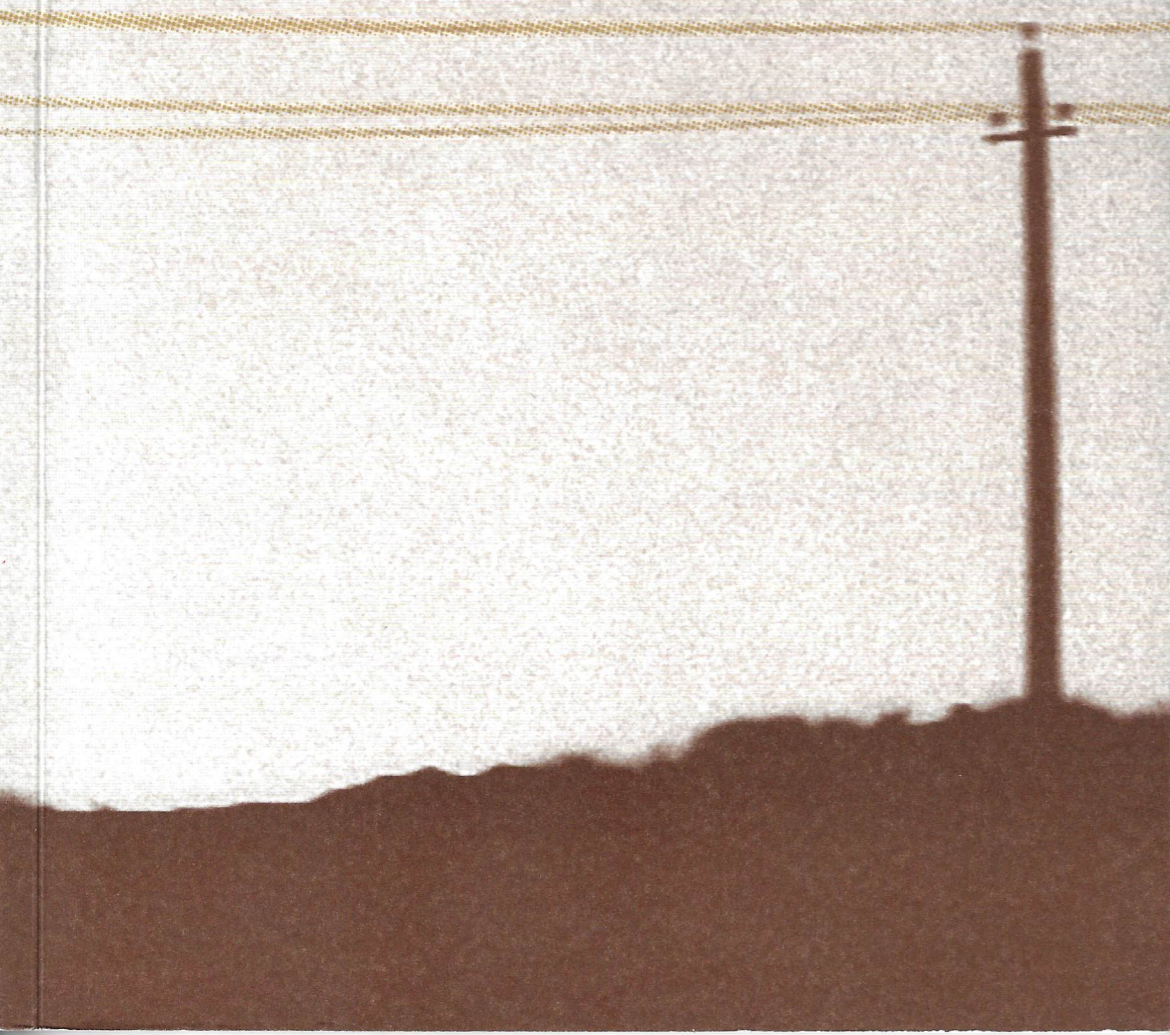


ADIÓS AMIGO!



