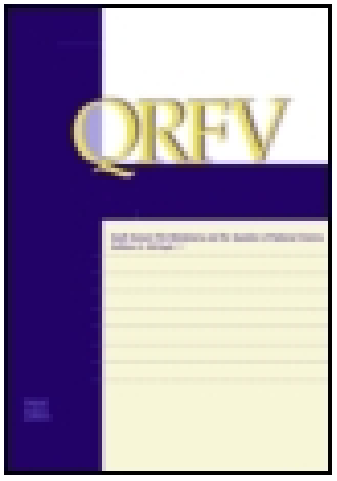

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Witness to War: Virginal Vicissitudes in Vicente Aranda's Libertarias (1996)

MARIA VAN LIEW

> "Accepting a priori the assumption that women are best thought of as victims in any nationalist mobilization that has turned violent dulls the analytical curiosity. Ultimately, this dulled curiosity produces explanations that are naive in their descriptions of power and camouflage men as ungendered actors." (Cynthia Enloe, 53).

It is unlikely that the spectator of Vicente Aranda's fictional reenactment of women's active participation during the Spanish Civil War, *Libertarias* (1996), knows much about the conflict. Nonetheless, this film establishes a link between the spectator and the narrative witness as a means of engaging two historical points of discursive departure that bridge nearly sixty years of dictatorship and democratic recovery. The accountability of a diegetic witness and the contemporary spectator is established through the shared coordinates of witnessing a wartime shift in women's social status, most notably among the Popular Front armies. Until the fall of General Franco's regime in 1975, Spain's counter-memories of the war had been censored, explored in exile, or interwoven into metaphorical allusion. Upon the outbreak of democracy, fictional women gained an increasingly significant role in dissident literary and film representations of collective and individual memories of the war and its aftermath.

Most notably, images of a woman's capacity for violence emerged as representative of the contradictions of the early democratic period and its relationship to changing notions of gender. By the 1980s, images of the modern Spanish woman were welcomed by the Spanish Socialist Workers Party's campaign (1982–1996) to promote a European image welcoming an interplay of generic styles catering to the assumed universality of a female capacity for violence in a western market of "liberated" women (Van Liew, 214). By the 1990s, diverse images of the Spanish Civil War surfaced in commercial films and documentaries, contributing to revisions of representations of the political left officially shunned after their defeat in 1939.

Decades of censorship prohibited discussion of the fact that some 200 women actually fought against the fascists on the Republican front lines. The revival of a cinematic consideration of the contribution of women anarchists has been turned over to the contemporary spectator, implicated as witness to a story loosely based on the historical

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accounts of women heroes sternly put back in their place by neo-Catholic fascist decree. María Asunción Gómez asserts that the use of archival footage, real people, events and other historical documents to legitimize *Libertaria's* fictitious plot creates a false sense of the national appreciation of women's military heroism (293–310). However, the film's manipulation of historical material helps to successfully relate the struggles of working class women fighting on two fronts–against the rise of fascism in Spain and against the sexism exhibited by the majority of their comrades in arms.

Despite an adversarial environment, this libertarian cadre perseveres in its efforts to "free" Spain from the injustices of social hierarchy and women from the confines of patriarchal design. Due to the duality proposed by the rhetoric of "salvation" their ideology shares with Franco's Catholic revivalism campaign, which also proposes to "save "the country from itself, innocence is rendered an impossible virtue. Rather than the artifice of historical reconstruction in the film, it is Franco's revival of the association of Spanish women with virtuous national icons such as Isabelle the Catholic and Saint Teresa of Avila that proves detrimental to clear consideration of real women's participation in the war effort. During the civil war the political left also worked against women combatants, forcing them back to the rearguard by 1937 on the pretext that women were making men sick.

The focal point of this study is the ideological bifurcation represented by María (Ariadna Gil), a Catholic nun swept up in the violence of war due to a Republican raid on her monastery. Exposed to radical theories of social reconstruction, rape, and the massacre of her comrades, she is ultimately captured by Francoist forces. While she initially occupies the role of innocent bystander, María quickly attains the status of narrative witness held accountable for her role in the conflict. Towards the end of the film, a Catholic priest is confounded by Maria's monastic medallions, Republican uniform, and bloodied face: "My dear, God knows you only suffer in conjunction with your guilt."

