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SINISTERRA'S AND SAURA'S *¡AY CARMELA!*: REMEMBERING AND DEALING WITH THE CIVIL WAR

CARMELA. Sí: para contarnos todo lo que pasó, y por qué, y quién hizo esto, y qué dijo aquél . . . PAULINO. ¿Para qué? CARMELA. Para recordarlo todo.[1]

Es imprescindible evitar todo aquello que nos pudiera hacer retroceder en el camino y volver a las exclusiones o enfrentamientos ya superados. Es necesario, en cambio, avanzar positivamente en el reconocimiento efectivo de los deberes y derechos fundamentales de todos. (Constructores de la paz 81).

"The Spanish case [. . .] is a rare case of an authoritarian regime that, after almost forty years of existence, transforms itself, or rather dissolves itself, through self-reform" (Casanova 934). In an effort to explain this exceptional example of political change, Laura Desfor Edles argues that during the Transition both the public and the political élites embraced a symbolic discourse that assigned a sacred status to terms like "a new beginning," "*convivencia*," "democracy," and the "politics of consensus," while deeming profane terms that denoted opposing concepts, e.g., "Franco," "confrontation," "dictatorship," and "dogmatism." Committed to avoiding the mistakes of the past, rival political and social groups collaborated to bring into being the new democratic government (140).[2] Recent work on cultural and historical memory, however, calls into question the costs and motivation behind the rhetoric of political cooperation and its corollary bracketing off of the past:

> [. . .] the transition to democracy was made possible by the active erasure of the social memory that had been hegemonic up to 1975. By this means the old regime became rapidly invisible and the democratic deficit of the new political edifice was disguised. (Cardús i Ros 19)

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Gregorio Morán further explains that this "historical amnesia" formed one of the links in a chain that joined even the most disparate political opponents, i.e., the former Franco official, Adolfo Suárez, and the Communist leader, Santiago Carrillo: "'sellaban un pacto de honor, no exento de características sicilianas, para un futuro común y un pasado inexistente'" (Vilarós 10). Aguila and Montoro highlight the irony that the language of *convivencia* and democracy produced zones that political discourse could not enter; debate and discussion of the Civil War, the Franco regime, and ideological positions had to be muted or rejected to preserve the orderly advance toward a democratic state (256). In short, political expression that Franco systematically silenced now existed *de jure*, but *de facto* it was circumscribed by a verbal evasiveness required by the stress on achieving "political consensus" and "reconciliation."

The political victory of the socialists in 1982 did little to stimulate the memory of the decades long dictatorship. In the 80s, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español based its electoral campaigns and policies on creating and, some would say, advertising a modern dynamic Spain that was to be a major actor on the European and even world stage. Felipe González, the newly elected President, proclaimed proudly in 1986 that a new generation had emerged and "put a stop to the dialectics of victors and vanquished" (181). Joan Ramón Resina attributes this conception of the past as finished to Spain's intent to become a global actor: "Cynically one might say, once Spain was integrated into the world market, the memories of the Civil War and the dictatorship became superfluous, even counter-productive, and amnesia set in" (104).

Commemorative activities in which citizens gather precisely to recall the past provide especially revealing moments of Spain's ambivalence toward the past. For example, in 1989 Spain celebrated the 50th anniversary of Antonio Machado's death in exile. Alert to the dominant discourse advocating *convivencia*, organizers made a special effort to insure that the presentations, unlike those in the past, would not be partisan, that is, anti-Franco: "'no tendrán carácter reivindicativo [. . .] que ahora no serán necesarias, vista la normalidad democrática española'" ("Las obras completas de Machado . . . " 37). The struggle to defend Machado had been won; Franco's well-known antipathy toward the artists of the Republic and the silencing of their voices could be forgotten and attention could now be directed solely to literary concerns.

The fiftieth anniversary of Civil War's end in 1989 supplies an even

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better lens through which we can examine Spain's problematic confrontation with its traumatic past. On the fiftieth anniversary of the War's outbreak, the Socialist government had decreed that the Civil War was "a non-commemorable event" and therefore in 1989 there were no official ceremonies to mark the occasion (Humlebaek NP).[3] During this anniversary time two widely popular texts (1989, 1990), however, did explicitly raise the issue of the War.[4] Sanchis Sinisterra's play *¡Ay, Carmela!* and film director Carlo Saura's adaptation of it were spectacles of symbols, poems, music, political and cultural references that resolutely trained the audience's gaze on the pivotal episode in twentieth century Spanish history. Would these two aesthetic experiences that earned the applause and praise of the Spanish public exemplify or contradict the "historical amnesia" that some maintain characterize the decade of the 80s?

