

María Lorenzo Hernández – Unanimated Voices: The Spanish Civil War as an emergent subject in Spanish animated short films

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This proceeding tries to re-animate the memory of the Spanish Civil War, through its depiction of animated short films produced in Spain in the last decade.

The dictatorship of Francisco Franco began in 1936, with the uprising against the Second Republic. The subsequent Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) divided peoples and families, causing a deep social rift in a country intimidated and subjected to silence during the years following the conflict. Despite the repression, the Civil War has been present in Spanish cinema since the time of the conflict itself.^[1] The Post-war period (1939-1959), the Civil War would also be the scene for epics portrayed from the point of view of the rebels — the self-styled “national side” — such as *¡Harka!* (Carlos Arévalo, 1942).

With the introduction of the Press and Printing Law in 1966 (which softened the previous censorship laws), the first films were produced to put into question, in more or less symbolic terms, the War and the dictatorship. Only with the arrival of democracy could Spanish cinema openly deal with the conflicts derived from the war, producing films with such different approaches, such as historical recreation in *Dragon Rapide* (Jaime Camino, 1986), family drama in *Butterfly (La lengua de las mariposas)*, José Luis Cuerda, 1999), comedy in *La Vaquilla ([The heifer]*, Luis G. Berlanga), gender perspective in *Libertarias ([Libertarians]*, Vicente Aranda, 1996), the stylized parable in *Madregilda* (Francisco Regueiro, 1993), or the openly fantastic genre, such as *Pan's Labyrinth (El laberinto del fauno)*, Guillermo del Toro, 2006).

Despite the many feature films that have directly or indirectly addressed the different issues arising from the Civil War, the war and dictatorship have been relatively absent from Spanish short films, mainly due to economic reasons. It should be noted the Spanish short film crisis that started in 1986, when Spain, as part of the European Common Market, adopted the same measures of film distribution and eliminated the obligation to program short films in theaters, decreasing the commercial possibilities of the format. On the other hand, since production aids were very limited, short film budgets were rarely enough to create the sets and costumes for historical re-enactments. As a result, the projects were frequently not carried out. However, since the arrival of digital cinema and the reduction of costs that it has meant, as well as a better access to production aids, these proposals have mushroomed seemingly overnight to include films such as *Jarama* (Albert Pla, 2018), *El zoo de papel ([The Paper Zoo]*, Daniel León Lagave, 2019) or *Coraje ([Courage]*, Estefanía Serrano, 2017). Other new films take place in the present, although their characters reflect on issues derived from the dictatorship, like the existence of common graves in *El jardín de Vero (Vero's Garden)*, Miguel Parra, 2019).

For Spanish animation, economic limitations were less of a factor than a lack of trust in

animation to transmit adult messages. Significantly, the first animated film to approach Franco's repression was not made in Spain, but in Portugal: *Os salteadores*, by Abi Feijó (1993) – a dramatic short film of 14 minutes based on a tale from the book *Os Grão-Capitães*, by Jorge de Sena (1971). In this short film, a driver relates one of his past experiences to a passenger. When he was commissioned to take a detainee to the Spanish border, he discovered that the detainee was a defeated Republican who, like many others, had found refuge in the bordering mountains of Portugal. However, the Portuguese government preferred to get rid of the detainee by putting him in the hands of the Spanish authorities, who ultimately executed him. *Os salteadores* provides evidence of how advanced independent Portuguese animation was compared to the Spanish, as production companies like Filmógrafo or initiatives such as Casa da Animação (founded in 2001) promoted the strength of Portuguese animated short films, often developing stories with an adult point of view.

The first reference to the Civil War in Spanish animation is likely *Haragia (Carne humana)*, 1999, by Begoña Vicario. More recently, the global boom of the animated documentary has facilitated the emergence of the first Spanish animated feature to deal with this historical episode: *30 years of darkness* (Manuel H. Martín, 2012) tells the story of the people who had to live hidden behind the fight to escape Franco's repression.^[2]

In terms of Spanish animated short films, there are currently proposals for films such as such as *La Folie* (Ricard López Iglesias, 2016), which is a reflection on “the absurdity of war”^[3] and relates the creation process of Picasso's *Guernica*. International filmmakers have also addressed the Spanish Civil War – most notably *Radio Dolores* (2016), by the Finnish filmmaker Katariina Lillqvist — which is based on the experiences of her grandfather, a member of the International Brigade, who disappeared in our country. The French short film *Bolero Paprika* (Marc Ménager, 2017) recounts the experiences of the children of Republicans in exile.