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CARLO GABERSCEK
WHEN SPAIN WAS THE WEST

VILLAINS, SIMULACRUM

AND APPEARANCES

Introduction from Pedro Vicente



In 1964, the film *A Fistful of Dollars* (*Per un pugno di dollari*) was filmed. A film directed by Sergio Leone at locations in the provinces of Almería and Madrid and in Cinecittà Studios, Rome. It is considered by critics as the seminal movie of a new genre: the Spaghetti Western, that could be defined as European cinematic westerns productions III, generally of a low budget, and filmed between 1961 and 1977. *A Fistful of Dollars* laid the foundations in this new genre in terms of style IV, story line and soundtrack, which was formed from a symbiosis of cultural, artistic and formal reference points. On the one hand, American westerns provide the historical and geographical backdrop, in terms of imagery and iconography, story lines and scripts. While the Mediterranean mentality added picturesque attributes, as well as brutality, dirt, sweat, humour, selfishness, rapacity, greed, chauvinism, violence and revenge.

The success of *A Fistful of Dollars* had a clear and immediate effect in legitimising this new genre, so much so in fact, that it in turn began to influence the North American classic western. The Spaghetti Western, which started out as a copy of North American western films ends up itself being copied, paradoxically, by North American producers and directors. Films such as *Two Mules for Sister Sara*, by Don Siegel (1970); *The Scalphunters* (1968), by Sydeny Pollack; *Ulezana's Raid* (1972), by Robert Aldrich; *The Wild Bunch* (1969), by Sam Peckinpah are examples of this return influence on what was, the 'original genre'.

A significant number of Spaghetti Westerns were filmed in Spain, as in Tabernas desert, in Almería, or at locations in Burgos, Granada, Madrid and the province of Huesca, around the Los Monegros desert, and the river Cinca. Often, these films were productions or co-productions with other countries, usually Italy or the former East Germany. These non-authentic westerns were dubbed (carrying slightly negative connotation) with the name of a typical food of its country/region of origin. Those of an Italian origin were referred to

as Spaghetti Westerns (curiously, Italian spectators named these films Macarroni Westerns), Chorizo Westerns to those produced in Madrid, Butifarra Westerns to those made in Barcelona, Sauerkraut Westerns to those of German origin, and Camembert Westerns to those produced in the French area of *Fontainebleau*...

More than six hundred Spaghetti Westerns were produced in Europe between 1960 and 1975, almost twice the number of American productions in the twenty years between 1940-1960. Two Catalan producers filmed outdoor scenes in the areas of the Baix Cinca and Los Monegros, Huesca, between 1965 and 1972. Alfonso Balcázar, owner of the production company Balcázar with brothers Francisco and Jaime Jesus, made productions in his studios in the Catalan town of Esplugas de Llobregat, that boasted a western town and four cinematographic sets. At the same time, Ignacio F. Iquino, Owner of the IFI production company, with studios in Parallel Avenue of Barcelona, also filmed various films in that area during the same time period. Between the two producers they managed to film some thirty films in the Baix Cinca and Los Monegros. Films such as a *West Nevada Joe* (1964), *Five Thousand Dollars on One Ace* (1965), *Viva Carancho* (1965), *Oklahoma John* (1965), *Doc Manos de Plata* (1965), *Cinco pistolas de Texas* (1965), *La venganza de Clark Harrison* (1965), *Yankee* (1966), *Texas Kid* (1966), *Los largos días de la venganza* (1967) were some of the films made in towns of the province of Huesca, such as Fraga, Candanos, Gardiel, Alcolea de Cinca or Gastejón de Monegros and in the surroundings of the River Cinca.

