de Certeau's phrase,[51] undermining hegemonic discourses through reactions ranging from outright disrespect and satirical correction to ironic questioning, to name but a few of its possible manifestations. It is worth remembering that according to Bakhtin the carnivalesque, during the Middle Ages, was not an oppositional culture, but a strand within the mainstream, and any discussion of Spanish memory debates should bear in mind the value and insights of an esperpentic vision of history.

49 See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard U. P., 1997).

50 Gardiner, 'Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums', 34.

51 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 23.