Certainly the background and orientation of the two artists gave every indication that their version of *¡Ay, Carmela!* would not be a timid depiction of the war. José Sanchis Sinisterra had been involved in independent and experimental theater since the 70s, demonstrating a commitment to dramatizing ethical and political issues and believing that theater could transform society (21). He founded in 1977 the *Teatro fronterizo* that he described as "un lugar de encuentro, investigación y creación [. . .] para todos [. . .] que se plantean su trabajo desde una perspectiva crítica y cuestionadora" (270). The dramatist specifically conceived *¡Ay Carmela!* as a corrective to other remembrances that he predicted might be: "'una celebración conciliadora y, quizás, más bien destinada a cubrir con un discreto velo de objetividad todo el horror, y la violencia de la guerra y su secuela de cuarenta años de franquismo;'" *¡Ay Carmela!* would "'remover las aguas, no remover la herida, pero sí al menos focalizarla.'" (Note 94, 62). For his part, Carlos Saura created during the Franco regime an impressive, award winning body of work that gave ample evidence of his haunting meditations on the war and the society created after it. The director's battles with the institutionalized censorship of the Franco regime have been well chronicled and attest to his persistent desire to show the reality that official culture denied or desperately hid from the Spanish people (D'Lugo 56, 114-16).

The two texts unquestionably picture the conflict from the perspective of the victims of the Nationalists.[5] The climactic scene of Carmela's death in both texts results specifically from her being forced to mock and defame the Republic while members of the International Brigades are forced

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to watch the performance on the night before their execution. Saura's film maintains the stance critical of the Nationalists even in several scenes created for the film, e.g., the joyous performance before a loyalist audience and a scene of captured townspeople being vindictively selected by the Nationalists for the firing squad. Given the background and work of Sanchis Sinisterra and Saura, this depiction of the contending forces in the Civil War shocks no one.

Yet is this negative image of the Nationalists the primary objective of these two works commemorating the anniversary of the War's end. I believe that, more importantly, the two aesthetic experiences comment on how the memory of such an event should bear on the present. Looking at the narrative chronology, characterization of Paulino, and modes of closure, in the two works, we perceive the play's consistent gaze on Paulino's guilt and responsibility for past actions that produce the present situation and shape behavior. To be specific, Paulino's present remains a constant reminder to the audience of his, and by extension, the nation's past. The film, in contrast, eschews this temporal circularity. Rather, Carmela's courageous act of defiance leads to a beginning of sorts. The film version implies that the past or the memory of it should not dominate the present or future. In sum, Saura envisions a space and time beyond memory's representation of the past. The essential dynamic of these texts does not hinge on the condemnation of the victors of the Civil War; rather these works present differing views on the processing and consideration of its memory and aftermath.

Sanchis Sinisterra structures, as he often does, his drama as a play-within-a-play. This well known metatheatrical strategy immediately requires the relating of different dramatic perspectives. Furthermore, by alternating the dramatic present with flashbacks, the author encourages the audience to evaluate the intersection of past and present, and the actions that have brought the characters to this moment. Carmela's ghost appears early in the play and Paulino's regrets for his past conduct becomes a recurring motif. He reveals the depth of his guilt in a nightmare reliving the moment of Carmela's death: "¡No . . . ! ¡Que no se la lleven . . . ! ¡Ella no tiene . . . ! ¡Ellos . . . la culpa . . . esos milicianos . . . ! (211). Paulino must deal with this past that has returned in "spectral form" and, as Labanyi explains, he can refuse to see it, obsess about it or "offer [. . .] [it] habitation in order to acknowledge [. . .] [its] presence, through the healing introspection process that is mourning [. . .] " ("History and Hauntology . . ."

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65-66). Sanchis Sinisterra's aesthetic choice of staging the confluence of temporal planes foregrounds the issue of dealing in the present with the memory and aftermath of the Civil War. As a result, Sanchis Sinisterra keeps the audience's attention riveted on the wound inflicted during the bloody national war.

