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War Memories, Violence and Social Pathology in Saura's La Caza

Saura's first film, *Los Golfos* (1959), curiously translated for the English speaking audience as *Hooligans* or *The Drifters* is in a way reflective of the social cinema of the 50's in depicting sympathetically the lives of the criminals of Franco's Spain and in implying the imperfections of a system that denies help and support to the young. In his second film, *Llanto por un Bandido* (1963) the life of a nineteenth-century bandit is used to obliquely launch an attack on the contemporary political situation. As the bandits were against the monarchists, it is easy to equate them with the Republican soldiers who similarly lived as outlaws in the mountains ¹of Spain using guerrilla methods to attempt against the Guardia Civil, and by extension the Francoist oppressive system.²

Using the Spanish socially and politically engaged cinema of the 50's as a guide, and with clear influences from Buñuel's surrealism, and the French *nouvelle vague*, Saura developed a new and unique style whose prime goal was to deceive and escape the scissors of censorship by telling and denouncing indirectly the social situation and political implications of a sickly Spain.

¹ These soldiers were popularly known as 'los maquis' and are clearly a modern version of the old bandits or 'bandoleros'.

² See Edwards, Gwynne, *Indecent Exposures: Buñuel, Saura, Erice and Almodóvar*, Marion Boyars, London, 1995, p.71

La Caza (1965) marks the beginning of a series of political films made under the Francoism. With *La Caza*, Saura achieved a highly personal and subtle mode of representation. His producer, Elías Querejeta, exerted an aggressive activism in his approach to the government's film administration with his technique of *fait accompli*, 'maintaining two scripts, one for the censors' approval and one for the actual shooting; then pressuring the censors to accept, even with modifications, sequences and dialogues that they would have rejected in the earlier shooting script' (D'Lugo, 1991:55). *La Caza*, shifts 'from socially validated myths that seduce and manipulate individuals toward the profiling of the mental machinery of the individual in whose mind the norms of a constraining social order have been formed and naturalized' (D'Lugo, 1991:55).

The film tells the story of three middle-aged friends, Paco, Luis and José who meet up after several years for a day of rabbit hunting in the countryside outside Madrid. Paco is accompanied by his brother-in-law, Enrique, who is in his early twenties. Paco, José and Luis fought in the war, and afterwards became business partners. Now, Paco enjoys a successful life both in the professional and private realm, whereas José and Luis are going through serious difficulties both personally and financially. Luis works for José. He is seen as the weakest link of them all. His wife has left him and he has a serious drinking problem. He reads science-fiction novels and has adopted a more metaphysical way of looking at things but still within the morality of Franco's

national tradition. José runs a business that is on the verge of failing, has separated from his wife and has taken up with a young woman, which doesn't help his financial situation at all. As the day advances, tensions will rise amongst the three old friends ending in a human butchery.

The site where the rabbit hunting takes place reminds the spectator of the Civil War although the word *civil* is never used for censorship's approval. The claustrophobic site connotes entrapment and suddenly makes us think of the isolation of Spain and its people during the years of Francoism. The characters refer to the war, 'That time we were down there'; ' Many people died in here'. Enrique, curious, asks, 'In which war?', and Luis answers, 'Any war, it doesn't matter'. The deserted landscape is spotted with black holes or caves that are in fact reminders of the old trenches. The landscape will be the first bridge between past and present.

The opening credits roll over, acquiring the style of a documentary, the images of two caged ferrets, anticipating the prospect of entrapment and foreshadowing the plot of the hunting. The ferrets are hunters and are imprisoned, longing for a prey to devour, as are the men, also prisoners of their society and who, likewise, long for violence in order to liberate themselves from frustration and isolation. As Edwards puts it, ' the ferrets are notoriously vicious and ferocious creatures, and the pair in the cage are kept in separate compartments to prevent them tearing each other apart' (1995:73). What the

opening scene suggests is that humans can be as vicious and ferocious as ferrets anticipating the human-hunting that is going to take place at the end, and that is reflective of what the Spanish did to each other during the Civil war. This opening scene is encompassed by a no less ferocious music imitating the sound of the war tambourines. The music accompaniment will be introduced later in the rabbit-hunting scenes and in the final scene of the three men killing each other. The music is as symbolic as every other aspect of the mise-en-scene in the film and acts as another clear reference to the notion of war linking the past to the present.

The preparation for the hunting shows the guns being cleaned loaded and aimed, once more joining the present with the past. As the hunters are getting ready, we are facing the Civil War soldiers preparing themselves for the battle. This scene transports the spectator, especially those who were involved in the war, back to the past, and consequently the idea of fratricide war resurrects. The hunting is only an excuse to build a bridge from the present to the past and underline the idea of war. The ideological pathology that Spain experienced during the war is now represented in the social pathology of the Spanish under Franco's regime. Although, we have to take into account, that the soldiers of *La Caza*, belong to the socially well accepted and respected part of society that is rooted in the nationalists' side. As D'Lugo says:

[...]in *The Hunt* we are brought to the very center of contemporary social respectability: the milieu, the values

and, finally, the consciousness of the Spanish bourgeoisie of the sixties. Instead of a rebellion against the injustice of an uncaring social system, we witness the evolving marks of an unmistakable social pathology that is at the heart of social normality.(1995:57)

However, Saura introduces the character of Juan, the gamekeeper, who lives in extreme poverty with a senile and sick mother and his young niece, to reinforce the opposing forces of the Civil war. On the one hand we have the hunters, victors of the Civil war, and on the other, Juan, the servant, the loser of the war who embodies the oppressed working class who couldn't evolve culturally or economically during Francoism.