All films and everything in cinema is a copy. In the same way that literature copies literature or art references art, cinema can only copy cinema and imitates, plagiarises, reproduces, simulates, references, emulates, parodies and imagines this very cinema. And just like all the best movies, Spaghetti Westerns function in almost exactly the same way, being based on the concept of simulacrum, in the game of replicas. Of appearing and not being, of being and making believe that that it is not, of wanting to be what it does not appear to be and appearing to be what it does not want to be; replicas that deceive but that do not lie - the River Cinca as the Rio Grande, an Italian from Texas, an Aragonese person pretending to be Mexican or a German from Arizona. Seeing is to believe, but belief is not necessarily related to the reality. Towns, landscapes and characters that appear in Spaghetti Westerns are not what is seen or indeed displayed, nor are what they intend to appear as, what they say they are, or even a simple depiction of what they could be. They are a depiction of something, that in reality, does not exist - another representation (at the same time as being something that does not exist in reality).

In Spaghetti Westerns the copy became the original, the imitation became authentic, the original copies the copy to create another original, and another copy. It originates from a unique and particular reference, that does not exist and that generates a new piece, halfway between the copy and the original, between authentic and imitation, and in constant tension, impossible to resolve.

Here is precisely where Sergio Belinchón's work is engendered, generated, becomes related to the object of his work, gains full meaning and is made effective. Not through copies, or fakes or imitations, but in the simulacrum, in the illusion, in semblances, in the changing of roles, in that tension impossible to resolve, in a crisis of depiction. An expert in this trauma, Belinchón uses it in his work, makes use of it, explaining and renewing that fundamental structural imbalance in the system of images. Just as an actor can make his body coincide with his own image, in his work, the copy and original coexist, imitation and authentic, and as in the case of the actor, such is the tension, that the limit between both concepts can disappear, vanish. And that can be dangerous.

The risk does not reside in that the artist deceives us, or indeed tries to, or that his work confuses us, or indeed tries to. No. He probably does not even wish for that to happen. The danger lies in the capacity, and responsibility of Belinchón's work in explaining and revealing the interpretation systems that we use to assess reality, to perceive the world in which we live, and of the codes that quantify them. Rather, the ease with which we fool ourselves with impossible visual pipe dreams, backed up and promoted by recognition and resemblance, by memory and simulacrum. His work betrays, makes evident our vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Through this, we realise not how easily we are deceived, but how easily we are seduced.

Undoubtedly, Sergio Belinchón's work, similar to the Spaghetti Westerns themselves, depends largely on recognition, and simulacrum. In fact, his essence resides,

and depends in the first instance, on the act of recognition. RECOGNITION (re + cognition) is a process that happens in our mind when a situation or object are repeated. Therefore, for something to be recognised, it must be familiar, known from a previous occasion, form part of our memory (in a police lineup, the suspicious offender can only be pointed out if he has been seen before). As the artist himself points out, we no longer travel to discover new places, but rather recognise them. Even more, probably what we truly seek when we travel is to know, know that we have recognised something that we had already seen/known on a previous occasion. The question here is clear - did you ever really truly get to know somewhere/something?

According to post-structuralist thinkers such as a Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault, image is not under the control of the artist, but is determined by its reference to other images or signs. We see what we see in Belinchón's images because of what we remember - our memory and our cultural and social knowledge - in short, thanks to other images. Images as images. Our highly contaminated visual understanding makes us see not only images that he has created, but also something else. In "*The Good, The Bad & The Ugly*" there exists not only a clear reference to Sergio's Leone "*The Good, The Bad & The Ugly*" (1966), but also to all images, films, books and popular iconography in which figures and stereotypes of (Spaghetti) westerns have been represented. Certainly, there is a clear connection between Belinchón's images and memory - a memory that we evoke just in the moment in which we perceive the

work of the artist.

Thus, the real meaning of Belinchón's work comes from our cultural baggage, from our experience and visual memory. Work of art such as "Western" are not only a series of photographs of landscapes and towns of the West, but also a multitude of remembered (cultural and social codes, images, knowledge, films previously seen, what we have read about those films, our own imagination, etc.) and imagined elements, which ultimately open the doors up to Belinchón's work.

