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The paradoxes of film and the recovery of historical memory: Vicente Aranda's works on the Spanish Civil War

Stephen Schwartz

Nearly seventy years after it ended, the Spanish civil war of 1936–39, and its immediate aftermath, suddenly regained the attention of the global public when *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006, written and directed by the Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro), won Academy Awards in 2007 for cinematography, art direction, and makeup. *Pan's Labyrinth* is a fantasy set in 1944, in which the girl-child Ofelia (played by Ivana Baquero), the step-daughter of a fanatical Franco army officer, escapes the cruelties and hypocrisy of the dictatorial regime through an alternate universe. Del Toro's entry into the field of European historical memory was surprising given that his previous work (e.g. *Hellboy*, 2004) was technically ultra-fashionable, but primitive in its intellectual conception. But what can be said about such issues? Obviously, computer gaming and effects, and the sudden respectability of comic books, have already transformed cinema art so that a leap from the infernal fantasies of video games to the real suffering in the aftermath of the twentieth century's most poignant and passionate historical conflict was unsurprising.

Films about the Spanish combat between the radical republic and the diverse totalitarian forces of counter-revolution have never been easily categorized as war films – regardless of which side, or which group of foreign sympathizers of a competing faction, produced them. The Spanish civil war is often described as 'the last idealists' war', when it would

be better called the last authentic social revolution. Because of the deep emotion, symbolism, myths, parables, and allegories the war evoked and created, it became the first 'proto-cinematic war', in which dramatic images generated in newspapers, newsreels, and the work of individual photographers and poster artists were clearly destined to become the raw material for a distinctive cinematic genre. Although excessively long, slow and talky, the 1943 production of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, starring Gary Cooper as Robert Jordan, an American *guerrilla* volunteer, and Ingrid Bergman as María, with her hair cropped, proved unforgettable for a large and mainly youthful American audience (many adult men were away fighting the Axis). Its only really great moment is its last, when Bergman screams the name of Cooper's character – 'Roberto! R-o-o-be-e-rt-o!!' – in unfathomable anguish, as Francoist soldiers and anti-Franco *guerrilleros* fight and die in the mountains. Yet the moment is uniquely transcendent in film history.

A year before, in 1942, Warner Bros. released *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz, with a stun-

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Fig. 1. Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman in Sam Wood's version of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943).

ningly charismatic performance by Bergman as Ilse, an antifascist refugee wracked by romantic ambivalence. She played opposite Humphrey Bogart as the American Rick Blaine, made cynical, or so it seems, by his experience assisting the Spanish Republic and the Ethiopians against the forces of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy in the mid-'30s. At the end, however, Bogart/Blaine is 'welcomed back' to the antifascist struggle by Paul Henreid, playing Victor Laszlo, the 'stiff' anti-Nazi Resistance fighter.

Neither film alluded to the moral ambiguities of the left in the Spanish civil war, or their impact on the generations that experienced it. Although largely forgotten today, *The Fallen Sparrow*, also released in 1943, with John Garfield and Maureen O'Hara, is a middle-rank *film noir* that, at least, more clearly associated the war with prison torture, Nazi terrorism, and hardened Spanish militancy. It was based on a novel by mystery writer Dorothy B. Hughes. Garfield was its only cast member with a notable leftist reputation, and his character, Kit, seems tougher and more 'anarchist' than Communist. While he refers to the

destruction of his 'brigade' of volunteers in the war, it is never specified whether his unit was American or even international. Kit's truculence and his association, in a subplot, with Italian-Americans, suggests that he might have served with Italian leftist volunteers, who ranged from anarchism to Stalinist communism – with the latter in a small minority – or even in Spanish ranks. In a striking item of dialogue, Garfield-Kit is asked by a police captain why he has a gun permit, and he replies bluntly, 'to shoot people!'

Most widely-seen films about the Spanish civil war were made by foreigners, a predictable outcome given that from 1939 to the death of Franco in 1975 the war remained controversial, if not forbidden, in movies coming from Spain itself. The greatest of all Spanish film-makers, Luis Buñuel, made no dramatic films about the war after his departure from the country during the agony of the republic. But the cinematic canon also embodied the fundamental problem of international historiography on the Spanish civil war. This was the gap between the war as experienced or observed by foreigners, who saw in it mainly a contest between external fascist and democratic powers, and as lived by the Spanish peoples themselves, who viewed it as a profound social transformation. This became a repetitive pattern of twentieth century intellectual dissonance.

