HISTORICAL MEMORY, THEATRE
AND HUMAN DISCOURSE
IN SAURA’S ¡AY, CARMELA!

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Carlos Saura, a major force in the New Spanish Cinema of the 1960s and 70s, is one of the few Spanish directors whose films have been successfully distributed throughout the world. Saura grew up in the years that followed the Civil War and witnessed its effect on his country. He still recalls those times of hardship: “It is perhaps the period of my life that I remember most clearly: the songs from the war, the children’s games, the bombings, the blackouts, the hunger, the dead…” (EDWARDS, 1995, p. 15). He portrayed some of these memories in his film, La caza (1965), though they were carefully disguised since censorship was still very active at that date. By the time ¡Ay, Carmela! was released in 1990, however, Saura was much freer to express his views fully and, in the intervening years, he had become able to view some aspects of the war in an almost farcical light. ¡Ay, Carmela! is based on the play by the Valencian writer José Sanchis Sinisterra and examines the role of the
variety theatre in the context of the Spanish Civil War. Saura adapts the story to the cinematic medium and transfers the role of the performance into a mechanism, which ties the rest of the plot together.

For Saura, the theme of the Civil War and its profound resonances within Spanish art and society is inevitably highly subjective – after all, the government’s systematic policy of censorship (EDWARDS, 1995, p. 15) was perhaps the most artistically and culturally devastating repercussion. ¡Ay, Carmela! is a historical film, set on the Aragonese war front in 1938. It was well received commercially, and the root of its appeal to modern viewers may be its treatment of preoccupations which can be considered constants within human experience: war and the tenuous balance between life and death, theatre, the deliberate infliction of human suffering – an homage to artistic integrity and human dignity.

The film takes its title from a pro-Republican song which itself features at various points; yet rather than serving to politicise the film’s narrative in an obtrusive way, the song has the effect of accentuating the human discourse. The plot centres on three variety performers: Paulino, his wife Carmela and their mute assistant Gustavete, who are first seen entertaining Republican troops, but who find themselves involved in a risible and tasteless parody of their original act, after they are captured in the nationalist zone and effectually forced to comply with the fascists’ aesthetic predilections. They are then held along with other prisoners of war in a local school. It is here that they meet the Polish International Brigade, the allies of the republican troops, who are awaiting execution. The three variety artists are taken to meet a fascist Italian lieutenant, Ripamonte, who orders them to mount a show for the fascists, and forces Paulino to rework much of their act so that it complies with Ripamonte’s ideas. Carmela, however, objects to the anti-republican nature of the show she is required to perform. Given this context, the film clearly comprises historical-political elements, yet interlaced within them are the concordant motifs of art and the “theatre of life” itself. It can be argued that the historical context of ¡Ay, Carmela!, the Spanish Civil War, is in fact incidental, peripheral to the occasion of the characters’ response.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PERFORMANCE AS MANIPULATING FORCE**

Many of the songs within the performance are Andalusian and Carmela’s costumes are like those of flamenco dancers, as is her dancing, and some relationship to Ortega y Gasset’s “Theory of Andalusia” (the performance as a representative unifying concept through its emblematic
Spanishness) thus appears to be implied. This may also indicate another reason why Saura was interested in Sinisterra's play: namely, that as in the Flamenco Trilogy, it provided him with a space in which to examine the significance of the variety performance and the mythification of Spanishness as a unifying force in the concept of staged illusion.