Maria's positioning as victim of the conflict does not exonerate her or the spectator, visually linked through numerous point-of-view shots, from complicity with existing social structures such as Catholic institutions riddled with centuries of social hypocrisy and the political injustices exacerbated by a disproportionate amount of private property ownership. In this manner, María becomes the key to the role of outsider made insider evoked by her paradoxical participation in the anarcho-syndicalist revolution. The spectator encounters several contradictions embodied by María, who must participate in the violence of the Spanish Civil War in an effort to survive the same. Namesake of the consummate image of virginal victimization, María's role bears the masochistic tone of self-sacrifice for the common good; in this case by straddling ideological extremes in order to outlive and to transcend the experience of defeat as fictional counterpart to lived history. The act of witnessing invoked by María attests to the persistence of competing visions for the future of Spain undeterred by decades of dictatorship.

Emphasizing the notion of innocence as the weak, vulnerable link in the historical chain of events represented in the film, the opening scene offers nuns' habits twittering in a flurry of haste to vacate their monastery under Republican siege while the Mother Superior doles out coins to fund each woman's possible escape. Turning to María, "the most innocent, the most vulnerable, the one furthest from her home," she has her recite Saint Matthew: "Is life not more than nourishment, the body nothing more than vestments. . ." Our introduction to the terrified nun is to an interiorized conformity to traditional religious values now in danger of bodily harm. "God will never abandon you," insists the Mother Superior as she thrusts 'her flock' into the street. Traditional Catholic continuity confronted by an explosion of militant resentment on the part of the working classes and women is rendered impossible in this opening scene.

Adding a carnivalesque tone to María's vulnerability in the street, members of an Anarquist militia dressed as a bishop and other select clergy declare: "Little nun-comrades, don't be afraid. The revolution respects women, even those of the clergy!" Witnessing this spectacle, María quickly sheds her habit and finds refuge in a brothel she has mistaken for a Catholic household due to a religious plaque of welcome on the door. The notion of appearances as disguise is soon clear when María is welcomed in and quickly stripped naked and the plaque removed by a scantily clad prostitute. Within five minutes, the spectator's introduction to María as "the nun" is disbanded by her sudden nudity. Stripped of her identity in the name of survival, María is placed in another vulnerable position; non-identification with the Church. Hanging in this void by the chain of medallions she conserves around her neck, María's naked body becomes the now safe disguise of a prostitute in bed. The spectator, voyeuristically invested in the spectacle of María's plight, becomes party to a directorial approach that forces her to suffer, constantly thrusting the diegetic witness into historical circumstances that require her metamorphosis in the name of survival.

The brothel environment quickly morphs under the guidance of the house "Madame," who now expects financial gain not only in exchange for the sexual satisfaction of male clients even in times of war, but for harboring hunted clergy members. A point-of-view shot from the bed where María lies terrified, begins to forge the collusion of spectator and witness to the entrance of a frantic Catholic bishop who quickly disrobes in front of her. Divested of their institutional regalia, the remaining indication of a mutual commitment to the Church remains their jewelry: María's religious medallions and the bishop's ring, which the "Madame" kisses before leaving the room. The situation of the two refugees, "disguised" as prostitute and client when a woman anarchist breaks down the locked door with the butt of her rifle, would be comical under any other circumstances.

But in this wartime environment of ideological animosity, the spectator's voyeurism is nudged towards empathy with María's terrified state through a point of view shot of the equally fearful pudgy bishop undressing, a man who correctly assumes that a feminist-anarchist's hatred of the Catholic Church is deadlier than her disdain for the exploitation of a woman's body. This sudden exposure to violence traumatizes María and forces the spectator to associate herself with her, since neither off-screen spectator nor on-screen witness would otherwise be involved in the conflict. Hence the conflation of outsider as insider is established, however precariously, through the use of María's body to lure the voyeur into the realm of historical victimization.

