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Rewriting and retranslation in Fernando Arrabal's Exiled Cinematic Memory

JOHN D. SANDERSON

Introduction:

The two films about the Spanish Civil War written and directed by playwright and filmmaker Fernando Arrabal from his exile in France, *Viva la muerte* (1971) and *L'arbre de Guernica* (1975), were expectedly banned in the target context of Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) because of their critical perspective. But, remarkably, when they were finally released in Spain the following decade, they were found equally unacceptable in that same cultural context under a new democratic regime, in spite of the earlier widespread appraisal elsewhere, which was still locally ignored. The portrayal of reminiscences of Arrabal's childhood experience during the war blended with compelling dreamlike images of military and religious oppression did not seem to go down well in Spain at a time when the foundations had been set for the so-called Pact of Forgetting (Crusells 2000) implied in the Amnesty Law of 1977, which boiled down to becoming a disclaimer of any institutional or personal liability for the atrocities committed during the dictatorship, in an attempt to promote a new democracy where any ill feelings would be forcibly absent.

As a consequence, Arrabal's visually provocative films portraying barbaric acts performed by the fascist victors of the Civil War received a fierce negative reception when they were finally released in Spain a few years after Franco's death. Actually, the national critical backlash in the early eighties hurled concepts against Arrabal's work that were not totally alien to the former dictatorship. The fact that both films were, not only linguistically, but also financially, foreign productions which starkly presented the violence of the Francoist regime seems to have added insult to injury to the Spanish context of reception, raising an irate perception of otherness.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the overlapping conflictive issues which would help understand this rejection when Spain was hoping to be considered with the same reputational status as other established democracies. The fact that both films have a hardly concealed autobiographical content, also strongly linked to Arrabal's previous theatrical and literary work, and a convoluted translation process, since their scripts were originally written by him in Spanish, translated by his wife into French for their cinematic production and eventually retranslated for the delayed release of the films in Spain, justifies bringing together History and Translation Studies in an attempt to make a synchronic approach to this case study that could provide conclusions transferable to other periods and authors. Concerning Arrabal, in spite of the institutional conciliatory portrayal of the newly-born Spanish democracy, his physical and artistic exile continued. It still does.

Theoretical background:

Contemporary Historical Studies have used Pierre Nora's concept of 'sites of memory' (1989) as a milestone to question or confront the concepts of Memory and History. Bringing together tangible places and non-tangible commemorations under this concept allowed him to foreground "the brutal realization of the difference between real memory—social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies—and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past" (8). This struggle would be at

the heart of the Spanish rejection of Arrabal's cinematic evocation of his memory, so different from the official historical master narrative, and would explain why Arrabal had had to look for financial funding in his country of exile and shoot both films in French.

On the other hand, Hayden White's research on the representational modes of historical discourse eventually lead him to foreground that every narrative "is constructed on the basis of a series of events that could have been included but were left out" (14) and, therefore, as long as a community is not aware of the setting up of a grand historical narrative which erases inconvenient information, acceptance will prevail on the grounds of an alleged national harmony. Local individual memories would struggle helplessly trying to contradict this master narrative, and foreign accounts of national historical events could be kept at a safe distance by simply not translating them. The fact that both issues conflated in Arrabal's films would have made him especially irritating for national institutions.

From a specific Spanish historical context, Rodríguez Gallardo (2015) suggests that both the Amnesty Law (10/1977) mentioned above, and also the Law of the Recuperation of Historical Memory (52/2007) which, thirty years later, eventually attempted to partially repair that damage, were both driven by fear-based discourses that, in the end, witnessed how immunity was granted for political crimes committed by the fascist rebellion and dictatorship. Cronin (viii) includes translation in the perspective of how the Spanish state determined which cultural representations were propagated or silenced during the first years of democracy:

In Spain, after the dictatorship, for many years the Pact of Forgetting meant that (non)Translation was practised to silence witness to atrocity and subjugation. Translation was not some incidental after effect of brutality and terror but a conscious strategy to normalize domination and exculpate the executioners.