The performance in ¡Ay, Carmela! is manipulated and serves to unfold the psychology of the characters; it also ties the narrative together. Furthermore, the iconography in the performance constitutes an eloquent voice within the narrative. The opening performance on the front is heavily invested with pro-republican references. Carmela, Paulino and Gustavete perform to the republican reds. The first song (¡Ay, Carmela!) is sung by Carmela and is a popular song of the time, containing strong Andalusian sentiment and instilling a sense of unity amongst the republican troops. The same opening song is used ¡Ay, Carmela!, the same opening song is used, but this time to inspire fascist patriotism. This is followed by a speech which Paulino makes in front of the three flags (the Nazi flag, Mussolini’s Italian flag and the Spanish flag) in which he declaims “¡Tres canciones! ¡Tres pueblos! ¡Tres victorias!”, thus demonstrating the mutability of his character. He then recites Federico Urritás “Balada de Castilla”, a Golden Age poem used to instil a feeling of Utopian Spain, a notion deeply embodied in the Francoist mythology. Then Carmela sings “España, flor de mi vida” which has both republican, fascist and humanist connotations. Soon after comes the “Abyssinian Slave Girl”, a deeply racist song sung by Ripamonte and his men, and the final part of the sequence is the symbolic Dr. Touchmeup act at the end of which Carmela is shot dead. By comparing these two acts we can see how the same performance is manipulated in order to create unity within each of the opposing sides. The words are changed, as are the symbols in some parts, but the act remains more or less the same. We can see how Saura attempts to do this around using the concept of the performance. By giving the spectator of the film an insight into the backstage circumstances of the performers and how they are being manipulated, Saura allows his audience to understand how the performers and their variety act are being manipulated. He therefore emphasises the backstage performance and encourages an engagement with the characterisation of Carmela, Paulino and Gustavete as more “natural” to the spectator. In this way, Saura encourages the spectator to invest emotionally in the characters and their trajectories throughout the narrative. At another level, the “performance” is also an exposé of Franco’s mythification of Spain. D’Lugo (1991, p. 7) comments on this recurring trait in Saura’s cinema:
Almost from the start of his professional career, Saura preferred to use the cinematic medium to map the emotional and spiritual relation of Spaniards to the dubious projections of a mythologized Spain that had ‘Francoized’ Spanish culture.

D’Lugo’s point can be applied to ¡Ay, Carmela!, for example, in the contrast between the first and final performances. The material in the first performance is manipulated in the final performance in order to inspire a notion of the “Utopian Spain” ideology, which Franco hoped to represent. This can be seen in various references throughout the rendition of the poem about “El Cid”, for example, to the Spanish Golden Age and the evocation of the glory of that era which Franco aspires to reassert. It is also perfectly conveyed by the symbolism of the flags in the performance: in the final number of the first performance, Carmela, Paulino and Gustavete stand proudly in front of the republican flag. The republican flag seems to be an important structural tool within the timespan of the film. It is as a result of the trio’s incriminating possession of the republican flag that their drive to Valencia is thwarted and they are taken prisoner by the nationalist officer and claim that it was used for a comedy number. Paulino salutes Franco and Gustavete echoes these sentiments on his slate. It is then taken to the theatrical lieutenant whom they manage to convince as to its use as part of the act, being wrapped around Carmela. Although this is a comic scene where Carmela exposes her breast, the viewer witnesses the image of the flag and all that it stands for, enclosing Carmela. The lieutenant writes a tasteless sketch that entails ridiculing the republican flag through smuttiness and sexual innuendo, with the aim of teaching the International Brigade a “lesson”. As soon as she reads the script of the act, Carmela protests to Paulino and the lieutenant saying that she cannot enact it in front of the Polish soldiers, particularly since she knows that they are to be executed the following day. Carmela reluctantly commences the number and as the act proceeds, she becomes increasingly distracted and resentful and begins to insult the fascist audience, visibly losing her composure. Defiantly, she almost swaggers in her robe of the flag and then exposes her breasts as an insult and as a revelation of her republican sympathies, but also as a humane, maternal woman, protesting at the senseless loss of life. Suddenly, a nationalist officer shoots Carmela in the head and she falls slowly to the ground, dead. Dressed in the republican flag that, right up to her last breath, has contributed to her fate; her falling seems to symbolise the fall of democratic Spain at the
hands of fascism and has a similarly devastating effect.