Clothed in a frock and a ridiculous hat, María is shuffled out to join the other women who are "liberated" once convinced of their slave-like roles in society: "Do you want to spend the rest of your lives spreading your legs for a plate of lentils?" Gómez, again, takes the director to task: "In *Libertarias* Aranda uses two of the oldest stereotypes in the history of representation of women in literature and film: the nun and the prostitute. Both characters are portrayed unrealistically; they need only to hear a few indoctrinating words from their 'liberators' to embrace feminist-anarchist ideology and sacrifice their lives at the front" (308). I would argue, however, that these very stereotypes exemplify the artificiality of difference between Libertarian and Reactionary politics, both of which function from extreme notions of correct female behavior; either openly sexual or asexual. Often cited for his misogynistic portrayal of women's sexuality, Aranda demonstrates uncharacteristic restraint from exploiting the sexually charged possibilities this dramatic scene offers.

The redressing of the prostitutes as soldiers initiates a process of cross-dressing that invites the spectator to join in the masquerade by identifying with María's traumatic loss of identity. Cross-dressing as a sign of the political conflicts of 1930s Spain creates a space of identification with the contemporary spectator through the carnivalesque necessity of

María's transformations. In other words, the spectator is lured into the excitement of the conflict from the safe vantage point of sixty years of historical separation. Images of María's suffering serve as the dramatic vehicle driving the sadistic narrative, relentless in its abuse of her monastic innocence and desire for neutrality.

The masochism implicit in identifying with this diegetic witness is offset by the pleasure of knowing the image, of entertaining the trauma of an historical event without having to live it. The many hats of spectatorial pleasure including virginal innocence and anarchic activism offer the contradictory status of 'being there' without running the risk. Nevertheless, the force of *Libertarias*, despite its abusiveness of the witness, carries the spectator by association to a point of social and political accountability. By identification with the outsider turned insider, the spectator is tricked into assuming the same responsibility that María accrues through the powerful lure of violent imagery and the desire to survive.

Initiated into the game of appearances required during wartime, María's outer disguises reveal the transmutation of her motivation to "do good." In her study of "an uncompromising ideological rejection" on the part of women activists from the left and right of the political spectrum, Victoria Lorée Enders explains that these extremes can justify their deeds for the common good depending on the historical contextualization of such claims. The Women's Section of the Falange (Sección Femenina*),* a women's organization that functioned under Franco in a "supporting" social role, endorsed the Church's assessment of women's nature and place in complement to her husband, which included "her sacred duty" as mother (376).

In 1944 the director Pilar Primo de Rivera expressed the urgency of his mission to impose a single idea of femininity upon the multiple images of female activity that had arisen under the Republic: "Not a minute, not a day can be wasted in this complicated mission to teach, for which the Patria must make haste so that no woman escapes our influence and so that they all know, in any situation, how to react according to *our Falangist understanding of life and history*" (Martín Gaite, 61; my emphasis). Surviving members of the Sección Femenina (disbanded in 1977) interviewed by Lorée Enders between 1987–89, view their work as "revolutionary" for the time: "In the mental world which informed their outlook, Catholicism defied Communism, religion challenged atheism, and the family stood as the last bulwark against the license and degradation that *threatened* women" (378; my emphasis).

In the eyes of the political left, justified under democracy to publicly criticize these Falangist women, the Sección Feminina was guilty–of wrongdoing–by association with the Franco regime and its collusion with patriarchy and capitalism. "Even shared historical experiences, transmuted through mutually exclusive perceptions of the world, will result in antithetical interpretations and opposing constructions" (378). As Lorée Enders demonstrates, liberal and radical Spanish women denounce the Falangists for having participated in Spanish politics "for the wrong reasons." Hence, her contemporary vantage point declares that it is not only what one endeavors by participating, but the motivation behind such activity. Lorée Enders attempts to give voice to the "revolutionary" endeavors of these Catholic adherents to Francoism in order to offer a better understanding of the contradictions embodied by *all* efforts to "do good."

