

DIA LO GUE



In spite of the exceptional importance of the work of José Antonio Nieves Conde (Segovia, 1911-Madrid, 2006) in the history of Spanish cinema of the first two decades of the post-war period, it seems that he has yet to be given the recognition he deserves, apart from the extraordinary *historiographical popularity* of *Furrows* (Surcos). The great commercial success of the supposedly and apparently clerical *Reckless* (Balarrasa, 1950) to a lesser extent, and, above all, the crisis provoked by the decisive support given to *Furrows* by the then Director General of Cinematography José María García Escudero and the National Interest classification it received to the detriment of *Dawn of America* (*Alba de América*, Juan de Orduña, 1951), which later, as a result of the uproar, was also awarded this classification, and its (also supposed) relationship with Italian neorealism, as well as the screenwriter's and filmmaker's connection with Falangism (obviating the fact that such a heterogeneous *formation* would inevitably give rise to some of the most profound and critical films of the period), have focused the *institutional historiographical discourse* on Spanish cinema to such an extent that much of the cinematic value of this work (not to mention the rest of his filmography) has been buried under clichés, *a priori* assumptions or, sometimes, serious errors of evaluation. If *Furrows* belonged, albeit *ambiguously*, to a no less hazy *dis-*

ident cinema, which, formulated this way as a unitary *whole*, prevents any real comprehension of texts that are as suggestive as they are unique, and, therefore, different (and even opposed) to one another, his films as a whole were lost in a supposed mediocrity from which could be rescued, at most, a few brush-strokes, a few isolated details that reveal the “technical proficiency” or “professional value” of this filmmaker.

Convinced of the lack of rigour of such assertions, as self-interested as they are repeated, and in the context of the preparation of a volume for the Ourense International Independent Film Festival, we (José Luis Castro de Paz and Julio Pérez Perucha) interviewed the filmmaker (who was 92 at that time) in his house in Madrid on 25 September 2003. Our intention was to delve into the filmography of this member of what some keen observers by the end of the 1940s were already calling the “reformist generation”, made up of filmmakers of around the same age, who began working in Spanish cinema immediately after World War II: Manuel Mur Oti, Antonio del Amo, Arturo Ruiz Castillo and Nieves Conde himself. In spite of their obvious differences, this group—to which we could tangentially add such names as Carlos Serrano de Osma or Enrique Gómez—shows a remarkable homogeneity which, for different reasons, makes it especially appealing to historians.

Realism(s), tragedy and irony

JOSÉ ANTONIO NIEVES CONDE

“It could have been and it wasn’t. I wanted to make films, but I found myself in a world where the director was constantly being pushed around”

Firstly, but definitively for understanding the difficulties of his work—which reached its critical period between the end of the 1940s (Nieves Conde debuted in 1946 with *Path Unknown* [Senda ignorada], which is lost today) and the appearance of the so-called New Spanish Cinema at the beginning of the *swinging sixties*—is the fact that he belongs to a *bridge generation* between the first wave of the post-war period (including the filmmakers most committed to building an official cinema that could be defined as Francoist, an endeavour with uneven results) and the generation that appeared at the beginning of the fifties, under the influence—sometimes hypertrophied by historiography—of Italian neo-realism. Nevertheless, this influence also logically touched this “reformist generation”, producing in some works an attractive hybrid between the industrial and rhetorical modes of Spanish post-war cinema and certain achievements of this movement. Secondly, and as a remarkable *unifying* feature, a singular concern for the formal work of the films; a concern that is visible in such semantically and formally daring titles as *The Anxieties of Shanti Andía* (Las inquietudes de Shanti Andía, Arturo Ruiz Castillo, 1946), *Ninety Minutes* (Noventa minutos, Antonio del Amo, 1949) or *A Man on the Road* (Un hombre va por el camino, Manuel Mur Oti, 1949). And no less could be said in this regard of Nieves Conde’s first film, *Anguish* (Angustia, 1947), which, through calculated staging shot brilliantly by José F. Aguayo, tells a Hitchcock-esque story with a psychoanalytical hue, which could be related to a line that he would develop in later films, such as the obsessive and sinister *Red Fish* (Los peces rojos, 1955), one of its greatest expressions. Finally, but no less importantly, the maintenance of a far from negligible level of personal dissidence with the official structures