Many other cinematic references to the Spanish civil war could be cited, including an eloquent scene in Andrzej Wajda's classic *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), that strange, neo-Communist near-parody of the 1955 *Rebel Without A Cause* – perhaps it could have been released as *Rebel With A Cause*. Wajda's film included the ill-fated Zbigniew Cybulski as a sensational East-European combination of Brando, Elvis, and James Dean, permanently in sunglasses – and playing an anti-Communist underground fighter. In that work Communist bureaucrats listen to a recording of a Spanish civil war song, symbolizing the long climb of Soviet-subsidized Poles from defeat in the '30s, and the disbanding of the Polish Communist Party at Stalin's command, to power over their people.

Some films about Spain were based on the experiences of post-Franco *guerrillas* and secret agents based in French exile, such as Fred Zinnemann's 1964 *Behold a Pale Horse*, a rendition of an Emeric Pressburger novel, with Gregory Peck as a revolutionary *guerrillero* operating from France, Anthony Quinn as a Franco policeman, and Omar Sharif as a Catholic priest. The film betrays inferior knowl-

edge of local Spanish, Basque, or Catalan customs on the border with France, compared with Pressburger's 1961 novel (*Killing A Mouse on Sunday*). *Behold a Pale Horse*, like the novel, is believed to be based on the life of the Catalan anarchist Francesc 'Quico' Sabate Llopart (1915–60), who continued battling the regime after the Republican defeat, arms in hand, until his slaying by Catalan rural militia. (*Behold a Pale Horse* also has a musical score by Maurice Jarre based on the pro-Franco Falangists' anthem *Cara al sol* [*Facing the Sun*]). Often seen as a sort of companion piece to 1963's *Lawrence of Arabia*, with Peck substituting for Peter O'Toole and Quinn and Sharif reprising their subsidiary status, the film has been neglected.

Frédéric Rossif's 1965 semi-documentary *Mourir à Madrid* (*To Die in Madrid*) was, by contrast, simplistic in its radical, pro-Soviet romanticism. But it contributed a catch-phrase to the '60s generation and their successors. The first major international film of value on the Bosnian war of 1992–95, a conflict that had strong echoes of the Spanish civil war, was Bernard-Henri Lévy's badly-neglected *Bosna!* (1994), which is rather obviously imitative of Rossif's work. Alain Resnais' 1966 *La Guerre est Finie*, written by Spanish ex-Communist Jorge Semprun and starring Yves Montand, Ingrid Thulin, and Geneviève Bujold, expressed the exhaustion of a Spanish Communist functionary living in exile in France and regularly penetrating the Spanish interior as a courier – a dissonant message in the radical '60s, but one more insightful than many of its early viewers could imagine.

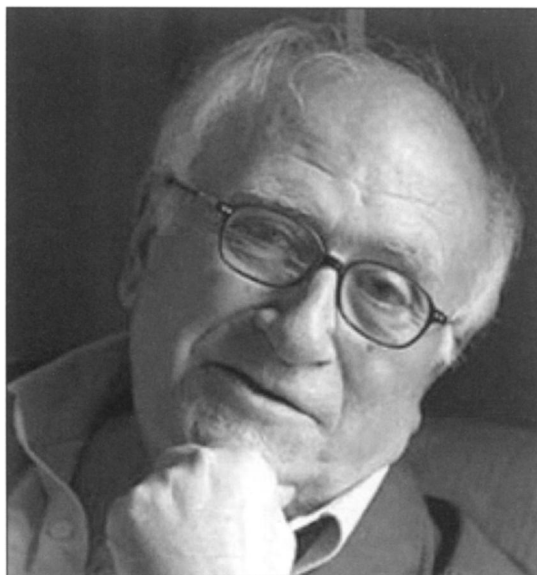
Many foreign literary and historical works about Spain identified vaguely with the Communist version of the war's historiography, in which the allegedly-valiant Soviet Union under Stalin, and the Spanish Communist leaders, represented the vanguard of the people's self-defence. So crude an approach was seldom presented in film. When in 1995 Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* appeared, it was shocking to many foreigners in its anti-Stalinism and overt identification with the Partit Obrer d'Unificació Marxista (POUM), the militia of which included George Orwell, author of the most famously controversial account of the war by a non-Spanish commentator, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Orwell's book was, for its time, distinctive in presenting the Soviets and Spanish Communists as agents of counter-revolution, repression in Spanish Republican ranks, and mercenary betrayal.