María's blind faith, represented by her "marriage" to God, evolves into more proactive empathy. "Matar es pecado/To kill is a sin" she repeats throughout the film, an assertion that gains weight as her exposure to the atrocities of war reinforces this conviction. María's "fate" at the hands of revolutionaries reveals itself as a survival tactic rather than the outcome of God's will. The militant Pilar (Ana Belén) takes pity on María's and becomes her protector in a Republican context denying God's existence. Ironically located in the *Convento de la Concepción* for their first night together, Pilar points out that her long name, María de la

Concepción de la. . .. clearly indicates a wealthy familial background. To emphasize the point of class identification through naming, she adds: "Pilar Sánchez, that's it; poor as a church mouse." Recognizing the invisible through naming now accompanies María's visual mutations. By replacing María's bourgeois hat with an anarchist scarf—"That's better, just like a peasant"– Pilar and the other militants begin to dismantle her "innocence" as coterminous with the hypocrisy of the Catholic church, much like the prostitutes protect clerics by disrobing them.

By dressing appropriately for the historical event of civil strife, this on-screen witness masquerades as a Republican sympathizer and eventually embraces the role. "[T]he masquerade paradigm has been filled out at the liberatory end of the [political] spectrum and many more critics are now considering the radical possibilities of what might be called spectatorial cross-dressing, a vision which takes its inspiration from the socially subversive meanings and increased options of sexual disguise" (Gaines 25). María's body becomes a site of spectatorial cross-dressing, since the position of viewing the spectacle of civil war in 1996 is one of historical removal, reliant on masquerading the memory of its contradictions in order to bear the responsibility of validating it. By re-dressing María's claim to neutrality in a body of political and social accountability, the historical traces of women's political participation under Republican Spain is addressed anew in 1996 as the constitutional property of all Spaniards. Thus, in this contemporary context María embodies the ideological bifurcation that still "threatens" to divide Spaniards from within.

Upon seeing a simple wedding band on her finger, Pilar inquires: "To whom are you married?" María responds, "To God (*El Señor*)," to which Pilar retorts, "How nice, a husband for whom you don't have to make the bed or dinner." Through many such sarcastic remarks, María is compelled to straddle opposing ideologies, visually paralleled as she awkwardly sits astride Pilar's motorcycle en route to a Republican stronghold. Disguised as a working class soldier, donning slacks, a button-down shirt and the red/black scarf of the revolutionary, María is safely carried to the Republican stronghold Barcelona. Holding on tightly to Pilar as her guardian, a unity develops between the two women. It is interesting to note that the actress Ariadna Gil's short-cropped hair, and status as the first Spanish women actor to play an openly lesbian character in Fernando Trueba's internationally acclaimed *Belle Epoque* (1992), contribute a tangible aura of androgyny to Maria's role. A photo of Gil's sexually active character in *Belle Epoque* dressed as a Republican soldier and gazing desirously off-screen at a male character dressed as a maid during a night of carnival celebration dons the cover of *Contemporary Spanish Cinema* (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998). The hyper-femininity of her character in *Libertarias* collides with this breakthrough role in a manner that adds an erotic note to her performance alongside the "macho" behavior of her protector Pilar.

While their relationship does not exhibit sexual overtones, the traditionally gendered roles they play (active/passive, aggressive/submissive) and the "men's" uniforms they wear, create a space of spectatorial flexibility that defies the objectifying vantage point of the male viewer. Jane Gaines refers to this defiance of a male-centered voyeuristic cinema as one of "oscillation" awarded the female spectator, by which the viewing position becomes one of a more expansive act of transvestism. "[T]he theory of a thoroughly voyeuristic cinema only allows the female spectator to look from the vantage point of the male viewer. In order for her to assume the requisite voyeuristic distance, the woman puts on the sexual guise of the male, effecting a trans-sex identification" (24).