within which he worked, which he sometimes expresses in his films, and which has its origins as much in the republicanism of some filmmakers (Ruiz Castillo, Mur Oti, del Amo) as in the “genuine” Hedilla-style Falangism of Nieves Conde himself. It is thus not surprising, for example, that Nieves Conde saw in the cultivated writer Torrente Ballester, also a Falangist, a solid ally in his endeavour to establish a *social cinema*—with the agricultural problem as the axis of some of his important offerings, as was the case of other members of the reformist generation—which, taking the experience of what other films had already attempted, with considerable difficulty, in the period immediately after the Spanish Civil War, would reveal *from within* what the longed-for revolutionary *new dawn* of his nation had turned into. The complexity of this project (of which the conflictive *Furrows* is the extraordinary centrepiece) gives a clear reflection of the troubled subsequent development of his filmography which this interview makes clear, especially from the equally problematic and exceptional *The Tenant* (El inquilino, 1957), a devastating anti-Francoist discourse which, after its sudden withdrawal from the theatres following its release in 1958, was only allowed to be re-released (following edits and additions that still do not manage to undermine its incendiary message) in 1963, until its withdrawal after the appearance of *Beyond Desire* (Más allá del deseo, 1976). In spite of this, his collaboration since 1971 with José Frade would still result in some timely films, sometimes of significant interest, such as *Marta* (Las señoritas de mala compañía, 1973) or *The Marriage Revolution* (La revolución matrimonial, 1974, with a screenplay by Rafael Azcona). ■

PROFESSIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

The first film of yours that we still have today—and which, by the way, endures extraordinarily well—is *Angustia* (1947), a story whose staging, on top of a fairly clichéd plot of the “who dunnit?” variety, builds a claustrophobic, stifling, oppressive atmosphere, closely linked to other films of the period, like Edgar Neville’s *Nada* (1947), for example. The characters often appear in frame boxed in by bars, by windows... elements that you would develop successfully in subsequent films.

It’s true. The set was made by the architect Antonio Labrada, the same one who then did the set for *Furrows* (*Surcos*, 1951). The whole house was built inside the set. Also, for the element of the windows, I told José F. Aguayo, the cinematographer: “Look, I want these elements to acquire visual importance, to be noticed...” In that period it could be done because we filmed inside a set; today this has disappeared. Everything is like a uniform spot of colour... I don’t know if this treatment of space and light could be a metaphor for the situation in Spain in the post-war era; I don’t think so. It was a temporary circumstance. It was the type of cinema being done. It was a genre that existed then... Spanish directors, whether we like it or not, were wrapped up in the American tradition, which dominated. But the Italian and French films were similar too... Visconti’s first film, for example... a type of cinema creates a style of lighting, and this style at the same time has an effect on another one... American cinema changed at a certain moment, thanks to Lee Garmes. This new style, with its variations, reached Gabriel Figueroa... the French imitated it, too... but it was basically a copy of the German style. A constant contrast between light and shadow... colour has been what has destroyed all that work. The other day I was watching *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) by Alfred Hitchcock, an impressive work in black and white. People who write about my films mention the influence of Hitchcock or Robert Siodmak. It is undeniable that Hitchcock was very important then, and especially the English Hitchcock. The wonderful ending of *Jamaica Inn* (1939)... fortunately, he was able to maintain a constant, something I tried to do, but couldn’t... I needed food. I had to eat.

You were the assistant director of *Black Jack* (Julien Duvivier, 1950)

I had watched some of Duvivier’s films and I liked them, as much the first ones he made after the introduction of sound as the ones after *Golgotha* (1935) or *La Bandera* (1935), and, at one point, the Spanish editor Margarita Ochoa told me that they were planning a co-production... I put my name in to take part, I wanted to see how Duvivier filmed. We went to Palma de Mallorca and the conclusion I drew from the whole thing is not to make a co-production.



Shooting of *Angustia* (José Antonio Nieves Conde, 1947). Origin: Archivo Gráfico de la Filmoteca Española. Courtesy of Juan Miguel Nieves

The producer was a Spaniard who worked in dubbing. The American part was handled by a Jewish producer... I was practically a spectator, I attended the shootings... I made good friends with the actor George Sanders, who spoke good Spanish, because his father had been a tobacco sales representative in Buenos Aires. The impression I got was that Duvivier was doing it out of necessity, but he couldn’t have cared less about it... After Palma de Mallorca they filmed here, at C.E.A., and then, the only thing I did was some scenes of corpses and, as we had a kind of well here to do them, we filmed a few things according to his instructions and they sent it to him to see if he liked them. But who really made the decisions was the French editor, Marthe Porcin... I remember that, when I received the script by Charles Spaak, it seemed extraordinary to me, but then it had nothing to do with what was filmed; they transformed it “American-style”, they lengthened it and it lost its force.