The rabbits of José's field suffer from myxomatosis, a disease that was introduced by men in order to control the increasing reproduction of rabbits. This disease is a clear allegory of the disease that affects the men in the film, and by extension the whole Spanish society. In fact some of the men in the film are physically damaged. Juan, the gamekeeper, is a cripple, injured by a trap, and José suffers from terrible stomach-aches.³ Reading beyond these metaphoric and visual parallels we can argue that the rabbits are in fact an inferior race, at the mercy of humans and by extension a symbol of those who

³ See Erwards, Gwynne (1995) p. 77

were *killed like rabbits*⁴ during the war, implying that those who survived were consciously controlled by a superior class, the victors. Luis, influenced by his science-fiction novels, speaks of the day in which rabbits and rats will multiply and defeat the humans, ‘ but that day, he continues, ‘ there will be a battle between them, and the consequences will be terrible’.

The rabbit hunting sequence was filmed as a military operation. The music accompaniment, war-like sounds of piano and drums, reinforces this idea, and José’s instructions make it even clearer. The brilliantly executed scenes that follow bring us back to the past resembling a battlefield where hundreds of rabbits/men are shot with no compassion and showing the superiority of the hunters/soldiers over them.

The film follows with two juxtaposed episodes of utmost relevance. José takes Paco for a walk to show him ‘his secret’, a skeleton, presumably a soldier from the Civil war, that he found in one of the caves. The skeleton in the cave parallels the rabbits’ warrens and is inevitably linked to violence and the theme of human hunting. In the meantime, Luis and Enrique take the Land Rover and drive to a nearby town to buy more bread. Enrique and Luis witness the skinning of a goat by some of the villagers. This image is juxtaposed with Paco and José looking at the skeleton in the cave. Paco is disgusted by the horror of the skeleton, as is Enrique on seeing the butcher cut the animal in two. As

⁴ The Spanish expression, *matar como a conejos*, is often used to refer to a massacre of an inferior and defenceless group of people, as it often happened to the republicans, whose arms were old and

Edwards believes ‘ for José and Paco, and for many other Spaniards, it is literary the skeleton in the cupboard; a guilty memory of the horror and the crimes committed and subsequently buried but which are always rising to haunt them’ (1995: 78). The dead animal and the human corpse suggest the slaughtering of men during the civil war. These episodes ‘not only described the War but also suggest that there is no escape from it thirty years on’ (Edwards, 1995:79). All these references to the war arise the spectator’s curiosity as much as it does Enrique’s, and make us ‘come to understand that it is historical memory that challenges the habits of this contrived normality that the characters outwardly seek to sustain’ (D’Lugo,1991:65)

José asks Paco for money .He almost begs him to help him out of the dire financial situation in which he finds himself. Paco refuses to lend him the money saying that “Friendship is one thing, money another”, and humiliates him by offering him some work at his factory. Later on, Luis is humiliated by José as he punches him when Luis interrupts their quiet *siesta* with his shooting at a beetle pinned on a mannequin that he got from the village. José cannot exert his power over Paco, but the drunken Luis is an easier target. Violence and tension increase and what seemed to be a friendly reunion turns into a ruthless tug-of-war among the three friends.

ineffective and little could do against the more sophisticated weapons used by the nationalist..

Enrique is just an observer. He stands for the new generation of Spain that know very little about the historical past that shapes the day-by-day social and political situation of his cultural environment. To reinforce the idea of the observer, Enrique keeps taking pictures of every one of them, and sometimes the action is seen through the photographic point of view of his camera. He can be seen as the only hope of a united Spain as he dances with the gamekeeper's niece to the pop song played on the radio. All this curiosity revealed by dialogue and his voice-over reflections will find an answer in the final scene where the three friends kill each other.

Before the final scene, Saura cuts into a sequence with the ferrets scaring the rabbits away from their warrens. This sequence is linked to the previous scene of the skeleton in the cave and evokes the human hunting in which the Civil war turned into. Paco in a fit of rage kills both the rabbit and the ferret. This scene is particularly meaningful since here both victim- the rabbit – and hunter –the ferret – end up dead. Following Edwards reasoning 'the episode points to the fact that the victors of the War have themselves become the victims of the violence which they committed, and anticipates too the carnage which is about to occur amongst the victorious hunters' (1995:82).

This act of malice by Paco sets up the final tension that will bring about the bloody resolution. A triangle of antagonist forces has been established. As Paco kills another rabbit running out of the warren, José shoots him in the face. Luis

gets into the Land-Rover and drives towards José shouting, ‘Now, try to kill me!’ José fires his gun at Luis, wounds him but fails to kill him. As José tries to escape climbing up the hill, Luis kills him, as he himself finally falls down dead from his own wounds. This bloody resolution equates the earlier rabbit-hunting showing how their violence turned against them themselves. Enrique runs away from the butchery as we see the sun setting in the sky. We can hear the sound of him panting and then the shot is freeze-d. The image remains on the screen and in our thoughts. Enrique has witnessed the fatal tragedy occur in the present but can now comprehend what happened during the war. He comes to understand better the society in which he will have to go on living after this tragedy. He is no longer the innocent and observing figure. From now on, he will have to take sides and choose which stance to take up. As D’Lugo believes, this ending invites ‘our reflection of the implication of Enrique’s and our own earlier detached, contemplative position in relation to history’ (1991:66). Enrique is the hope for the future as is Federico in *Calle Mayor* and Matilde in *Death of a Cyclist*, both films by J.A. Bardem.