The notion of transcending identification with specific gender roles is a view that limits the possibilities of María and Pilar's relationship, whose emotional intimacy allows the spectator to occupy a Janus-like experience of historical justification based on competing

models of national unity and social justice precisely through women's solidarity. By denying the gender of these two united characters as Gaines' commentary proposes, there emerges the danger of denying the very real contributions of women to the social and political transformations delayed by the Franco dictatorship. According to Gaines, the notion of female spectatorship as transvestism helps the spectator identify with the visual pleasure of the(male) voyeur and, in so doing, with an act of "spectatorial cross-dressing" coincident with María's survival tactics resulting in both outer and inner transformation. But, the insistence on the female gender of María and Pilar, despite their wartime disguises as "men," can better uphold implications of the accountability of the contemporary spectator.

The paradox of spectatorship in *Libertarias* remains one of slippage from male and female vantage points as a means of defying ideological confinement, rather than transcending gender altogether. En route to Barcelona, María witnesses the execution of the same Catholic bishop she encountered earlier at the brothel. Traumatized by witnessing his murder: "Why? Why did they kill him?" Pilar, understanding though undaunted by Maria's despair exclaims, "Fuck! This is a war, not a party!" Nonetheless, María spurs the off-screen spectator to ask the same question. Who is right in a conflict of political extremes and murderous intolerance? Temporal distance from the event, representative of documented atrocities, allows the spectator to comprehend these ideological extremes, while the responsibility of witnessing the murder—and its justification remains paradoxical. "We want to die like soldiers, not live like maids" cries Pilar at a gathering of *Mujeres Libres,* organized to mobilize women in 1936, predominantly proletarian, with the central goal of "capacitación" (practical skills training) in conjunction with the war effort.

By forefronting process (training women to overcome their socialized limitations) over product (winning the war), *Mujeres Libres* impelled women to take on new roles in unfamiliar territory and, when possible, a new critical consciousness resulting in a new sense of themselves (Graham 113–114). When a member of the organization proposes that women's "feminine sensitivity" keep them off the front lines—Some aspects of the *Mujeres Libres* speech were taken verbatim from an anonymous article published in July 1937 in the *Mujeres Libres* magazine. Gómez points out that despite the textual validity of these statements, their temporal placement in the film historically incorrect, since by this time, women had already been forbidden from the front lines due in part to severe problems with venereal disease (298–299)—María's growing affection and reliance on Pilar places her at a crossroads of the "mutually incomprehensible realities" (Lorée Enders 378) of the two women. Their common ground of desire for "social justice" is confounded by Pilar's ability to kill and to die for the sake of social change.

This conflict, set within the backdrop of the war itself, becomes the true catalyst of María's redefinition as a modern Spanish woman, responsible, by association, for the outcome of events. María is a compelling figure in her ability to gain knowledge, to remember what she has experienced with Pilar and the other women, while remaining faithful to her religious beliefs eschewed by her adoptive comrades as the source of their oppression. By affiliation with them, María gains insight into the historical disparities of social design based around unattainable goals of morality for flesh and blood women. The contradictions of her "marriage to God" in an environment in which "God is dead" gesture towards that hint of history that corrupts the innocence of all things. Any illusions of safety from the perils of the past are dispelled when María's infantilized space of seclusion; "a husband for whom you don't have to make the bed or dinner," is invaded by competing ideological models for the salvation of Spain.

The spectator to this vision of historical symbiosis–the ellipsis that unites past, present and future–of the lived and fictional realities of gender, class and sexuality, holds the film viewer accountable. By displaying María's process of release from her repressed sexual

body and intellectual mind due to her willingness to survive, and Pilar's struggle for liberation from the material constraints of historical social design due to her willingness to die, a bi-temporal condemnation of social conformity arises. Pilar and María's union, exemplifying the contradictions of the structures of human existence, creates a space for the off-screen spectator to witness her own complicity with past injustices that persist, in different guises, in the present. According to Manuel Villegas López, the "New Spanish Cinema" of the 1960s and 70s already offered a less frontal, more metaphorical approach hinting at spectatorial accountability. López insists that such films insist on active viewing: "The new Spanish cinema is not a question of serving the public a film, but rather of bringing the audience to the film, forcing them to intervene [in the story]" (65).