Probably the most relevant theoretical background for the case study of Arrabal's two films can be found in Siobhan Brownlie's monographic volume *Mapping Memory in Translation* (2016), in which she defines different typologies of memory and their relationship with essential translation practice, since (92): "A fundamental condition for the memorialization of texts is their propagation", in order to recover signs of a suppressed past. Even though the nine case studies analyzed in her volume do not include any films (or, for that matter, any references to Spain), she does point out that: "an experientially rich mass-media production such as a film or museum, may give a person, indeed potentially a large number of people, a memory almost as if they had lived through the experience themselves" (9), considering these productions more effective in the propagation of suppressed memory if the necessary budget is raised to produce them. And, concerning Arrabal's two films, the convoluted textual elaboration of processing an originally Spanish text in French and back into Spanish finds an echo in Brownlie's words: "Memory is a construction that relates the past to the present involving ongoing transformation. Another important reason for retranslation is relating the text from the past to current norms and particular circumstances at the time of translating; the item from the past is approached through the prism of the ever-evolving present" (84). The trouble was that Arrabal did not adjust to the norm and circumstances of the Spanish cultural context in any of the periods in which his texts were written, translated or retranslated.

Rainier Grutman comes closer to Arrabal's circumstances when he reflects on how: "In today's world, there are probably writers translating themselves on every inhabited continent, with some areas buzzing with activity: I am thinking of post-Franco Spain" (189). As a result, from Grutman's theoretical approach, the blurring of the borderline between creative languages would enhance the resulting work. In any case, the fact that Arrabal wrote his scripts in Spanish; that they were translated into French by his wife Luce Moreau, professor of Spanish Literature at the University of La Sorbonne; that the films were produced and premiered in France and, finally, retranslated into Spanish years later for their national commercial release, would not, as translologist Bella Brodzki emphasizes when referring to the consequences of translation, "maintain equivalence, level differences, or smooth over what is missing or flawed. Rather, its task is to alter linguistic and textual frameworks by disrupting sameness and injecting otherness" (65). In a different cultural context, this bilingualism involved in the creative process would have been considered an enriching plus: eventually Arrabal became a bilingual writer, switching at ease from Spanish to French, basing his choice on the language his sources of reference were written in (Arrabal, personal interview 2019). But not from the Spanish critical perspective.

Interestingly, both Brodzki and Grutman have developed a case study on the work of Jorge Semprún, another Spaniard exiled in France who wrote most of his novels and scripts in French, but who also translated himself and eventually wrote some of his work directly in Spanish. Imprisoned in the concentration camp of Buchenwald during World War II but freed by the allies, Semprún was a member of the Spanish Communist Party in exile until he was expelled in 1964 because of his disagreements with its policy. He then went on to write a film script loosely based on this experience that was made into a film, *La guerre est finie* (Alain Resnais 1966), a title which made reference to the iconic words with which Franco ended his proclamation of victory on April 1, 1939: '*La guerra ha terminado*'. The film was expectedly banned in Spain at the time, even though, within the context of plot, the subtextual meaning of the reference was that the Communist Party had lost all hope of defeating the fascist dictatorship.

This perspective seems to have made Semprún's work far easier to assimilate by the Spanish democracy, and when his first novel written in Spanish, *Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez* (his alias in the Communist Party), was published in 1977, scarcely two years after Franco's death, he was awarded the most reputed literary prize in the country: Premio Planeta. By then, *La guerre est finie* had swiftly passed censorship control and was premiered that same year, highly praised by critics. Semprún would eventually become Spain's Minister of Culture (1988–1991), but was also expelled from that post after expressing his disagreement over certain corruption issues of the Socialist government which had appointed him.

As for Arrabal, he has never been appointed minister, or any other post, by any Spanish government. He also wrote his work from his French exile and confronted the Communist Party, but he had not incorporated this latter issue to his creativity. His trauma was more closely connected to fascist oppression during his childhood in Spain, so the foregrounded features in his films were far more controversial and uncomfortable for the newly set up democracy.