Shifting to Saura's film, we notice immediately that he elects to employ a chronological narrative to tell the story of this itinerant theatrical troupe. According to many this elimination of flashbacks corresponds perfectly to the demands of film.[6] Saura himself explains his rejection of presenting Carmela as already deceased by pointing out that the ghost-like appearance was too metaphysical (Yraika 252). It is necessary to ask, nonetheless, whether this change in narrative structure is merely the expected modification in the adaptation of a theatrical work for the screen, and whether it substantively alters the thematic thrust of the original work. With respect to the first question it will be instructive to examine Saura's narrative style in previous films.

From his first feature film Saura questioned the need for linearity in the narrative. Mario Camus, a collaborator on this film, *Los golfos* (1959), noticed Saura's tendency to "'erase every vestige of logical order of scenes, which broke completely with the narrative thread [. . .] he made brusque cuts and avoided any kind of sentimental posturing'" (D'Lugo 37). More relevant to the historical topic of *¡Ay, Carmela!*, two of Saura's major films during the dictatorship and one in the post-Franco era not only deal specifically with memories, the Civil War, and postwar society, but demonstrate an imaginative fusing of past and present. First, in *Jardín de delicias*, Saura dramatizes the corruption and materialism of a family identified with the victors of the war. Saura organizes the film in what D'Lugo describes as "an intricate, intentionally dense narrational scheme involving flashbacks and simulated memories, as well as a number of hermetic fantasy projections [. . .]" (97). Second, Saura's controversial *Prima Angélica* (1974) centers specifically on the protagonist's memories of the summer of 1936, and the director resorts to a complex narrative scheme as in *Jardín de delicias*:

> Told as a labyrinthine montage of recreated memories that surface in the waking consciousness of the protagonist, the thematic and emotional heart of *Cousin Angelica* lies in the burden of remembrances that persist in the consciousness of the vanquished and that they still cannot bring themselves to confront. (D'Lugo 116)

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Third, in 1982 Saura revisits the past in *Dulces horas* and uses the play-within-a-play technique to create a scene in which clips from a historical documentary films alternate with the characters' behavior in the present to probe the protagonist's reexamination of his past and the recasting of his present (Vernon 137). Saura's cinematic art evolved during the oppressive system of censorship established during the Franco regime; nevertheless, it is also a fact that Saura, as perhaps few other Spanish filmmakers, was perfectly capable of finding a cinematographic equivalence to the metatheatrical and flash-back strategy adopted by Sinisterrra. Consequently, the director's decision to eliminate the play's ambiguous mix of present, past, dream, and imagination is not due to the limitations of either his cinematographic language, or to the genre restrictions of film itself.

I return now to the second question posed above, namely, does this artistic choice result in a major difference in the perspective of the two works. I believe that the film's point of view does differ significantly from the orientation shaping the play, not with respect to the portrayal of the Nationalists, but with respect to the role of memory. As seen above, Sinisterra's play prevents the audience from forgetting that past acts produce a particular present. Saura's film allows the audience to follow the actions unfolding in time without constantly holding the past in mind. The effects of Saura's linear narrative emerge upon comparing the two works' characterization of Paulino. Instead of the play's emphasis on Paulino's guilt and the present as an outgrowth of the past, Saura prefers a less judgmental image of Paulino. Saura's Paulino does not appear as a drunken, lonely man haunted by recent events and his role in them. Moreover, the film does not lead the audience to concentrate primarily on Paulino's conduct in contrast to that of Carmela. In the film, Carmela's criticism of Paulino's silence in the face of danger only is emphasized almost at the end of the film. In the play, Carmela, from the outset, convinces the audience to judge Paulino when he speaks. Saura's Paulino certainly enjoys drinking and yet it does not mask his regrets. No sense of guilt invades his sleep. No ghost of the past stalks his imagination. In the film Paulino impresses the audience as a roguish, opportunistic, charming, second-rate variety show performer caught in circumstances beyond his control. The film, therefore, studiously avoids the characterization of Paulino that dominates the play.