Land and Freedom told the story of an English Communist who travels to Spain and more or less by chance enlists in the POUM militia. He is disillusioned by the actions of the Stalinists, including assassination of Spanish revolutionaries. But while it greatly satisfied foreign and some Spanish anti-Stalinists, it was a retort in the void, since, in an unnoticed but significant fact, no major film had aggressively supported the Communist position on the war. (The grossly mediocre 1938 *Blockade*, a vehicle for the propaganda aims of Stalinist screenwriter John Howard Lawson no less than for actor Henry Fonda – playing a secret police agent hunting Trotskyists – does not count.) Indeed, for most of the generation that lived through it, all over the world, the Spanish civil war and perceived Soviet subversion of the republic represented an undeniably distasteful memory, even if unacknowledged.

This outlook was universal, but was uprooted in Anglo-American academic historiography after the 1960s, and the influence of historians, rather than filmmakers, decreed that the anti-Stalinist message in Loach's work would be provocative. *Land and Freedom* was ferociously condemned by superannuated Stalinist 'international' volunteers and their apologists. Nevertheless, *Land and Freedom* is deeply flawed. Above all, it aggravates the above-noted error of analyzing the war through foreign, rather than Spanish eyes. It includes two inept elements in which Loach took great pride, but which are unfortunate rather than significant. One is a key scene in which inarticulate Catalan peasants aimlessly discuss collectivization of local farm land, and turn to the foreign volunteers for advice. Loach himself said this setup comprised the summit of the work, when it is, in reality, 'cringe-making', in the present-day idiom. Spanish and, especially, Catalan anarchist peasants had read, discussed, and thought about collectivization for three generations, and did not need to stumble through inarticulate colloquies about it. Nor was it probable that they would pay attention to the views of outsiders, except for a handful of well-known foreign anarchists. Even the Spanish anarchists were unconvinced of the usefulness of foreign leftist volunteers in the war, preferring that 'international' supporters return to their own countries and there carry out propaganda in favor the Spanish revolution.

Loach has also been over-praised, and has narcissistically preened, over his emphasis on spontaneous dialogue and the employment of amateur

Fig. 2. Catalan director Vicente Aranda Ezquerra.



actors, who supposedly represent popular types, in his work. Unfortunately, however, movies are movies and acting stars are not simply manufactured mannequins to be discarded altogether. Finally, Loach's film is no less a fantasy, outside Spanish reality, than *Pan's Labyrinth* – but the latter at least embodies a Hispanic consciousness absent from Loach's work.

I believe the clearest film depiction of the Spanish civil war comes to us from Vicente Aranda Ezquerra, a leading Catalan director – self-taught in film art – who was born in 1926 and lived through the civil war. Aranda is an unabashed sympathizer of the Spanish anarchosindicalist movement, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) and its active cadre formation, the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI). Paradoxically, however, the first title in his Spanish war trilogy – *Aventis* (originally titled *Si te dicen que caí* (*If They Tell You I Fell*)) – was more sympathetic to the POUM. It was released in 1989, fourteen years after Franco's death.

Aranda's engagement with civil war issues came after a successful career making films with erotic and crime themes. None of his pictures gained a major release in English-language markets, and although the director is extremely popular in Spain, and is associated with the career of the actor and singer Victoria Abril, he is unknown outside the Hispanic world. With the conclusion of his 'revolution and civil war' trilogy he returned to his classic themes – sex and transgression – before beginning a new phase as a director of period films set in the Spanish and Catalan past.