This recognition, so present in the work of the artist, apparently leads us to a dangerous cul-de-sac, that of semblances. At first glance, one could argue that Sergio Belinchón's works of art such as "*The Good, The Bad & The Ugly*", or the still images of "*Sauerkraut Incident*", are remakes of a film or various Spaghetti Western films. It is certainly possible. But at the same time, is *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* not a remake in itself of traditional westerns. Even, the cinematographic genre of the classic western on which Leone's film would be based, would it not be ultimately be a remake of the stories that they reflect and of a specific period in the United States? And would not History (its record) be a remake of those historic events that took place in the Nineteenth Century during the expansion of the border of United States of America towards the coast of the Pacific Ocean? Are not all images in the end remakes? Images of other images? This could also certainly be the case.

In this spiral of recreations of recreations of recreations, the concept of the original becomes diluted in its own multiplicity and complexity, and is (con)fused with our memory and the socio-historic codes on

which it is based. In the plurality of references, what does Belinchón's work represent, or end up representing? A movie? A cinematographic genre? History retold? Supposed historic facts? Desert landscapes? A period? All of the above, and none of them in particular at the same time. Without a shadow of a doubt there is a visual connection between the work of Belinchón and all of those elements, but there is also a clear correspondence between all social and cultural symbolisms associated to them. There is no doubt that the work of Belinchón goes much further than a simple trip through more or less realistic recreations.

The History of the Image could be defined by the constant tension, fluctuation, between model and double, idea and icon, mental projection and the indicative, and between speculation and the mimesis. Tension that is, in a sense, in a permanent state of contradiction. In *The Sophist*, Plato makes the distinction between at least two types of mimesis – the manufacturing of images. According to Plato, there is the perfect imitation, that of the copy (eikas-tiké) that makes each reproduction the exact replica of its model, that legitimizes its participation and membership of the referent's context, and that has been present in a very significant way in the history of representation (at least in the Occident). On the other hand, there are some images that produce simulacrum (phantastiké) - imperfect imitations of the original and that are positioned in relation to the master copy as simulations, fiction and falsity.

Thus, in reaction to the perfect depiction, there appears the pretence - an image based on the multiplicity of difference against the ideal repetition of the original. The

simulacrum is one of the concepts that have most marked modernity and postmodernity in our days. According to Gilles Deleuze, the modern world is that of simulacrum, the image is not longer based on resemblance, in its affinity, but on the existence, phantastiké, on simulacrum. Simulacrum does not necessarily copy any particular object in the world, but is projected in the world. Simulacrum exists, simulacrum is.

The work of Belinchón is not a copy or a remake of Spaghetti Westerns, it goes much further than simply creating a perfect, frame-by-frame reconstruction of a film - respecting points of view, the movements of the camera, the same optics and conserving the original audio and photographing the exact localizations of particular scenes of this type of film. When "*The Good, The Bad & The Ugly*" is exhibited, it is done without showing its reference point, its master copy: the movie of Leone. This would be easy, obvious, and would oblige the spectator to enter into an endless game of obvious comparisons, and acting as a simple distraction from the real sense of this work of art. In his work, landscapes, decor, the elements that constitute the films are decontextualised, becoming something more, they gain their own life. As the artist points out, these elements are the real stars of the screen, and become more real than the very reality, they are authentic; even though they are not master copies, or copies without master copies, or copies of anything, or copy and master copy at the same time, or indeed are copy of a reference that does not exist.

In any case, is it really necessary to determine which is the "original", and therefore, which is the "copy"? Surely not. Is the im-

portance and intensity of the presence of this contradictory tension between copy and original, model and double, in the work of Sergio Belinchón such that in its pure saturation, it manages to free itself from this pressure, creating its own existence? Existence born from recognition and an apparent resemblance with the western, but once overcome, becoming free, independent, and is enough by itself, on its own. And this happens just in the precise moment that the bystander stops seeing and begins to observe, to imagine. Because imagining is emancipation, it is to be free, it is to absolve, escape. To imagine is not remember. Belinchón's images do not represent, they exist. They are.