The use of the marginalised characters of the travelling artists within the context of the narrative allows them to appear to be more objective about what is going on and allows the spectator to relate to them first, before any other characters within the plot to relate to them more than any other characters. Furthermore, through the film’s form and focus on the performance, it subverts the escapist musical and popular cinema of the 30s and 40s, which Franco encouraged in order to divert people’s attention away from what was really occurring in Spanish society at that time of the Civil War. However, beyond the subversion of the earlier popular cinema which Saura presents in ¡Ay, Carmela!, one common theme which the genres of both the musical and popular cinema seem to share is the concept of “Life as Theatre”. An understanding of this metaphor helps to unveil the development of the psychology of the characters through the performance. In an interview, Saura himself stated: “The play is not about the civil war but about theatre during the civil war and theatre in the face of death”. The metaphor of life as theatre allows us to understand how people act and behave in their daily lives and how the act on stage is reflective of this. For example, Paulino’s will to survive at all costs makes him give up his integrity as an artist and his principles as a human being. His act is mostly imitative. He is the creator of most of the acts and essentially Carmela is the actress, the performer, the artist. Paulino is the faux naïf, Chaplinesque “little man”, a pragmatist who collaborates at all costs to save his skin. In fact one could argue that the heart of the comedy in ¡Ay, Carmela!, with its overtones of black humour, is in Paulino’s struggle to survive. It appears that Carmela wins the hearts of her audience but Paulino wins the laughs. He is more disposed to pleasing, his motivation is external, whereas Carmela’s is more internal, from the heart; her act is emotive and it touches the hearts of the others which is why she ultimately meets her death. The two polarities of Carmela’s and Paulino’s characters, Carmela embodying the sacrifice of life for art, integrity and change, and Paulino embodying the sacrifice of art for life, self-destruction, a living death and stagnation, are established at the outset. Paulino’s hyperbolic introduction of Carmela, “la inimitable, la estrella de las variedades, la Carmela”, at the very beginning of the film sets the grounds of the heroic performance of Carmela in life and theatre.

Aside from the human characters, two salient themes also emerge as protagonists—war and theatre. The effects of the war are either explicitly shown or else allusively evoked (reminiscent of the prevalent
and necessary technique of Spanish filmmakers during the Franco regime. Therefore, the Civil War attains the status of an almost tangible presence. Political overtones and connotations are thus inevitable, yet Saura seems for the most part in ¡Ay, Carmela! to be rendering the ubiquitous, ineluctable effects of any civil war. These are depicted from the very beginning of the film, with the opening shots of a derelict, desolated town, where a man has resorted to the most primitive means of transport, astride a donkey. People are shown to exist in a constant state of fearful apprehension – they squabble over the paltry rations of food allocated to them (at one point Paulino eats meat which is probably catmeat, rather than go hungry), and cannot even find relief from the pervading sense of anxiety in entertainment, as the ominous noise of Franco’s planes punctuates the pro-republican performance.

As the other major theme of ¡Ay, Carmela!, theatre too is reified, but it must be considered on the two distinct levels at which it can be seen to function within the film. There is firstly the internal situational context of the fictional (and fictitious) theatre: that which the artists perform on stage, whether for a republican or nationalist audience. But there is a second concept of theatre – the one which is inherent in the external context of the film: the presentation of a theatre of emotion, of the in a sense “real” theatre of existence taking place behind the Civil War. Paulino interprets a role on stage, but his best acting is demanded by real life. Given this dual capacity of theatre, it is necessary to distinguish which one is meant when we consider whether the theme is politicised. The internal context clearly embodies political elements; it presents art within a volatile and oppressive political environment, and provides an illustration of the flagrant and tendentious manipulation of art by politically-motivated agents – the song “Mi jaca”, for instance, is transformed into “Mi España”, dedicated to the “valor de su caudillo”. Saura depicts the role of theatre within the Civil War effectively as a means of survival; Paulino avoids being sent to the front because of it; it provides an escape from the prisoner-of-war camp, and later secures the three performers a chance to elude execution by enacting the new nationalist routine. The film’s external context of generic theatre reveals that everyone, no matter how personal their involvement in the Civil War, is fulfilling a role, and Saura is unequivocal in exposing the broader significance of this dissimulation. Carmela dies because she stops acting. Paulino lives, but it is at the price of artistic dignity and moral integrity.
PAULINO VERSUS CARMELA: SURVIVAL VERSUS INTEGRITY