Biographical Notes:

The trauma for Arrabal had started in 1936. He was four years old when his father, who was serving as an army officer in Melilla, a Spanish city on the northwest coast of Africa, was arrested for remaining loyal to the Spanish Republic on July 17th, the day before the *coup* by Franco's troops was officially proclaimed. He was transferred to other jails during and after the war, and his mother moved her family to other cities accordingly in order to be close to him. He disappeared from the prison hospital in Burgos in 1942; he was never heard of again. Arrabal always suspected that his mother had contributed to his arrest (Torres Monreal 1999).

That trauma was increased three decades later when, years after having settled down permanently in Paris, Arrabal travelled to Madrid in 1967 for a presentation of a book on his theatrical work and was jailed himself for blasphemy (Brown 1984). By then Arrabal's theatre had achieved international popularity both in Western Europe and the United States. *Picnic* (1952), for instance, was staged in Paris as *Pique-nique* in 1959, directed by Jean Marie Serreau, and as *Picnic in the battlefield* in New York in 1962, directed by Alan Schneider.

Spain's attorney general asked for a sentence of one year and four months imprisonment, but Arrabal was released a month later and went back to France only after an international campaign headed by the also playwright Samuel Beckett put pressure on Franco's regime. Arrabal was banned from returning to his native country, even though (or perhaps because), as Beckett wrote in a letter to the Spanish authorities: "Wherever his plays are staged, and they are staged everywhere, Spain is present" (in Arrabal & Trigano 31). Arata considers that this experience "brought the playwright face to face with the crude reality of the Spanish prisons that had earlier destroyed his father" (56). And as a result, it could be added, the biographical issues that had been sprinkled all over his previous theatrical and literary work came together then into this new artistic medium, cinema, with the financial support of the country in which he was forcibly exiled, still after the death of the dictator: "I am not in a voluntary exile; exile was imposed upon me. I didn't choose not to publish in Spain; my plays were rejected. My plays are published and my films shown everywhere in the world except in Spain. I'm not responsible for that. In a way, censorship is the only distinction that a poet can accept from the Franco regime" (Arrabal & Kronik 55).

Rewriting:

The year Arrabal settled down in France, and fell ill with tuberculosis, he wrote a play while he was in hospital, *Los dos verdugos* (*The Two Executioners* 1956), in which a mother, Francisca, tells her two sons how much she has sacrificed herself for them, in contrast with their father, who, due to his selfish political idealism, has compelled the two executioners to arrest him and, subsequently, torture him. One of the sons blames her for his arrest but, after his father dies at the hands of the executioners, his brother persuades him to ask their mother for forgiveness.

Three years later Arrabal published *Baal Babylone* (1959), an autobiographical novel written in epistolary form, with eighty fragments hardly two pages long each addressing his mother while he is recovering from his illness in a hospital. Various themes related to his childhood recurrently come and go through it: his self-pitying mother, his oppressive grandmother, his sexually repressed and self-mortifying aunt, bullfights, nuns and, above all, his absent father.

The content of these two works was rewritten into what would be the script of his first film, *Viva la muerte*: “The French National Film Centre offered financial support when a script was formally presented. I wrote it in Spanish, and my wife Luce re-read it, corrected and translated it. We succeeded in getting the funding” (Arrabal, personal interview 2018, *my translation*).

The same year that Arrabal published *Baal Babylone*, he also wrote a play, *Guernica* (1959), in which an elderly couple, Fanchu and Lira (derivations from the author and his wife’s first names) are caught at home during the infamous bombing of the city on April 26th 1937 and, while she is covered by rubble, he occasionally looks outside to check if the iconic Guernica tree, which symbolizes traditional freedoms of the Basque community, is still standing, before they finally die together. It was presented for censorship control in Spain almost a decade later under the title *Ciugrena*, an obvious anagram of the name of the Basque city, and was expectedly banned. One of the censors, Gabriel Elorriaga, summed up his report, written on December 10th 1968, in one single word: “Dangerous” (in Muñoz Cáliz 251, *my translation*).