Aventis was followed in the war trilogy by a five-hour series aired in 1990 on the national network Televisión Española (TVE), *Los Jinetes del Alba* (*Riders of the Dawn* – hereinafter *Jinetes*.) Both films evinced narrow cinema resources and the restriction of many scenes to key actors and interactions between them. In 1996, however, Aranda produced his spectacular summation (so far) about the war, *Libertarias*, the epic of six members of the anarchist women's organization, the Mujeres Libres (Free Women), which was a significant component of the revolutionary movement in Spain. But *Libertarias* was also produced with the cooperation of the remaining CNT in Spain, and includes magnificent spectacle and crowd scenes in which Aranda brought to life the newsreels and stock images that had electrified the world in 1936.

All three of these works are available in the U.S. on DVD, and I will not spoil the pleasure I hope the interested spectator will enjoy in watching them. Suffice to say that Aranda's memory of the Spanish torment is nearly faultless, his vision authentic, and his cinematic touch sure. His fidelity to the POUM and, even more, the CNT, demonstrates conclusively that inside the Spanish left, regardless of the legends prevalent among Communist-nostalgic foreign intellectuals, the anti-Stalinists have won the battle of historic memory.

In *Libertarias*, along with Aranda's other works, there is no temptation to avoid female and male stars, or a frank and even brutal eroticism. Many scenes appear in his films that could never be anticipated in a politically-correct opus like that of Loach, but are undeniably Iberian in their reality. Aranda is a feminist: sexual exploitation and especially prostitution and humiliation appear as repeated and effective themes in *Aventis*, *Jinetes*, and *Libertarias*, along with lesbianism and homosexuality. So does the trope of the hidden and deformed female soul – in *Aventis*, a fugitive girl whose identity is ambiguous; in *Jinetes* a handicapped girl with webbed fingers kept prisoner in a cell. In *Libertarias*, we find a nun transformed by anarchism (María, played by a child-like Ariadna Gil – later to perform as the mother in *Pan's Labyrinth*) and an anarchist-spiritualist, Floren, who is lame, with one leg permanently deformed, and is played by the main star of all three films, the doe-eyed, then dark-souled Victoria Abril. Today Abril, who has also worked with Pedro Almodóvar, is one of Spain's great film personalities.

Aranda's works are, in their way, no less fan-

tastical than *Pan's Labyrinth* and many other Spanish films, including the surrealist achievements of Buñuel. 'Aventis', as in the title of that film, are juvenile adventures based on rumors, derived from the Catalan slang of Barcelona street children in 1940, the year after Franco's victory. But the real topic of *Aventis* is the universe of debasement imposed on the working class of Barcelona by its catastrophic defeat. The picture was based on the novel *Si te dicen que caí* by Juan Marsé, published in Barcelona in 1973 and one of the most important recent Spanish literary works. The title of the original, *If They Tell You I Fell*, was drawn from the lyrics of the Falangist song *Cara al sol* – the same whose melody runs through *Behold a Pale Horse* – and is obviously satirical. But the content of the work is finally depressing and even shocking. The book appeared in 1979, from Little, Brown, in an inferior English translation by Helen R. Lane; both the translation into a foreign language and the currently-available dubbed English DVD version miss major elements that only Barcelonese or others who intimately know the city and its revolutionary history would recognize.

Aventis is told in flashback from the 1970s and 1980s, but is mainly set in 1940, during the Stalin-Hitler pact. The protagonists, including an anarchist resistance circle, refer repeatedly to 'the Chinese' as enemies equal to the Francoists, and even as allied with the latter against the radical resistance. 'Xinesos' in Catalan, or 'chinos' in Spanish, was the famous nickname given to Soviet agents in Barcelona by their opponents. Newsreels in a movie house show Franco meeting with Hitler, and Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov parleying with German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. The film clearly suggests that during the pact the Communists and Francoists cooperated in Spain to hunt down and kill anti-Stalinists – 'the Chinese and the fascists have teamed up to kill us, but we're alive', an anarchist declares. A main theme of both the book and film is the concealment from Falangist police of a POUM soldier, Marcos, played by Antonio Banderas. But Marcos is equally afraid of the 'Chinese' – he believes he is still 'remembered in the Kremlin'. References to 'the Chinese' would be incomprehensible to a foreign audience, probably even to anti-Stalinists, as would be brief comments about the involvement of the Soviets in suppressing the May protests of 1937 which were described by Orwell. (Orwell makes a spectral appearance in the original novel.) So would remarks about the Barcelona work-

ing-class district called the '*Barri xinès*' – 'Chinatown' – and Francoist suppression of Catalan folk dancing.

