



## The War that Won't Die: The Spanish Civil War in Cinema

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### Book Review

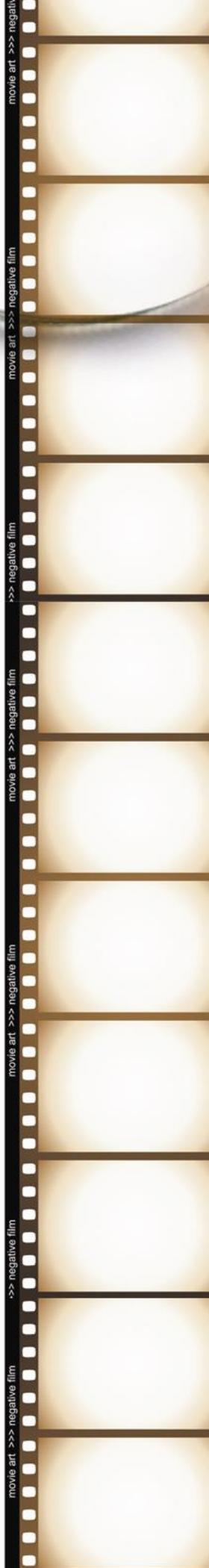
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The romanticizing of the Spanish Civil War as 'The Last Great Cause' (p.1) of politically committed writers and artists, from George Orwell to Picasso helped establish the conflict's reputation as 'an artists' or writers' war' (p. 1). Contemporary film depictions, both newsreel footage and feature films, taking advantage of the recent arrival of cinematic sound were also produced during the conflict (p. 20). Increasing numbers of films appearing since the relaxation of censorship in the last years of Franco's rule and the recent unravelling of the 'pact of forgetting' (pacto del olvido) imposed during the years of transition from dictatorship to democracy after Franco's death in 1975 suggest film makers are still responding to the unresolved complexities of the bitter three-year conflict (p. 169).

David Archibald's survey of films made about the Spanish Civil War over the past 80 years asks two key questions: how useful is film as a tool for historians when excavating the past, and how do film directors address the challenge of 'representing the unrepresentable': the bloody, complex, multi-dimensional aspects of a war the legacy of which is still hotly contested to this day (p. 83). In order to answer these questions, Archibald examines a wide range of remarkably diverse films organized into either chronological or thematic groups made from various political, propagandist and artistic standpoints. Archibald filters his findings through a theoretical structure heavily influenced by Hayden White in order to examine the role of the artist, in this context, the film director, in the construction of history. If, as White argues, historians' accounts of the past are a series of random, subjective and partial narratives often artificially yanked together to create causal explanations, then are not the creative responses of contemporary artists also a legitimate

way of communicating and presenting the past (p. 11). The substantive chapters of the book then proceed to examine these questions.

The first two chapters analyze how film was used by foreign interests, firstly American, and then East German to suit two very specific propaganda aims. Archibald argues that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Sam Wood, 1943), the film adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's eponymous novel, helped the US war effort by connecting the fight against fascist Germany, 'with the fight against fascist Spain...placing US citizens at the heart of the struggle' (p. 45). The heroism of the protagonist, Jordan, a US International Brigader, and his love affair with Maria, a Spanish Republican guerrilla, promotes US public support for American soldiers fighting their 'just' war in Europe. The East German film *Five Cartridges* (Frank Beyer, 1960) similarly makes heroes of German International Brigaders who subsequently went on to occupy senior positions in the East German state apparatus (p. 50).

Other chapters examine various film genres: surrealism, comedy, social realism and horror and ask whether each genre provides appropriate representational form for the 'holocaustal' events of the Civil War (p. 64). Of particular note are Fernando Arrabal's *Viva La Muerte/Long Live Death* (surrealism, 1970), Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (social realism, 1995) and Guillermo del Toro's *El Espinazo del Diablo/Devil's Backbone* (horror, 2001). Arrabal's cinematic debut contains shocking and violent imagery; through surrealist sequences, such as the protagonist experiencing sexual contact with his mother while stitched inside the carcass of a bull, the film is a 'spirited howl against the three pillars of Franco's Spain: family, country and religion' (p. 73). Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom*, which owes much to George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), concentrates on divisions between Republican factions during the war. Although the film is criticized for historical inaccuracy and for only focusing on a minor aspect of the Civil War,

Archibald argues it is ‘one of the most important pieces of political filmmaking of the twentieth century’, foregrounding workers’ struggles and stories, and the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to create a ‘Spanish Revolution’, the ‘civil war within the civil war’ (p. 159 & 165). Guillermo del Toro’s *The Devil’s Backbone*, set in the final months of the Civil War, evokes the many unavenged murdered, and strongly suggests that the memories of the past will never be laid to rest until Spain confronts the crimes committed by the dictatorship. While not suggesting a causal effect, Archibald notes that shortly after the film was launched, the Spanish government passed the Law of Historical Memory which allowed for the exhumation of bodies of those killed during Franco’s dictatorship, and dumped in unmarked graves under the policy of ‘limpieza’ (cleansing). *The Devil’s Backbone*, Archibald argues, is one of an increasing number of artistic spaces wherein the unresolved horrors of the conflict, suppressed for so many years, ‘are emerging in increasing number’ (p. 148).

A particularly successful twenty-first century representation is David Trueba’s *Soldados de Salamina/Soldiers of Salamina* (2002), based on Javier Cercas’ best-selling eponymous novel. The film depicts a journalist who, initially unenthusiastic about her commission (‘Not the civil war again’), becomes fascinated by a story of surprising mercy from the war and, using historical methods, such as locating primary sources, newspaper cuttings and a diary, tries to piece together ‘the truth’ of what happened. Her ultimate failure to obtain a cut and dried, neatly tied up narrative is, argues Archibald, an important contribution to debates over whether historians can ever claim to establish the ‘absolute truth’ of past events.

Archibald successfully demonstrates through his detailed and wide-ranging analysis, the ‘elasticity of cinematic depictions’ (p. 184) of the war and its unresolved political, emotional and social legacy. He emphasizes the importance of these contributions in helping understand both events of the Civil War and the difficulties of representing the past, from the point of view of the

artist and the historian. The book demonstrates the appositeness of its title, ‘The War that Won’t Die’ in that recent artistic depictions help us understand why the war’s legacy is still so contested. While the book’s lengthy and often unnecessarily detailed synopses of the films can at times create burdensome readerly headwinds it is a masterful case study on film’s contribution to understanding historical events. Its accessible style will benefit students and more advanced scholars of film and the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath.

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