However, besides the obvious historical context, this play has hardly any connection, as far as the plot is concerned, with the script of *L’arbre de Guernica*, in which, initially, the lead female character, Vandale, arrives at Villa Ramiro, a fictitious Spanish city, where she finds its population in arms against Count Cerralbo, a local exploiter supported by the church and the military. His bohemian son Goya rejects his father and leaves towards France, but when he comes across Vandale, who has also left Villa Ramiro, in Guernica during its bombing by the German air forces that supported Franco’s *coup*, they become conscious of their republican duty and return to Villa Ramiro to confront his father’s oppression.

More shared issues can actually be found in an open letter to Generalísimo Franco, almost a manifesto, that Arrabal wrote on March 18th 1971, in which he denounced the injustices that had been and were still being committed in Spain; for instance: “Do you know that in Peñón del Hacho, where he [my father] was jailed, prisoners were locked up in tiny iron cages?” (in Hernández *Cartas* 34, *my translation*). In the film, Vandale is carried around by two soldiers holding a stick which goes through the tiny cage where she is in. No other Spaniard had so far, or since, addressed the dictator in that way.

According to Torres Monreal: “cinema allowed him to enlarge at will the reduced and choking space of the scenic cube where he had moved so far” (20, *my translation*). The fact that Arrabal’s two films were shot, respectively, in Tunisia and Italy with French dialogues may have also contributed to liberating him further from that choking feeling, healing partially his permanent trauma by verbalizing it through this alternative medium in a different language. He would eventually start writing some of his work in French himself, as Beckett had.

Film Analysis:

Viva la muerte begins with the main character, young boy Fando (reduction of Fernando) coming across a lorry full of soldiers (see fig. 1) with a loudspeaker blaring General Franco's military communiqué that proclaimed the end of the Civil War, followed by the motto that gives title to the film: '*¡Viva la muerte!*' (Long live death!), infamously popularized by the founder and first commander of the Spanish military legion, José Millán Astray (*Hernández Venceréis*). Fando runs in the opposite direction towards the family house where he lives with his mother, aunt and grandparents, while he mutters his fears that his father might be murdered.



Fig. 1. Fando (Mahdi Chaouch) sees a lorry full of soldiers coming towards him. (copyright Fernando Arrabal)

Even though the outstanding verbal issue is that the motto is uttered in Spanish within a film whose dialogues are in French, perhaps a stance of national identity made by Arrabal, it might be more interesting that the final words of Franco's communiqué, "*La guerra ha terminado*", are translated into French as "*La guerre est terminée*", even though the canonical translation was "*La guerre est finie*", culturally owed to the film directed by Resnais based on Semprún's script. The subjective impression is that Arrabal and his wife's intention might have been to distance themselves from the official version of the struggling post-war Spain set by the former film.

As for *L'arbre de Guernica*, references are more historical and artistic than linguistically based. Any audiovisual narrative portrayal of the bombing of Guernica customarily makes a reference to Picasso's widely known painting. Here we can see Vandale carrying a dead infant in her arms after the bombing of the town (see fig. 2). It should be remembered that, at the time, the *Guernica* was safely kept in the Museum of Modern Art of New York: Picasso was considered an enemy of the dictatorship. It was not returned to Spain until 1981, the year before *L'arbre de Guernica* was released there.



Fig. 2. Vandale (Mariangela Melato) carries a dead infant in her arms after the bombing of Guernica (copyright Fernando Arrabal), and an extract from Picasso's *Guernica*.