The character of Paulino is a considerable contrast to that of Carmela. He is presented as a rather superficial character, weaker in the sense of always conforming and adapting to the new circumstances to ensure survival. Paulino’s ability to adopt whatever political sensibilities seem most judicious is often at the expense of his artistic dignity, though he is at least aware of this, in that same way that he reluctantly performs “los pedos” because of requests from the audience, despite the fact that he considers such an act “una indignidad para un artista”. To Paulino, artistic dignity is an easily forfeited commodity, especially when to compromise it is in his own interest: “Nosotros somos artistas, Carmela. Hacemos lo que nos mandan y punto”. This remark reveals an important quality of Paulino’s. His artistic philosophy is to do unquestioningly what he is told, which, given the situation, is perhaps the most politically astute, if morally dubious, choice to make. (His acquiescence does ultimately save his life). Paulino consistently shows himself to possess, at least, political discernment; he uses his knowledge of Italian to befriend and flatter his captors (he pays homage to Italy by listing its great artists as “Michelangelo, Dante, Petrarca, Puccini, Rossini, Mussolini”), manages to curb Carmela’s objections to the show (which would undoubtedly have angered the nationalist Lieutenant Ripamonte and put their lives at risk) and eventually resorts to bribing Carmela into performing a show which she finds highly distasteful. As a construct within the film’s narrative, the character of Paulino represents a harsh reality in any society: a person willing to sacrifice the little dignity he has; he possesses the political compulsions of the commanding authority, regardless of his own personal convictions. He is almost portrayed as a caricature of himself. The ostensible innocuousness of Paulino as a character would seem to belie a more disquieting social observation intimated by Saura. After witnessing Carmela’s strength and courage, which results in her death, Paulino undergoes a transformation. Standing at Carmela’s graveside, Paulino, for the first time, takes off his actor’s mask and shows his true emotions and real self.

In contrast to her husband, Carmela is more dignified; her character and her act is sublime. She is portrayed as a sensitive and compassionate character; an aspect of herself which she candidly reveals to the predominantly nationalist audience: “Yo, es que soy una sentidora y lo siento todo mucho”. As such a character, she assumes a symbolic function within the film, personifying the values of motherhood, friendship and a general principle of humanitarianism. Although she does not have any children of her own
(this was through Paulino’s wish), Carmela displays a strong “mothering” impulse – she voluntarily takes on responsibility for the forlorn Gustavete whom she finds abandoned by the roadside, and treats him in an affectionate, maternal manner (i.e., when she wraps his coat more tightly round him in the school playground). This tendency to mother and nurture fosters in Carmela a fervent empathy with others, and in this she does not discriminate between people of different social or political persuasions. Her empathy is never arbitrary – she forges a bond with the Pole imprisoned by the nationalists in the school through a genuine desire to communicate and establish a mutual affinity and regard, and later identifies with the imminent grief of the Pole’s mother, berating Paulino for his utter lack of sympathy or understanding: “¡Cómo se nota que tú nunca has sido su madre!”. However, she is moved to tears on hearing Paulino recite the poem to the nationalists – not, as the Italian lieutenant supposes, because of the poem’s emotive (i.e. political) content, but because of the reference to the anguish of the dead soldiers’ mothers. Her rhetorical observation attests to her intrinsically humanitarian principles: “¿Es que en Polonia no hay madres?”. In short, the defining feature of the character of Carmela is seen to be her humanity, which overrides any extant political imperatives or even considerations – it is this attribute which emboldens her to call to the attention of the nationalist audience an elementary, if politically incommodious, truth: “Las cosas son como son. Por muy polaco que sea uno, ¡qué una madre es siempre una madre!”.