In this paper, I will discuss three recent Spanish animated shorts with different approaches to historical material: first, *Zepo* (2014), by César Díaz Meléndez, who proposes a fictional story derived from the real experiences of people and situations from the Post-war period; secondly, I will examine *Areka* (2017), a collective work coordinated by Begoña Vicario to recreate the memory of the dead through experimental animation; and finally *El olvido* (Xenia Gray & Cristina Vaello, 2018), which realistically revives a historical episode: the bombing of the Alicante Market in 1938, which resulted in the death of several hundred civilians.

Metaphor and censorship: the symbolism in *Zepo*

César Díaz Meléndez (Madrid, 1975) is one of the most multidisciplinary Spanish animators, and one of the best valued internationally. He has contributed to features such as *ParaNorman* (Chris Butler, Sam Fell, 2012), *Anomalisa* (Duke Johnson, Charlie Kaufmann, 2015), *My Life as a Zucchini (Ma vie de courgette)*, Claude Barras, 2016), or Wes Anderson's *Island of Dogs* (2018). Additionally, he has directed a large number of independent short films, including *Documentales animados* (2002), *No corras tanto* (2008), the aforementioned *Zepo* (2014), or his most recent work, *Muedra* (2019).

César was inspired to make *Zepo* when he saw a 1901 watercolour by Ricardo Baroja,

depicting a sinister pair of Civil Guards walking through a snowy landscape. This image, along with a stroll through a snow-covered forest in Soria, invited him to recreate an existing iconography about the post-civil war — in terms of horror.

Zepo [*The Mantrap*] is animated with sand under the camera, and it enhances the performances of very simplified but identifiable characters (Figure 1). The technique of sand animation also facilitates the scenery transformations and the camera movements. *Zepo*'s narrative simplicity tells a striking story in just three minutes, which made it one of the most successful short films worldwide between 2014 and 2015.[\[4\]](#)



Zepo, 2014. © Cesarlinga.

Zepo begins without preamble, in media res: a girl is collecting wood in the forest when she sees bloodstains in the snow. She follows them until she discovers a *maqui*, a guerrilla, with his ankle caught in an animal trap next to a frozen lake. Together with the dissident there are several crows, which announce the figures of the Guards; two black figures, with bright eyes, that resemble spectral machines. When the girl asks the civil guards for help, they push her aside. While one of the guards breaks the ice with his boot the girl, witness to their cruelty, falls into the water. The policemen go off, letting the guerrilla die slowly, and the girl to freeze under the ice.

Despite its overwhelming message, the poetry of *Zepo* is indebted to the Spanish films that denounced the Civil War during the Dictatorship; that is, with an important dose of symbolism. In this sense, there is some dialogue between *Zepo* and two of those films: *The Hunt*, by Carlos Saura (*La caza*, 1966), and *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, 1973), by Víctor Erice. Not coincidentally, both films were produced by Elías Querejeta.

The Hunt benefitted from a change in legislation that eased censorship in Spain with the Press and Printing Law (*Ley de Prensa e Imprenta*) in March of 1966, whose main points

were the freedom of expression and freedom of business — although it consisted mainly of a change of attitude rather than of mentality, given that the leadership continued to be the same. Accordingly, *The Hunt* is a stylized film, almost like a play, wherein four men go hunting for rabbits near an old battlefield. The three eldest men, ex-soldiers from the National side, discuss in the following way:

“For the good hunter, rabbit hunting has no interest. An inoffensive creature which only tries to hide.”

Soon another man explains: “The more defenses the enemy has, the more beautiful the hunt is. The fight is power against power,” to which the first responds, “for this reason someone once said that the best hunting is to hunt man” (Saura, 1966).

The hunting reserve, hot and suffocating, presents a contrast to *Zepo*'s snowy landscape, although it is indeed a similar desert of death: a rocky landscape, white with blinding light, full of treacherous hunting traps and holes in its hills, where there remains, unburied, a casualty from the Civil War. The hunt thus becomes the pretext to talk about abuses of power — not only the *major hunt* as a metaphor of the War; but the *small game*, the persecution of the vanquished side, like the guerrilla in *Zepo*: a person dead in life.

In this sense, it is important to point out that the repression of others was the very basis of Franco's social project. The end of Francoism did not usher in a more advantageous period to denounce this reality. Between 1969 and 1973, the then-Minister of Information and Tourism, the ultra-right wing Alfredo Sánchez Bella, led an unsparing persecution of New Spanish Cinema (*Nuevo Cine Español*). In 1973, Víctor Erice directed *The Spirit of the Beehive*, with an ambivalent language that resembled that of a fable, starring a girl named Ana who discovers a wounded dissident in an abandoned barn and, innocently, she decides to help him.