We asked that question partly because you once said that you had had the script of *Mister Arkadin/Confidential Report* (1955) by Orson Welles in your hands, and we thought that you might initially have been considered as assistant director, a role that was ultimately given to Julio Fleichner.

No. What happened was that, taking advantage of the fact that one of Welles’ assistants was Margarita Ochoa’s son, I was watching him filming. He was introduced to me. Then, I met him in Seville, riding around on a horse and carriage, and with a huge cigar, and he greeted me warmly... But it is true that they gave me the draft script of *Mister Arkadin*, but what I really saw was the Swiss co-producers’ version, which was different from the Spanish one.



Shooting of *Llegada la noche* (José Antonio Nieves Conde, 1949). Origin: Archivo Gráfico de la Filmoteca Española. Cesión de Juan Miguel Nieves

Historiographically, *Furrows* is, without a doubt, the most renowned film of your filmography, and *Reckless* (Balarrasa) is the most popular and best-known with audiences. However, we have had the good fortune recently to see *Todos somos necesarios* (1956), an excellent film which, in a way, underscores the willingness to take a position at the limits of what could be said at that time, of discussing uncomfortable issues, bringing up social problems in the Spain of the fifties, and in a way that is brave and supportive of the disadvantaged.

Yes, although really it is a film of circumstances, after *Los peces rojos*, with the same producers, with the Opus... The screenplay was written by Faustino González-Aller, a scriptwriter who then went to Cuba and to the United States as a correspondent for the agency EFE. I liked the story. I think it was a good film; of the films I have made, it was the one I felt most at ease and freest with. As you know, it was screened at the San Sebastián Festival, where it received awards for best film and best direction.

In some of your films—especially in *Los peces rojos* and also in *Rebeldía*—there are some formal devices that seem to be taken directly from Luis Buñuel’s filmography, and specifically from *Él* (1952), a film that you have said more than once that you watched with great interest. It is obvious, at least, that the presence of Delia Garcés and Arturo de Córdova in the cast of these films might have something to do with it.

I don’t think that Buñuel had any kind of formal influence on my films at all. I briefly met Buñuel in 1935, before the Civil War. He was introduced to me by Sáenz de Heredia. Buñuel’s assistant on his first film, *Urgoiti*, Domingo Pruna, had come from France as his assistant. And then

he was my assistant on *Furrows* and on *Los peces rojos*. And he was the one who told me how they filmed at the Filmófono studios from an extremely strict and detailed script, which was followed to the letter. Actually, I saw *Él* in Cannes; what attracted my attention the most was Arturo de Córdova. When I made *Los peces rojos* in collaboration with the Mexican Wallestein, the Arturo de Córdova’s name came up, along with the memory of his tense and obsessive character. It was Arturo who later told me how they filmed the scene in *Él* where the protagonist rides a bicycle in his underpants; that is not in the film now, but I saw it at Cannes... Buñuel said that the critics were going to love it, because it was nonsense.

And Delia Garcés, the star of *Rebeldía*, is Córdova’s partner in *Él*.

Well, I didn’t even remember. She was an Argentine actress who was married to Zubiría, a director of Basque ancestry. The only thing I remember now about *Él* is that sequence that ended up not being in the film. I also remember that Arturo told me that he was keen on a novel by Ricardo León, an employee at the Bank of Spain who wrote very pro-Catholic novels. Arturo de Córdova was prepared to put money into the production and he offered it to Buñuel, but Buñuel rejected it because he was a right-wing writer and that could cause him problems... And that story is practically the story of *Viridiana* (1961). It’s about a man who goes around the countryside preaching, like a kind of lay priest. At one point he goes into a house where there is a bunch of insane people... and he practically converts them all... The story of the house with the beggars in *Viridiana* is already there. Buñuel filmed it at the same studio where I was filming *Prohibido enamorarse* (1961); on the next set. I remember, as a curiosity, that his assistants asked us for a bed from our set to use on theirs. But in reality, I have never been all that interested in Buñuel. I had the patience to watch almost all his films on television in order, one after another, and the one that really interests me is *Los olvidados* (1950), the first part of Pío Baroja’s *La busca*. Don’t imagine for a second that they wasted time on trifles, either Buñuel or his scriptwriter Julio Alejandro, when they were looking for material. I like many of his films, but he often went over the top.