Recognizable textual references included in the film are, for instance, “It is better to die standing than to live on your knees!”, proclaimed by Vandale as the new leader of the resistance once she returns to Villa Ramiro, a motto which Spanish communist figurehead Dolores Ibárruri, “La Pasionaria”, had made hers during the Civil War (Del Sarto 2012); Roger Ebert refers to the crowd cheering her in the film as: “the last-ditch pockets of resistance to the fascists. They're led by a ferocious young woman named Vandale (who is obviously based on the civil war hero La Pasionaria...)” (3). Another identifiable reference in the film is to artist Salvador Dalí who allegedly, as Goya (another artistic reference) does in the film, masturbated and gave his semen to his father (Pérez Andújar 2003) saying that he did not owe him anything, that now they were even.

As for the trauma referred to by Brownlie concerning Memory Studies, a distinctive example is in the prison scenes, which recall both Arrabal's father's and his own experience in prison; actually Arrabal himself plays a cameo role as one of the prisoners. In his letter to Franco, he wrote about the conditions of Spanish prisons: “Turning round was a problem, since it meant waking up your two neighbors, who, then, woke up...etc., so, every once in a while, all the prisoners in the gallery changed their position after one of them would call out” (in Hernández *Cartas* 37–8, *my translation*). In the film, the prisoners, kept in an overcrowded jail, are made to pray while they are being threatened with shotguns by the guards and, at night, one of them shouts “East!” and “West!” every few minutes so that all the sleepy prisoners will turn round at the same time, since there is not enough room for them to lie on their backs. “I thought that many other stories like mine would be filmed, another four hundred, but that was not so” (Arrabal, personal interview 2018, *my translation*). That left his two films as outstanding vulnerable targets for the fierce Spanish critical backlash.

Reception:

After a successful premiere in the Cannes Film Festival of 1971, *Viva la muerte* was released in New York in October of that year to widespread appraisal. Roger Greenspun (1971), in *The New York Times*, highlighted “an intensity and a complex vitality that I have not seen equaled in recent cinema (...). It is as if the famous razor across the eyeball that opens Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* had never lost its cutting edge”. Amos Vogel, in *The Village Voice*, referred to it as “a paroxysm of anguish, a scream for liberty, and probably one of the most ferocious, violent films ever made. Reminiscent of Buñuel” (1974/2005, 60). Clearly, the only Spanish filmmaking referent at the time was Luis Buñuel, another director in exile who had made most of his work in Mexico, but

who also moved to France in the sixties to make five films, with *Belle de Jour* (1967) as his most outstanding French production. Arrabal made a reference to their relationship in an interview:

My film *Viva la muerte* was shown at the Cannes Film Festival, and Bunuel went to see it. The journalists surrounded him afterwards and asked his opinion. He liked it very much. One of them said regretfully: 'You cannot say anything about Arrabal's film because he copies you.' 'Yes,' said Bunuel, 'our worlds touch, though without converging by any means. But don't forget that he's a Spaniard, and so am I, thank God.' (Arrabal & Kronik 58)

And when *L'arbre de Guernica* was released in the U.S.A., Ebert remarked: "Fernando Arrabal, the surrealist playwright and poet, is apparently the first Spaniard to have made a film about the Spanish Civil War. (...) He uses a visual language that's drawn from Spanish tradition and then steeped in sacrilege" (1-4). This shocked reaction was shared in academic circles: "(...) the viewer is repulsed yet mesmerized by a flow of humorous and ingenious images. The surrealist spirit developed here, morbid as it may be, is far from moribund" (Michalczyk 762).

In Spain, however, the reception would be extremely different. When *Viva la muerte* was finally released a decade after its acclaimed premiere in France, the official Spanish master narrative of the period was still prevalent, as we can see in the following interview with Arrabal: "Ten years ago, however, most of the audience in the Cannes Film Festival stamped their feet to express their disapproval of your film. -It is not true. They did not stamp their feet; it was an extraordinary success" (Berasategui 56-7, *my translation*). In any case, subsequent film reviews made sure that the Spanish official wave of disapproval continued. Crespo considered his first film a compilation of "political-erotic frustrations originated after years of voluntary exile in France" (59, *my translation*). Interestingly, in the Spanish historical master narrative, Arrabal's exile had become voluntary.