In the street, the hidden Marcos is described in the childrens' '*aventis*' as a Franco soldier who hid during the revolutionary period and has yet to learn that his side has won, or as a Soviet aviator. But Marcos himself is obsessed by the memory of a young woman, Aurora Nin, played by Abril. This reference could not but stir the Catalan audience, for Aurora Nin is described as a niece of Andreu Nin (1892–1937), the famous Catalan writer and POUM leader assassinated by the Communists – as mentioned in the film. Aurora Nin, who also calls herself Ramona, has been reduced to defilement in sex shows and to open prostitution, although pregnant. The symbolism of Barcelona's maltreated soul, degraded but fecund with a reborn self-awareness, is obvious and deeply affecting, especially as presented by Abril.

Marcos is not alone in hunting Aurora Nin – his brother Java, played by Jorge Sanz – who performs with Abril in the other two components of the trilogy – has been induced to search her out, but must perform sexually with her while watched by a Francoist voyeur with whom she has convoluted links. Further, various other individuals claim they want to provide for her charitably but clearly seek her for her civil-war past, which is too-briefly depicted. In an authentic star turn, Abril plays both the young Aurora Nin/Ramona, and an adult prostitute, Menchu, at one point with both at the same bar. '*Aventis*' include street-children's games imitative of Francoist tortures, while the anarchists carry out jewelry thefts and plan other attacks on the regime. Aurora Nin's fate as a prostitute explicitly refers, by contrast, to the wartime revolutionary effort to end the sex trade among women, when the postwar anarchists raid a whorehouse (a Spanish institution that figures in each of the three films).

The party was internationally libeled for decades by the Communists as traitors to the Spanish left, but no film more eloquently portrays the fidelity of Catalan popular memory to the true history of the POUM in the civil war. In Barcelona today, a street is named for Andreu Nin, and a plaza for George Orwell. But the works that succeeded it, although more rigorously realistic, surpass it in incorporating a reality that must seem otherworldly to many viewers today.

Victoria Abril is often radiant in *Los Jinetes del Alba* (1990), playing Marian, the daughter of a



Fig. 3. *Los jinetes del Alba* (1990), Aranda's five-hour television series dealing with the 1934 Asturias insurrection.

woman working at Las Caldas, a spa in the northern region of Asturias. Much of the action takes place during the revolutionary events in that Spanish principality in October 1934, when miners led by anarchists, anti-Stalinists, and socialists, briefly established a commune. Aranda has noted in a television interview included in the series' DVD that *Jinetes* (based on a novel by Jesús Fernández Santos) was the first film ever made in Spain about the 1934 Asturias insurrection, and that the director had to research its history thoroughly. Jorge Sanz again appears with Abril, as Martín, a patient at the spa who earns his keep by handling wild Asturian horses – which appear repeatedly as a motif – and then becomes an anarchist, an illegal *guerrillero* after the civil war ends, and Abril's lover.

Set in a semi-rural environment very different from the urban culture of Barcelona, *Jinetes* introduces mystical cultural elements, including an ecstatic hermit, folk healing, and the appeal of Protestant missionaries. As a five-hour television series, *Jinetes* includes many passionate, erotic scenes. But in an item of dialogue doubtless unexpected to the Spanish audience, none other than Leon Trotsky is blamed for inspiring the Asturias Commune – a detail based on historical fact, since Trotskyist and other anti-Stalinist groups that later made up the POUM were leading elements in the 1934 uprising. The series includes striking images of radical miners armed with belts of dynamite, as well as references to the shock among the bourgeoisie when Moroccan mercenaries were brought to Asturias to suppress the workers (the principality was

the only part of Spain never invaded by Arabs during the Islamic period from 711 to 1492). The Spanish right portrayed itself as traditionalist and Catholic, but had no hesitation to enlist Arab mercenaries to suppress the proletarians. In one mordant note, a man destined to become a Francoist officer proclaims that all the counter-revolutionaries are 'Republicans'.