In addition to the narrative chronology and the characterization of Paulino, the method of closure further sharpens the distinctions between

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the two works. Each text produces endings that stress either the need to remember or the possibility of moving beyond the past. The play's epilogue begins with Paulino putting on the blue shirt of the Nationalists and carrying a broom to clean the theater. As he speaks to someone in the back of the theater, Paulino leaves no doubt that despite Carmela's death and his guilt, he will cooperate with the authorities, and is already maneuvering to improve his status, thereby distancing himself from her behavior:

> Pues dile a don Mariano cómo me estoy portando, ¿eh? [. . .] Que vean que conmigo se puede contar para lo que sea . . . Si me puedo sacar unas pesetas para ir tirando, al menos. [. . .] Pero, en fin, lo principal es que sepan que soy de buena ley . . . . (253-54)

Paulino has opted for Labayni's first strategy to deal with the spectral forms of the past: he will refuse to see them. Defending the blue shirt he completely rejects the past. His previous attachment to Carmela and his curiosity about the world of the dead have faded to be replaced by the preoccupation with his own situation: "yo estoy vivo, y soy de verdad, y aquí nos tienes, peleándonos como siempre [. . .] El que tiene que seguir aquí, y aguantar toda la mierda, soy yo" (256, 258). It is Carmela's role to review the past that definitively separates them because she and the other victims must gather: "Sí: para contarnos todo lo que pasó, y por qué, y quién hizo esto, y qué dijo aquél . . . Para recordarlo todo" (261). Carmela turns to help one of the International Brigade fighters to pronounce the word "España," while Paulino stands off to one side reminding us of the present created by her death and the soldiers' execution. Aznar Soler unmistakably links this epilogue to Spain in the eighties:

> concluye con una apasionada reivindicación de la memoria histórica como atributo de la dignidad. En el contexto político de nuestra transición democrática, teatro de [. . .] complicidad colectiva en amnesias históricas varias, en donde la pura memoria de la biografía personal de cada quien durante el franquismo ha sido como ruptura alevosa del consenso constitucional. (Sanchis Sinisterra 97)

The film's dénouement pointedly diverges from that of the play, signaling perhaps a way to transcend the horrible memory of the past. From the moment of Carmela's death the director sets in motion a distancing process for characters and audience. While Carmela lies dead on stage, the camera retreats to the balcony and we look down on what almost seems a

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theatrical tableaux of the murder that has just taken place. If previously Saura positions the audience with the actors looking out on the audience, now he reverses this identification.[7] Next the film cuts to a daytime scene in which Paulino has been inexplicably released unharmed by the Nationalists despite the disastrous performance in which his partner insulted Franco and his allies. The audience views a mourning but free Paulino while no Nationalist soldier appears before the camera's lens. The scene is poignant, but this visual image of Paulino retains nothing of the theatrical scene that ends the play, namely, a man dressed in the Franquista blue shirt, behaving as a servile supporter of a faceless authority.

The character of Gustavete is mentioned but never appears in the drama. He appears throughout the film and his role in the final scenes reinforces the work's orientation toward the future. Carmela's violent death has shocked Gustavete into recovering his voice. She has always protected him and now has given him one last gift: the ability to speak. His future life will certainly be changed. At her gravesite Gustavete leaves as a grave marker his previous means of communication. The small blackboard textualizes and encapsulates Carmela's life in the form of name and dates of birth and death. Although Gustavete and Paulino grieve, Carmela, as symbolized in the makeshift tombstone, will remain behind. In addition, there is no evidence of a political awakening in either of the two that will lead them to voice, and keep alive the values espoused by Carmela in her final moments.

The last image of the movie shows Gustavete and Paulino getting in their truck and driving off into the distance. Podol has described the setting as a rainy, gray day with a view of a muddy road ("*¡Ay, Carmela!*. . ." 200). Yet, Saura's use of the truck in this scene completes a series of images involving the vehicle and presents this scene in a more positive light. Early in the movie we associate these performers with the truck as it comes into view while we hear Paulino's voice introducing Carmela inside a building. Slowly the camera approaches the truck until we see the sign that identifies them and their profession: "Carmela y Paulino Varietes a lo fino." In a subsequent scene, the camera again focuses on the truck as a home where Gustavete, Paulino y Carmela share a meal and speak freely, protected from the outside world. Once the Aragón front comes under attack, the truck becomes their means of escape to the safety of Valencia. When they are taken to makeshift jail by the Nationalists, they walk past the truck that is being sacked by soldiers which symbolizes their inability to resume

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a normal existence. The truck, then, is an emblem of who these individuals are, and by the end of the film it stands for their ability to live, move on, and survive.