L'arbre de Guernica arrived two years later, and the critical reception followed suit. César Santos Fontenla considered it "Slandering, pedantic, wantonly blasphemous, indulgently pitiful" (75, *my translation*). But things went a bit further this time, proving that the textual framework, using Brodzki's terms, had felt the threat of being altered. When it was first released in some Spanish provinces on March 27th 1982, a gang of fascist agitators broke into a movie theatre in Segovia to stop the projection (Vicente 1982), and were fought off by the audience. But when it was going to be released in major cities such as Madrid on May 17th, Spain's Attorney General sued the film's distributors and asked for it to be banned on the grounds of insults to the armed forces (Cueto 108), typified in article 242 of the Criminal Code. The Supreme Court acquitted them two months later, but the film was never re-released.

Arrabal was not very popular among the Basque community either. De Pablo Contreras complains about *L'arbre de Guernica*: "(...) this film has nothing to do with the Basque country, it is a film about the Spanish Civil War. (...) The word *Basque* is not uttered a single time in the whole film, and the bombing is blamed on the Nazis, not Franco" (66-7, *my translation*). However, in some academic circles, Arrabal was not even considered Spanish. He had not been included by Ruiz Ramón in his *Historia del teatro español del siglo XX* (1977) because: "the home of the writer is the language in which he writes and exists as a writer, not his place of birth, however deep his roots may be in the physical or spiritual geography of his childhood or subconscious" (in

Montero 3, *my translation*). Actually, Arrabal was writing in Spanish at the time and, due to the Francoist censorship, had his work translated into French to get it published or produced, fighting back the non-translation strategy denounced by Cronin. But even his place of birth was contentious. Years later, in a volume on exiled filmmaking, Fernández Labayen (44) considered him “*un autor africano*” because he was born in Melilla, a Spanish city on the northwest coast of Africa. Stripping Arrabal’s nationality away could be considered another effective tool to invalidate his work. Arrabal had reflected on this: “Spaniards think I am not genuinely a Spaniard because I left, even though the most profoundly Spanish characteristic is to leave” (Eder 16).

Conclusion:

The many autobiographical references found in both films could make us consider that Arrabal’s unsolved trauma mirrors the non-verbalised trauma of part of a Spanish society which has not been allowed to confront the silenced historical period of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent Francoist dictatorship. From the macrotext of his father’s imprisonment and disappearance in his first film to the sprinkled micronarratives throughout both films, a more welcoming reception could have been expected from the newly born Spanish democracy. But the prevailing master narrative would not allow his disruptive contradictions to the current historical version to be propagated.

On the whole, Arrabal was considered an alien to Spanish democracy since he had been out of touch with the sociocultural evolution of Spanish society because of his exile in France since 1955. But, as a conclusion, I would point out that Arrabal’s residence in France, permanently haunted by his earlier experiences in Spain, would have actually preserved his ‘memory’ with a lesser degree of contamination than those who, two decades later, in an attempt to produce an official ‘history’, wholeheartedly or otherwise, were willing to erase conflictive issues from the recent collective national memory that the playwright turned filmmaker was still bringing to the fore. There was, therefore, an institutionalized effort in order to prevent Arrabal’s cinematic recollections from being shared factually and emotionally with many other Spaniards who, like him, had suffered the arbitrary arrests and disappearance of their loved ones during and after the Civil War.

Individual memories can be restricted nationally by the overwhelming institutional support to the historical master narrative, and foreign accounts kept at bay by simply discouraging their translation with accusations of *otherness* which would always succeed in making a patriotic reaction spring up. But in the case of Arrabal, the fact that he was a Spaniard who wrote in Spanish from his French exile, had his work translated into French and, in the case of these two films, retranslated into Spanish for their delayed national premieres, required a bigger effort from the now democratic institutions to defuse the effect they might have had on the questioning of the official history. Left and right wing media joined forces in successfully dismantling the distribution of both films, but, in hindsight, the rewriting/retranslation of confrontational texts proved to be a useful resource in the struggle to contradict imposed historical versions.

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