Carmela rebels on two fronts, the artistic and the humanitarian. She refuses to be part of the performance designed by the nationalists, as, in her view, it is a “mierda de diálogos, una putada”. In her last performance in front of the condemned Poles, she reluctantly plays a part in the ritual humiliation of the vanquished Polish soldiers. The trio’s safety is assured if they simply perform the fascist propaganda. However, for Carmela the final straw comes when she looks at the Polish prisoners awaiting their fatal destiny: “hay gente que de libre nada”. Although free herself, she cannot forget there are others still oppressed. Neither will she allow her art to be debased, “no me vayan a pisar con esas botazas, el arte, digo”. She will not allow her art to be trampled underfoot by fascism. In this climactic final scene, the contrast between Carmela and Paulino becomes ever more stark. Tension rises as Carmela’s fatal protest gains momentum. A fault in the lighting causes a flickering effect, further heightening the tension. As her protest mounts she seems to grow, while Paulino appears to shrink in stature beside her. Stripped of his integrity, left with nothing to believe in, his face frozen in a ghastly grin, his body contorted into cringing submission, he can do no more than fart desperately. Protest and capitulation:
The one question which must be asked is, is Carmela’s sacrifice futile? At one point an exasperated Paulino asks, “¿desde cuándo te importa a ti la bandera?”. He seems to miss the point. It is not about flags and frontiers. It is about humanitarianism and solidarity, both of which transcend borders. Carmela cannot understand a word of what the Italian fascists say to her and yet, through her art, is able to communicate with everyone, “tenga el pelaje que tenga”. Saura’s point is that when faced with the doctrine of “creer, obedecer y combatir”, ultimately our only protection is our own integrity.

Given Carmela’s attitudes and sensibilities, and the personal circumstances of a section of the audience (who face death the following day), her reaction to the distasteful, tawdry script she is asked to perform by the nationalist authorities is to be expected. This is revealed when she states: “Esto es una putada... A mí no me hace ninguna gracia. Ponerme a cantar y bailar delante de esos pobrecillos, sabiendo que los van a fusilar”. Unlike Paulino, Carmela’s refusal to comply with the spectacle which she finds so repugnant lays bare her sense of personal and artistic integrity – she cannot and will not fulfil the innately self-compromising requirements of the nationalist agenda, which ridicules and derides the Polish prisoners. It is for this reason, rather than for any deeply-held political belief, that she engages in the exchange of lyrics with the condemned prisoners of the International Brigades – the song “¡Ay, Carmela!” becomes a kind of code between them; a signal of empathy and solidarity. Despite the fact that Carmela is shot as a direct result of singing a pro-republican song, she ultimately cannot be considered a character with political motives or even awareness. Saura presents her as a person who reacts the way she does because of her own ethical standards. The death of this embodiment of incorruptibility and idealist sentiments, who furthermore shares her name with a republican anthem, is hugely symbolic not only of Saura’s republican sympathies, but conveys a universal message of the tragedy and immorality of war and authoritarian regimes anywhere. Furthermore, we are left with the widowed Paulino, who only in the face of tragedy discovers a capacity for change, breaking his façade and finally expressing his true emotions at Carmela’s graveside. He reveals himself as a pathetic image, an empty, broken man. This final lasting image
is a vivid reminder of the tragedy of collaboration and submissiveness in the face of oppression, and though Carmela dies, she never denies her integrity, a tragic heroine whose last words mock her oppressor. The final scene, depicting Carmela’s pathetic grave as part of a vast barren landscape, is representative, as Gwynne Edwards states, of the thousands who died for their beliefs in the Civil War (EDWARDS, 1995, p. 129). Carmela’s sacrifice can never be seen as futile. Authoritarian regimes rely on the Paulinos of this world. Ultimately, the only futility is silence and capitulation. Of course when ¡Ay, Carmela! was filmed, fascism had gone, but for the artist, challenges remain. These are epitomised in Paulino’s introduction of Carmela: “Señores y señoras, la incomparable, la extraordinaria, la única, la Carmela”. For Saura, this is the role of theatre, of any art form, it must challenge, push back barriers, scream its protest.