María's spiritual release is the most problematic, since her comrades are not concerned with the celestial as a source of comfort from their earthly endeavors. "Holy shit!" exclaims the anarchist sympathizer Aura when Pilar explains that María is/was a nun. María's ideological conversion is placed in high gear when faced with Aura's stance on God and the Church: "I'm an anarchist because I believe that the individual is everything and the State nothing; spiritualist because the spirit is everything and God nothing; and crippled [one leg is shorter than the other] by birth so that I can develop intellectually." By replacing God with the needs of the individual, "Jesus was the first anarchist of all time," Aura begins a process of reversing the Church's "conquista" of the nun's mind. Toying with her new comrade, Aura says she's spoken with God about these things, to which María eagerly responds, "you've spoken to *him*?" Aura retorts, "to *her*, God is a woman, didn't you know?" Handing her a number of socialist texts, Aura inspires María to read them.

Using the same approach as she has to the bible, María later cites passages verbatim citing page and paragraph, thus revealing a willingness to consume alternative theories of social (re)construction while adhering to already acquired patterns of gaining and communicating knowledge. In like manner, she begins to nuance her mantra, "to kill is a sin" by recognizing that "there are many ways to kill" as Aura explains in signaling centuries of oppression by the Church of the poor. Through this process of ideological expansion–recognizing the material and spiritual implications of her contribution to the war effort–María exemplifies the growing visibility of women through intellectual endeavor as the desire to expand the constraints of history.

In the Post-Franco, post-socialist environment of democratic reform, *Libertarias* bridges the gap of civil war and democratic freedoms by offering a space where memory and history can be negotiated. By embracing traces of the past, gender-specific religious and political iconography becomes fundamental to a contemporary understanding of the individual's role and responsibility in designing the future. The general idea of the spectator's relationship with on-screen witnesses/victims is that ignorance, often defined as innocence, places humanity in harm's way. Dragged through the perils of civil war, María's illusions of spiritual autonomy–marriage to *El Señor*–are exposed as an attempt to bypass the material environment that defines her as a woman. The representation of a former nun in Luis Buñuel's masterpiece *Viridiana* (1961) holds much in common with Aranda's rendition of María:

> Buñuel understood control in a double sense, both physical and ideological: as a submission of the body to the ritual rigors imposed by religious doctrine and also as an absorption of Christian dogma. Viridiana has been taught to suppress her natural sexual impulses and to attempt to lead a perfect Christian life, that is to imitate the life of Christ. [Numerous characters] teach Viridiana to acknowledge natural instinct and to reject the *dangerous* idealism of Catholicism (D'Lugo, 113, my emphasis).

In like fashion, María's ideological innocence is encumbered by a blossoming recognition of her preference for physical survival over spiritual conformity to the ideological constraints of monastic refuge, rendered impossible in a politically charged environment of national divisions. Unlike Viridiana, however, María does not succumb to her sexual desires though she comes to recognize them. An ex-priest functioning as the male counterpart to María in the anti-fascist war effort depicted in the film, also functions as the ex-nun's love interest. His efforts to court and marry her serve to emphasize the bonds, stronger than her sexual desire for him, with her comrades. She consistently chooses Pilar over him for protection and affection. All other supporting characters reveal heterosexual desires, yet the need for political and emotional solidarity waylays sexual pleasure and release.

After a drunken celebration of a battle victory, the consummation of Pilar's sexual desire for an American journalist is deterred by María's plea, "I need you tonight; Pilar, don't leave me." Walking off arm in arm with her friend, Pilar yells to the confused man, "In your dreams, pal." Expressing his surprise at Aranda's uncharacteristic reserve with sexually charged material, Williams Johnson states that "the tension between perceptiveness and the itch for crude effect catches just the right tone for revealing the contradictions and unpredictability of war" (72).