The confrontation of childhood innocence with a dissident is not the only parallel that can be seen with *Zepo*. In Erice's film, when the police locate the dissident and shoot him down, Ana finds his blood trail and flees across the empty land, losing herself in the night. After her discovery, Ana metaphorically *dies*: she becomes a spirit, absent from reality. *Zepo* also conveys the role of civil society through the innocence of a girl wandering in nature, and who will also become a collateral victim. There is also a visual correspondence between the colour range of both films, contrasting orange and blue: the orange honey from the hive and the night blue in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, and in *Zepo*, the deciduous orange trees and the blue water where the girl falls when the ice opens. In *Zepo*, the unexpected interruption of the blue colour becomes, as in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, a sign of death.

In summary, *Zepo* condenses the iconography of a genre that rose before democracy, with the use of metaphors to encode silently, under the ice of censorship, the need to protest against an intolerable reality. With its short duration and impressive development, the serious lightness of *Zepo* is a unique work in Spanish cinema on Francoism, more related to the subtlety of a cinema of social criticism and filtered through a symbolic language, than to more ideologically explicit films produced under Democracy.

Historical Memory and the collective experimentation in *Areka*

Areka [*The Ditch*] is an experimental film exploring the problem of the mass graves resultant from Francoism's brutal policies. It employs a plural and creative language to convey the anguish of the families of the victims, whose struggle is far from being resolved.

Although Hitler and Mussolini proposed the *Blitzkrieg* strategy to Franco to quickly win the war, the conflict was long enough to not just defeat the enemy side, but to exterminate it completely. Undeniably, the Civil War had genocidal characteristics. As the opening title sequence of *Areka* states, it is estimated that 114,000 victims of the Civil War still lie in more than 2,000 unopened graves; after Cambodia, Spain is the second country in the world with the largest number of missing persons due to war. [5]

However, the attitude of the successive democratic governments of our country has been rather lukewarm. In 2007, the socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero established the Law of Historical Memory, which upholds the rights and measures of those who suffered persecution or violence during the Civil War and the dictatorship. That said, the law does not recognize the opening of common graves, so the ARMH (Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory) stepped in to claim that the Franco regime had committed crimes against Spain's entire society and against humanity in general.

In 2011, the conservative government of Mariano Rajoy repealed the Law of Historical Memory by leaving it without a budget, suppressing the Office of Victims of the Civil War and the dictatorship. However, in 2019 the socialist government of Pedro Sánchez demanded the exhumation of Franco's remains without the honours of Head of State, which has meant a clash with the Francisco Franco Foundation. As the *Areka* film suggests, "The traces of Francoism are still profound, also in Euskal Herria."

Begoña Vicario directed *Areka* in 2017. Vicario is a Spanish filmmaker born in Caracas (Venezuela) in 1962, but she grew up in Spain and, specifically, in the Basque Country. She has been the only female animator to receive a Goya award for a short film, in 1997 — for the film *Pregunta por mí* (1996). She continues producing short films at the same time that she teaches animation at Universidad del País Vasco. *Areka* is part of a series of short films by Vicario and a handful of collaborators such as animator Izibene Oñederra and editor Eduardo Elosegui. This diverse team has developed themes related to Basque culture, to vindicate their memory and identity, which gives them a certain unitary character. Other titles produced under their seal Atxur Animazio Taldea are *Beti bezperako koplak* (*Coplas de una noche sin mañana* [*Songs of a night without a morning*], 2016) — a denunciation of the macho violence expressed through the Basque tradition of the couplets to Santa Águeda — or *Miraila* (*Espejo* [*Mirror*], 2018) — a reflection on the prehistoric paintings of the Cave of Armintxe, in Vizcaya.

Produced within the University of the Basque Country, and with support from the Euskal Memoria Fundazioa, *Areka* combines scenes animated with multiple techniques with a musical background that brings together the whole. Using a Basque tune — a bertso — written and composed by Andoni Egaña, *Areka* tells the story of Euxebe, whose father was murdered when she was born (Figure 2). Like many other Basques, during her youth Euxebe suffered under cultural repression. Despite the years which have passed since the end of the Regime, she could not recover her father's memory until she opens his gravesite. Finally, Euxebe deposits a photo next to his father's bones.



Areka (Cuneta), 2018. © Colectivo Hauazkena.