The film's projection of a future comes into sharp focus when we compare the last truck ride with one in which they leave the Aragon front and head off to Republican-held Valencia. The truck enters a night shrouded in dense fog. Paulino and Carmela, and later Gustavete, peer out the windshield and can barely make out the outlines of a road. The cabin of the truck and the windshield frame the characters and enclose them in this predicament. The headlights shine brightly but do not illuminate a safe path. Eventually they lose their way and enter the perilous world of the Nationalists. The audience then observes a shot of the truck, stopped, clouded in a mist as it hears the song of advancing Nationalist troops. In marked contrast, the truck ride at film's end occurs in daylight and the camera presents a way out, a visible path, albeit not a modern, paved one. Once Paulino and Gustavete set off on their journey, there are no shots of them enclosed inside the truck; rather the audience from a position behind the truck views it moving beyond the scene of tragedy and seemingly beyond the control of the Nationalists. The truck leaves behind Carmela's grave, her murderer, the dead soldiers of the International Brigade, the inhabitants of Belchite, and the rubble of the occupied town. Carmela is only present textualized in the lyrics to the film's title song. Gustavete, Paulino, and the audience look at the undetermined future stretching out in front of the departing vehicle.

These two works both condemn the victors of the Civil War and at the same time adopt decidedly different stances about the memory of the event. On the one hand, Sanchis Sinisterra's play proposes that we, like Carmela, continue retelling the past so that it continues to exist, especially during the more comfortable present because as Carmela warns: "los vivos, en cuanto tenéis la panza llena y os ponéis corbata, lo olvidáis todo. Y hay cosas que . . . " (261). We are not to follow Paulino who wants the past buried in a ditch (263). For Paulino the only imperative is to survive no matter what regime is in power. The play underscores the need to retell the stories of the past, and to consider the path that Spain traveled on its journey toward the prosperous democratic present of the 80s (92, Note 106).

On the other hand, Saura's adaptation eliminates the focus on Paulino's past behavior and offers no visual clue to the victors' role in his or Gustavete's future as the movie ends. In fact, the camera, as we have

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discussed above, shows Gustavete's and Paulino's movement unhindered by those who have terrorized the townspeople and killed Carmela. By electing not to dwell on the persistence of memory Saura posits a place and time beyond the events and effects of the War.[8] The film's vision and tone correspond more closely to the socialist rhetoric of the day that emphasized a Spain that must look beyond the divisions of the past as Felipe González had announced in 1986. If Spain's commitment to democratic rule appeared certain by 1989, it was less clear as to how it would interpret the memory of the War and the regime that ruled the country for almost forty years. This discursive struggle was perhaps just beginning in earnest.

Grinnell College Dennis Perri

NOTES

[1]José Sanchis Sinisterra, *¡Ay, Carmela! Elegía de una Guerra Civil en dos actos y un epílogo,* (Madrid: El Público, 1989), 261. All citations from the play will be taken from this edition and incorporated into the text.
[2]Santos Juliá attributes this moderation and compromise to the changes in Spanish society even before the death of Franco (110-11). Heywood contends that the Spanish electorate is essentially moderate and that political candidates conducted mild campaigns in order to "avoid any actions which might destabilize the democratic experiment" (172, 176-79).
[3]Humlebaek points out that the ultraright did celebrate the event and those newspaper articles that spoke to the event considered it as that which should never be repeated ("Victory Becomes Peace: Remembering a Civil War" NP).
[4]*¡Ay Carmela!* is not the only text that remembered the Civil War and/or its repressive legacy; see Fusi and Labayni (112 and "Narrative in Culture . . . " 159).
[5]For a discussion of the works' critique of the Nationalists see Sánchez Dueñas, Gómez ("La irreductible heterogeneidad . . ." 203-10), and Pillado.
[6]Consult Makris (327), Gómez ("La irreductible heterogeneidad. . ." 203), Pérez Gómez (2-3), and Podol ("*¡Ay, Carmela!* . . ." 200).
[7]For a discussion of metathetrical dimensions in the two texts consult Podol ("El teatro en el cine . . . "310) and Gómez (*Del escenario a la pantalla* . . .89-108)
[8]During the late 80s, Saura turned to a more distant historical past in order to problematize the roots of the Spanish character, e.g., the conquest in El dorado (1988) and sixteenth century religious intolerance in La noche oscura (1989).
[9]Kathleen Vernon also links one of Saura's films from this period (Dulces horas (1982) to Spain's transformation to democracy: "Thus, I suggest, it would be a mistake to take Juan Sagahún's happy resolution of his personal trauma as a purely private matter. Taking a page from Spanish history's perhaps equally improbable happy ending to nearly forty years of Francoism, Saura's film affirms, not without irony, a nation's capacity to rewrite its relationship to a traumatic past in terms of a more promising present" (138)

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