We have yet, however, to consider Gustavete, the young mute whom Paulino and Carmela take into their care after finding him starving by the roadside. Although Gustavete at first seems to be a secondary character, his significance in the film is clarified as his background becomes clearer. He is an extremely “eloquent” character, not least because of his ability to communicate without the use of speech. His face is highly expressive and he also “speaks” through his chalk and slate. It is these tools that are most effective in portraying the panic and fear of all three characters. Through Carmela’s voice, we discover that Gustavete has suffered from the atrocities of the war, and has possibly lost his family, home, friends, and familiar surroundings. He has apparently witnessed such horrors of war that his voice has been silenced in shock. He seems innocent and childlike, scrawling messages on a blackboard, his only means of communication. He too has a role in Saura’s political metaphor, a “dumb waif”, dressed for one performance in a hammer and sickle vest, who finds his voice hand in hand with Paulino as a rhetorical gesture of the potential tragedy of collaboration and submission in an authoritarian regime. Gustavete, however, is like Carmela, far more than a political metaphor. His voicelessness makes the emotions he expresses raw and honest; he cannot deceive, cannot hide behind a performance. His only means of expression is expression itself: the fear in his eyes and his trembling body when he is arrested by the fascists, his doting glances at Carmela. This regression of the most basic instincts makes him very much like Carmela; he makes basic distinctions between right and wrong, acting and reacting on a very human level. Furthermore, as he watches Carmela on stage, he seems to understand and identify with the passion she feels, looking to her as both a moral and artistic role model.
It is he that thus represents hope at the end of the film: having regained his voice and finally being able to express himself fully, he may follow in Carmela’s footsteps as an advocate for basic human morals, respect for the individual and the conservation of artistic integrity. After his silence throughout the film, Gustavete’s shriek fully alerts the viewer to the devastating and tragic implications of Carmela’s death. The fact that he is able to speak in the last scene illustrates the shock he has suffered but it is also a hopeful note in the desolation as he helps Paulino into the car. He has laid his slate at Carmela’s graveside as his own personal headstone to her, and this is at the same time symbolic of his “muteness” being finally laid to rest.

CONCLUSION

Saura has remained faithful to his reading of the play by José Sanchis Sinisterra in his adaptation of ¡Ay, Carmela! He centralises the theme of the role of theatre during the civil war and the theme of human survival. Saura’s focus on the themes of theatre and survival leads us to conclude that the film is ultimately depoliticised – despite the fact that our sympathies are directed by him onto the side of the central protagonists and therefore the republicans – and that the Civil War is used purely as a context within which to deal with more universal themes such as art, love, life, identity, gender, survival and death.

As a poignant chronicle of historical remembrance, republican dignity and a collective social tragedy, ¡Ay, Carmela! incontestably embraces a historical-political context. Given the delineation of the nationalists as brutal, indiscriminate killers, and the fact that it is a burlesque of the republic which the artists are forced to perform, the film does leave the viewer with a formidable impression of Saura’s condemnation of the political powers responsible for the Spanish Civil War. There is, however, a more enduring impression which remains with the viewer – and it is adumbrated in one of the film’s earliest scenes, in which Paulino recites a poem by Machado: “Si mi pluma valiera tu pistola de capitán, ¡contento moriría!”. The creative freedom which Carmela inadvertently finds herself morally compelled to defend on the nationalist stage seems to be the “true” message of the film – bearing in mind the policies of the Spanish state on artistic freedom, (including the restrictions placed on film-makers and cinema producers)55 See Higginbotham, Chapter 2.
Notas

1 José Ortega y Gasset (apud D’LUGO, 1991, p. 112) “This propensity of the Andalusians to play act and mimic themselves reveals a surprising collective narcissism. The only people who can imitate themselves are those who are capable of becoming spectators of themselves, of contemplating and delighting at their figure and being”.

2 This is generally more of a trait of Hollywood cinema than European cinema and particularly Spanish cinema which generally encourages more of a distance between the audience and the film and stays within more of the arthouse tradition where the audience is often directed to engage with the film from more of an objective rather than subjective position.

3 Frank Richard Aloysius Jude Maloney, “A critique of ¡AY, Carmela!”.

4 The performance is a concept which Saura has dealt with in many of his films. His interest in this theme is strongly exemplified in his work in the Flamenco Trilogy or the “Flamenco Dance Films” which encompasses the films Bodas de Sangre (1980), Carmen (1983) and El amor brujo (1986).

Referências


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Abstract: for the Spanish filmmaker Carlos Saura, the theme of the Civil War and its profound resonances within Spanish art and society reveal that the government’s systematic policy of censorship was perhaps the most artistically and culturally devastating repercussion. As a poignant chronicle of historical remembrance, republican dignity and a collective social tragedy, ¡Ay, Carmela! incontestably embraces a historical-political context. The film conveys that political objectives make an awkward and extraneous companion to artistic values, and in this case, have a tragic consequence for human moral sensibilities.

Key words: Carlos Saura, ¡Ay, Carmela!, cinema, historical memory, civil War

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