Together with the Basque song, we can hear sounds from the countryside such as cicadas, or, more eloquently, the noise of a beak digging rhythmically into the ground. The song reproduces dialogues between the characters, like when Euxebi asks as a child: “Mother, where is my father? Everyone else has a father, but I don’t. All that I have is a photograph.” In *Areka*, the use of photography is crucial, as it takes us back to the past via a series of barely painted photographs. Other times photographs are combined with animation drawn with charcoal and reminiscent of the expressive language of South African animator William Kentridge. In other instances, live action provides a basis for cut-out animations, such as an animated collage that recreates the scenes of Euxebi’s daily life. The stop-motion animation of the dolls and objects are akin to those of Jan Švankmajer’s, especially when the land itself is animated under the camera. Memories flow throughout the entire film and rush towards the end, when Euxebi finally locates his father. He says, “Buried with a shovel, discovered with a brush, it would be inconsequential if the bones were only bones. They reflect the ideas of those who were killed and they are the feelings of those who mourn them.”

The creative collaboration between twenty artists also leads to an unpredictable result, that would have hardly been achieved following a more planned system. In this way the film fully incorporates the contributions of creators from the Fine Arts, facilitating mutual learning in a melting pot of experiences, in a kind of *animated jam* that defies traditional storytelling. The mosaic of scenes is thought to focus on a single idea, which touches the viewer emotions.

The 2017 winner of the Zinebi short film competition, the film was selected at hundreds of other film and animation festivals. The most remarkable thing about *Areka* is the permeability of its genre: it is a visual poem that talks about reality with a high degree of

experimentation, as a collective construction linked to historical facts. Its daring use of techniques and narrative allows us to label *Areka* as a *documentary of creation*, a specific contribution of artistic animation to documentary film, with promising possibilities still to explore.

Journalistic reconstruction in *El olvido*

El olvido [*Oblivion*] is the visual transcription of a tragic yet forgotten episode: the bombing of Alicante on May 25th, 1938, one of the bloodiest and most indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population. The attack left approximately 300 dead and 1,000 injured, all civilians. The event was part of the terror campaign ordered by the rebellious side, when it reached the Mediterranean and began the advance on Valencia. There were also concurrent bombings of other civilian populations throughout the Mediterranean coast, carried out by Italian airplanes settled in Mallorca. The bombings did not stop until the decisive Battle of the Ebro took place.

Because the bombings were carried out by foreign aviators, an uncomfortable truth is unveiled for those who still defend the ideology of the dictatorship. The self-styled “national side” of insurgents was significantly supported by Italian and German legions of volunteers and air forces — as well as some brigades from Morocco, Portugal and Ireland — who made of the Spanish Civil War a trial of the techniques and weapons that would go on to be implemented in the theatre of the Second World War.

El olvido differs greatly from the films I have discussed above. Its concept is closer films with characters rely on characters engaging in historical re-enactments (Figure 3). The short film, only four minutes long, was produced by two artists in only four months, and premiered on the anniversary of the massacre (May 25, 2018). The rush to complete the film in time for the anniversary resulted in a narrative economy that follows the facts in a very simple way, to pay a tribute to the people of Alicante.



El olvido, 2018. © Horizonte Seis Quince, Begin Again Films.



El olvido, 2018. © Horizonte Seis Quince, Begin Again Films.

Founded in 2014, Horizonte Seis Quince is a young production company based in Alicante, with the purpose of producing films that foster the social and educational framework. Despite their short history, Horizonte Seis Quince was nominated for the Goya Awards in 2018 for the short film *Colores* (Samy Natesh, Arly Jones, 2017), and it was during the promotion of this film when *El olvido* took shape as a film project. Following in *Colores's* footsteps, *El olvido* was also nominated for the Goya for Best Animated Short Film 2019.

El olvido begins with a close-up of old newspapers reporting on the bombing of Guernica. These newspapers are used to wrap the scarce fish found on the coasts of Alicante, which the fishermen sell directly to those who come there. A man spreads a rumour amongst the children that a shipment of sardines has arrived at the market. The rumour races through the community, whose members appear *en masse* only to discover that the market is empty. They then hear the Italian planes, which had dodged anti-aircraft alarms. After the bombs fall and the glare blinds the screen, a newspaper page summarizes the dark event.