María becomes emotionally attached to these militants and embraces their utopian ideals. Rather than surrender to her sexuality in order to demonstrate her status as a 'real' woman as Viridiana does at the end of Buñuel's film, María opts to stay by their side rather than pursue her journey home to Zaragoza in safety with the ex-priest. Now a willing witness to their exploits, and caretaker of their needs, providing food, clothing, propaganda when possible, María explains to the American journalist investigating the Republican cause, "I'm not an anarchist, nor am I a nun. I'll probably become a seamstress when the war's over." Shedding her connection to the Church while retaining a chain of medallions underneath her button-down shirt, María confesses her solidarity with the mobilization of women for social change without succumbing to cinematic cliché, thereby delaying the spectator's pleasure as well.

María's enhanced gaze becomes one of an insider suffering for her comrades as well as for herself. Due to her inability to participate directly in the violence of battle, María is forced into the position of voyeur, viewing at a distance her comrades' efforts to ambush an enemy stronghold. Illustrating the on-screen spectatorship Marvin D'Lugo describes as a metaphor of the off-screen spectator's "perceptual authority" over the text, María frames the event for the spectator with binoculars, distancing herself from the action yet undeniably contained within it as the off-screen spectator spies on her as well. In this temporary position of observer, María is able "to view the contradictions inherent in such socialized sight" (55) more often obtained by the off-screen viewer.

Thus, the process of collusion between spectator and diegesis is reversed in order to solidify its cohesion. In this scene, the spectator masquerades María's distanced vantage point and is coerced into "taking sides." The contradictions of the ambush scene illustrate the witness's moral dilemma, since she finds herself watching a situation in which "to kill or be killed" is the only possible outcome. All are relieved, including the spectator, due to established sympathies with the anarchists, when they return to safety after killing "the enemy." During this scene, the "Nationalists" are converted into "fascists" while "the good guys" risk their lives for "the cause." María's use of binoculars emphasizes the importance of seeing and not being seen, setting traps to harm others while staying out of harm's way.

Since such traps in a war environment are based on ideological preference and individual survival, María's compassion for her comrades now runs in contradiction to

her mantra: "to kill is a sin." The expected sacrifice of her comrades is delayed by their rooting out the enemy without bodily harm to themselves. This "us vs. them" triumph is soon contrasted by María's horrified trek through rows of dead soldiers left behind their anarchic victory. The paradox of killing in order to "win" becomes the specter of the nun's own struggle for survival. Though she refuses to carry arms, María becomes deeply implicated by her perseverance in witnessing and sympathizing with the outcome of events. As a sort of ideological prostitute, María represents the individual "in whose mind the norms of a constraining social order have been formed and naturalized" (D'Lugo 55), but whose mind is nonetheless mutable through exposure to history; that is, successive events and the desire to survive them. In this ambush scene the spectator, from María's vantage point, is denied the satisfaction of the heroic death insinuated by Pilar's earlier claim that she'd rather die fighting for utopia than adhere to current social trends. Once again, spectatorial pleasure is delayed through the denial of this expected sacrifice.

At this point in the film, the spectator and María are unable to turn back from knowing the images of war. The act of witnessing leads to an inevitable sacrifice triggered by a biblical metaphor of slaughter. "Are you going to murder that poor innocent lamb?" protests Aura upon seeing the young animal strung around a comrade's neck. "What innocent?" he retorts: "It's a male and, besides, a fascist!" Horrified at the prospect, María removes herself by running to a hut seeking shelter from the unavoidable spectacle. The mise-en-scène juxtaposes a fixed shot of María's crouched prayer position with a soundtrack of gunshots and screams, revealing a bloody ambush. A point of view shot leads us to a window through which we hear and ultimately see the proof of the militia's rape and slaughter at the hands of Franco's Moroccan mercenaries, known for their brutality during the war.