In this crisis of representation, the most important thing is the concept of illusion. According to Jean Baudrillard, the place par excellence for illusion is art, illusion is a superior convention that orders a different approach to that of reality. For Baudrillard, illusion in art, in the game of representations, is not a dream, a mirage or a recreation but is equivalent to the entering of an unusual dimension, it is not an everyday thing. What is relevant here is that illusion manages to burst into reality, and the power with which this is done and in some way, the way in which it occupies its place, but without identifying with it. In one of his numerous articles on photography, Baudrillard entitled *For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality...*, it is asserted that the photograph is the most suitable means by which to approach a world without images, that is, in other words, pure appearance. The photograph does not however entrap reality, nor capture its essence, but what should not exist. The definition of the

photograph has been widened: light is now not the only thing that reproduces reality. Photography, images, are not only about what is (seen), but, and maybe more importantly, about what could be (seen). In this world without images, not devoid of them, but without them, absence and disappearance are as important as presence and appearance. We are absorbed by three moments that make us reflect on what we see, what we do not see and what we will never be able to see. The photograph explores this presence, tracking what is invisible, and situating itself in the fissure of existing things, sensing the absence inherent in the present of these images. According to Baudrillard, things are at once present and absent to themselves. But that absence must, and has to leave a trace, a place in which another presence is produced. In this way only, on the basis of absence, can something truly exist.

In concepts such as absence, and more specifically in disappearance, are where works such as *Once Upon a Time* or *Adiós Amigo* become complete. Logically, the works of art do not do it by themselves, us as spectators must do this. Once we no longer remember and are able to imagine is when the work of Belinchón takes flight, when they reappear, are reincarnated in images that, with absence as its only reference, finally show, illusion - an illusion that, as pointed out by

Baudrillard, is not the opposite of reality, but cannot be reality either, however much the illusion is situated within reality. This effect means that we are able to see in the work of Belinchón something much more than just simple photographs from scenes of westerns, as he himself points out, a reflection on what spaces look like or represent, and not what for they are for that matter, on how the artificial can be substituted by reality, or even, hopefully, how reality can replace the artificial.

Art, such as the work of Sergio Belinchón, is not a mirror to the world, nor does it have a simple mimetic character. But nor is it the mirror into which he is reflected, to see and recognise himself, the individual, nor has it exclusively an expressive character. It is illusion, and assumes that the absence of a reference point means that it is neither fact or fiction. The images of Belinchón are neither false nor real. Nor does it matter if they are. They are not substituted by anything. The hypothetical relationship with reality has disappeared; they themselves are part of reality, of perception, of authentic landscapes that substitute the originals. This absence of reality stems from the fact that the images are already real, they are reality, they exist on their own, and reveal a substitution, a simulation that means that the sensations provoked by these images,

that that is perceived, is more real than reality itself. Thus, reality, in terms of natural presence, vanishes in the absolute visibility of the simulation. His images conserve a trace of that disappearance, assuming this very absence. These images play with the complex simplicity of the recontextualisation of represented landscapes and stages, that through recognition and simulacrum, presence and absence, induce not only contemplation in us, but also curiosity, memory.

Even though the image can be viewed as a simulacrum, it does not help to forget that the image is not the semblance. Two identical objects are not, necessarily, an image one of the other VIII. God created man in his image and likeness, even if the appearances are not similar; St Augustine pointed out it: "an egg is not the image of another egg". Even though art substitutes the object for its image, an image is much more than an object. Nor are they, necessarily, image or reference of each other, neither object or copy, although likenesses are sometimes misleading. If Sergio Belinchón's images have the form of objects, they are something else. They are also relationships that give us something that we did not previously possess.