The aesthetics and treatment of *El olvido* are reminiscent another short film which narrates an ominous event: the bombing of Hiroshima in Renzo Kinoshita's *Pika-Don* (1978). The Japanese film similarly begins with a gentle portrayal of daily life as it was on the morning of the attack, with pastel colors and softened design characters, unworried until the "great glow" (*pika-don*) transforms the city into a scene of death. From that moment on, the film reflects with stark realism the effect of radiation on that innocent population. The final

inclusion of photographs of the ruins and the corpses enhances the overwhelming effect of this tribute to the Japanese victims.

El olvido borrows some ideas from *Pika-Don*, to the point that some scenes are repeated. However, *El olvido* does not portray the dead; instead letting the audience imagine the slaughter, without any testimonies from the survivors. As Xenia Grey, co-director of the short, states in an interview, *El olvido* aims to “rescue an episode of the Civil War without reopening wounds” (Terol 2018, n.p.), avoiding explicit violence so that it could reach a young audience and promote its pedagogical side. Grey continues, “we wanted to avoid politics and controversy, not to speak of sides [...] this short film does not speak of war but it speaks of peace” (ibid).

The desire for political correctness while talking about the Historical Memory is, at least, surprising. In fact, the choice of a simplified animation style reminiscent of television anime, as well as the use of watercolors for scenes and textures of the characters, bathed in gentle Mediterranean light (with minimal shadowing), seems a deliberate attempt to avoid the *chiaroscuro* of a society that broke down in fratricidal struggles. *El olvido* seeks the middle road and moderation — the same path for which the majority of Spanish society voted in the first democratic elections in 1977.

El olvido informs the viewers, but it does not move or remove the conscience. It may be necessary to seek its ultimate purpose, its real expressive force, in the event for which it was shaped: the public screening at the scene of the massacre, with the emotion of the past surrounding the film.

Conclusion

Cinema is a reflection of society, its concerns and troubles. What the current production of short films about the Civil War and its subsequent Francoism is telling us is that these episodes do not belong merely to the past.

To portray the Civil War, Spanish animation needed to acquire recognition within the country as a suitable medium for telling adult stories. Secondly, it could then be positioned as part of the global boom of animated documentaries. Lastly, its contributions to the genre foregrounded the need to reflect on little-known or minor aspects of the conflict, which nonetheless shed more and more light on understanding the past.

Animation provides expressive freedom when it comes to suggesting ideas and approaches. It represents a creative renewal that is now more necessary than ever, to revitalize a genre around little-known historical events in order to interpret the facts as they really were; to consciously choose a position; and to be able to close open wounds that continue to affect very heterogeneous sectors of Spanish society.

Above all, after more than four decades of democracy, what is saying about today the current proliferation of short films — not just animation — that evoke the Civil War?

In the past decade we have witnessed an alarming rise of right-wing parties throughout Europe in the different Chambers of the countries of the European Union — and, as the April 2019 elections have revealed, Spain is no exception. Today Spanish society is more

divided than it ever was in the period from 1975 to 2004, when the return of the Socialist Party to power led to a series of progressive measures which were well-received by a significant part of the population, yet caused moral dilemmas to other sectors — the reformulation of the old ultra-right parties around the image of a new party. The growing support they have received in the elections seems to confirm the origin of this reaction.

Although the law is necessary, it is possible that the claims derived from the Law of Historical Memory have divided some sections of Spanish society and served to generate extremist reactions. Today, however, it is essential to claim all those rights that have cost us so much to acquire, the most fundamental of which is freedom: freedom for citizens, for women, for the press, for artists ... and for animation, the most unlimited and subversive manifestation of the cinematographic creation.

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Notes

[1] During the Civil War, filmmakers such as José Estivalis (aka Armand Guerra) were sent by the CNT union to film scenes in the front — an experience that would inspire his book *A través de la metralla. Escenas vividas en los frentes y en la retaguardia* (1937).

[2] Fortunately, the tendency to portray documentary themes in Spanish animation seems to consolidate: this year we have seen the recognition with a Goya Award for the animated documentary film *Another Day of Life (Un día más con vida*, Raúl de la Fuente, Damian Nenow, 2018), based on real events during the Angolan War.

[3] As mentioned in Spanish in the film’s synopsis in Vimeo: “*La Folie* es una reflexión sobre "el absurdo de la guerra". El argumento está centrado en el proceso de creación del *Guernika* de Picasso tomando, como desencadenante del acto creativo, la noticia del bombardeo y documentos fotográficos del desastre.” (<https://vimeo.com/184704800> [accesssed: May 2020]).

[4] As an indicator of the film quality and prestige, the journal *Short Film Studies* devoted to *Zepo* their first issue in 2018.

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