The sudden presence of the Moroccans offers a racist component displacing the responsibility of the massacre onto a "foreign" culture, witnessed by María who just barely survives the bloodbath. "Saved" by a Spanish officer from rape and mutilation when grabbed by three men, the former nun is left psychologically and emotionally deflowered. The successful entrance of Francoist forces into the scene leave her in a void from which she hangs, once again and much more precariously, by the chain around her neck. Seeing María's medallions but stymied by her silence, the officer commands: "Take care of this woman and find out *who* she is!" Her transformation from the passive servant of God into the witness and victim of devastating war tactics leaves her in a void similar to her experience in the brothel, when she is stripped of all recognizable images of self. While María's slaughtered comrades are thrown into a heap of political waste, her captors determine to find out who and what she is. The contradictory signs –Anarchist uniform, religious medallions—coincide with an ineffable reality of imprisonment and loss. María remains the surviving embodiment of wartime contradictions.

Ironically, the social, political and religious strategies of the triumphant Franco regime reinstate the context in which María could have functioned "innocently" before her abduction by feminist anarchists, contact with whom disabled her ability to uphold the moral commands of the new military regime. This paradox places María in a site of precarious survival, and renders her mute when interrogated by a priest: "My dear, God knows you only suffer in conjunction with your guilt." Confrontation with her culpability, however fabricated, renders María incapable of articulating who she is. To underscore this loss, María finds Pilar, whose throat has been irreparably slit. The mutilation and death of her protector prompts María to defy the notion of spiritual superiority over the material world, a sentiment summed up by Santa Teresa de Avila by her famous verse: "muero porque no muero/I'm dying because I'm not dying."

Santa Teresa, a Carmelite nun and mystical poet resurrected by the Franco regime in an effort to offer sanitized versions of historical figures to legitimize its values, was used to exemplify ideal Catholic womanhood. This final scene in the film however, "Pilar, don't die, I need you, don't leave me." exemplifies the regime's need to edit out certain aspects of these "role models," such as Santa Teresa's Jewish ancestry, independent thought, and active role as a religious reformer. Under Franco, she was presented in retrograde archetypal imagery in children's literature especially (Graham, 182–195). María, pathetic in her perseverance, whimpers her final commitment to women's solidarity, "don't die, Pilar," in this tightly framed scene that spiritually binds the two women in the devastation of their material existence.

For María, her role as witness has converted a once reliable and safe future of isolation into an impossibility. With flesh and blood body and Catholic spirit no longer in synch, she is reborn into a modern Spanish woman– An individual burdened with the impossibility of forgetting the past as the only possible means to the future. By the end of the film, she epitomizes a stoic resistance to the ideological campaign of putting women back in their place as ordained by "God." Her unrecoverable monastic identity functions as a spectacle of democracy while we, spectators to the same horrors, bear witness to past failures of social restructuring as a warning of the illusion of contemporary developments as indisputable achievements; such as persistent social and economic inequalities. In sum, the film projects the memory function and its disruptions as an event to be witnessed by all who can bear the responsibility of knowing the past.

Post-Francoist political strategies of democratic reform have attempted to reconfigure the nation's relationship to the past in order to proceed into a liberal democratic future of free market exchange. Often, "new" details of well-known historical events are highly valued when rendered to justify the present. *Libertarias* justifies women's militant participation in Spanish politics, but also insists on their 'inevitable' destruction through the 'necessary' sacrifices of war. The massacre of feminist militancy presents the spectator with a moral dilemma similar to María's: The accountability produced by witnessing the horrors of war and the loss of lives in the name of ideological, spiritual and physical survival.

Although María's religious faith is in line with official discursive strategies of national "salvation," her ideological expansion through exposure to the contradiction of killing to survive sheds doubt on the viability of returning to her former servile role in society. María has become cognizant of the complicity of "innocence" with a soon-to-be totalitarian status quo. As such, her "salvation" becomes historically linked to the spectator's awareness of ideological hypocrisy. Yet, unlike María, the contemporary witness is unencumbered by the historical context to which the protagonist is condemned. The privileged spectator is released into the democratic realm of freedoms, however imperfect, that serve as the off-screen platform from which to ponder one's proximity to these images of war from the point of view of the defeated survivor. "Matar es pecado" rings true towards the end of the film, now implying that we are all "sinners" by knowing images of war.

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