Jinetes includes discussions among anarchists that are far more articulate and convincing than those in Loach's *Land and Freedom*. The period between the collapse of the 1934 insurrection and the 1936 Spanish election, which was won by the left, is depicted in an especially interesting way. Until the full outbreak of civil war in 1936, the radicals must hide in the mountains as *guerrilleros*, while imprisonment of the active militants becomes a major political question. *Jinetes* includes a few anachronisms, but none that contemporary audiences, aside from professional historians and a few recusant revolutionary militants, now at least 90 years of age, would notice.

Both *Aventis* and *Jinetes* conclude with elaborate terrorist actions, and flaws on the revolutionary side are openly disclosed – mainly, a taste for violence. *Libertarias* (1996) also reveals weaknesses in the radical camp, chiefly in the form of male chauvinism, but its sequence of episodes in the revolution as seen by a group of anarchist women cannot be adequately described in an abbreviated review. *Libertarias* is, in my opinion, the finest motion picture ever made about the Spanish civil war. It includes actors, character names, and other elements that join it with its two predecessors. Aside from Abril as the crippled occultist Floren, and Ariadna Gil as the former nun, it includes Jorge Sanz as a young anarchist militant, and Miguel Bosé, an adulated Panamanian actor and pop star, in the role of a former priest who has become the secretary of the charismatic anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti (1896–1936). The popular actress Ana Belén, who like Abril has a second career as a singer, takes the role of Pilar, an anarchist militant and lesbian. Abril's scenes of mystical possession, with references to customs and other elements that most foreigners would never comprehend, are a major aspect of the film and, in Aranda's trajectory, reintroduce the folk habits encountered in Asturias into Barcelonese culture. Abril is possessed by a *duende*, the Spanish translation of *djinn* – an Islamic spirit-being. (Grossly incompetent Anglo-Saxon authors and academics have, by the way, completely misrepresented the presence of the *duende* in Spanish lore, based on

mistranslations of a famous essay by the poet García Lorca. A *duende* is a supernatural being, not an abstraction or an attitude.)

Perhaps the least that needs to be said of Vicente Aranda is that in *Libertarias* he has made the speeches and other commentaries of Durruti, and citations from the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, brilliantly serve as text in a work of cinema, which is hardly easy. Only one foreigner appears in *Libertarias* – an American journalist, probably based on the once famous Pierre van Paassen, who is presented as naïve and uninspired. The final lesson of Aranda's Spanish civil war trilogy is one he can hardly have

anticipated: that, as I have argued on many occasions, there are two historical memories of the Spanish civil war – not the two within Spain, nationalist and leftist – but an indigenous Spanish memory of revolution and a foreign recollection of distant manipulation and obscure atrocities. Aranda has restored to the Spanish public the authentic historical memory of the anarchist revolutionary movement that once swept the peninsula. His works, which are subtitled as well as dubbed on DVD, deserve to be watched and studied by everybody interested in the devastation of Spain during the late 1930s.

Abstract: The paradoxes of film and the recovery of historical memory: Vicente Aranda's works on the Spanish Civil War, by Stephen Schwartz

This essay contrasts the popular and artistically-respected films of the Catalan director Vicente Aranda, who is considered friendly to the legacy of Spanish anarchism, with other recent and past films on the Spanish civil war of 1936–39. It describes and evaluates Aranda's 'war trilogy': *Si te dicen que caí*, 1989, (*The Fallen*, re-released as *Aventis*), the TV serial *Los jinetes del alba*, 1990 (*Riders of the Dawn*), and *Libertarias*, 1996.

Key words: Vicente Aranda, Spanish civil war, Catalonia, anarchism, POUM, Victoria Abril, Antonio Banderas, Ken Loach, *Casablanca*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Fallen Sparrow*, *Behold a Pale Horse*, *Mourir à Madrid*, *Land and Freedom*, *El Laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*), *Libertarias*, *Los jinetes del alba*, *Si te dicen que caí*.