As you know, there is a tendency to speak of “film auteurs”, who take charge not only of the direction, but also of the script and, sometimes, of the production, and of “filmmakers” or “directors”—who are given the material a material and have to do what they can with it. In this sense, you would be a filmmaker, but actually there are filmmakers like you (Hitchcock or Douglas Sirk in the U.S.) who aren’t usually recognised as co-scriptwriters, but who work with the scriptwriter either during the shooting

or before it. We would like you to tell us a little bit about your relationships with the scriptwriters.

For example, in *Furrows*, a paradigmatic case, Natividad Zaro gave us a few sheets, about twenty foolscaps, of a *sainete*-style farce. I read it and I told her I was interested, but that it had to be changed. I was interested in the idea, but not the story. “If you wish to make this film,” I told her, “I need absolute freedom to hire the scriptwriter I want and rewrite the film from top to bottom.” When I told her that the scriptwriter chosen was Gonzalo Torrente Ballester there was no problem. Gonzalo was a friend of Eugenio Montes. We began with the idea of some poor peasants who come to Madrid, and starting from there we had to create a new story. Between the two of us we discussed every situation. It was a kind of co-writing. He had a bigger influence on the words than I did, but I was the director and I corrected him and marked out the direction to take. The film was shot on the third version of the script, but even there, we corrected and changed things. I think I still have the first version, but not the final one.

***Don Lucio y el hermano Pío* (1960) also had an original script that was extensively modified.**

The script was by Jaime García Herranz and the truth is nobody could stand it. It was woeful, weepy. Highly sentimental. It needed to be transformed and given life. The scriptwriter, logically, loved what he had done, and when we showed him the film he stood up, furious, and walked out. I met Pío Ballesteros and he generously promised to collaborate with me, even without being credited. We started with the central ideas in general terms. Then we shot and discussed the development of the story, and what we would film the next day. We made some copies and delivered them to Pepe Isbert and Tony Leblanc, who adapted without any problem. The script was constructed as we filmed. We constructed different episodes, little stories, without any order. We had to warn the editor about the lack of continuity. It had to be created. I gave it to the editor.

The curious thing—since we do not know the original script by García Herranz—is that the film ends with a documentary aftertaste of the Madrid of the era, of El Rastro, and of certain situations and relationships among the characters which, in a way, make it resemble *Furrows*. In this sense, the work of re-reading that script, of bringing it home, is quite remarkable.

Yes, yes. Talking about films about Madrid, *Don Lucio y el hermano Pío* also had to be screened together with *Furrows*. It is a real Madrid film: El Rastro, its characters and types... Also close to *The Tenant* (El inquilino, 1957), another *documentary* about Madrid. It is a film I like. When we watched it after the end of the editing, both Alfredo Fraile and Arturo González (the producer, Cesáreo’s brother) were very happy with the transformation we’d pulled

off. And it did quite well. The story was based on a tradition I remember when I was a boy in Segovia: carrying religious statues home. To my house they brought “the Virgin of I don’t know what”... That also happened in Madrid. It was the basis of the story. García Herranz was a very Valencian scriptwriter, very CIFESA, very sentimental... I discussed it with Fraile and we decided on all those changes. In the end he was afraid that not everything we’d filmed would stick. But I told him not to worry. There is an old saying that in cinema everything sticks.

There is, by the way, an old Castilian proverb, as you know, about the opportunist who “wants to keep the saint and the alms as well.” It describes exactly the character played by Tony Leblanc. It is a very funny depiction of the proverb, and it takes us to an aspect, which has to do with *Furrows* and also with *Don Lucio*, which is the aspect of Cervantes’ influence. The structure of *Don Lucio y el hermano Pío*, for example, has an accumulation of interludes typical of Cervantes’ theatre.

Yes, yes. That’s it exactly. And it also has to do, in another sense, with Pérez Galdós, with *Misericordia*. In *Furrows*, in spite of the oft-mentioned influence of Italian neorealism, our source of inspiration came from the world of Cervantes. But also from Florián Rey and his extraordinary film *The Cursed Village* (La aldea maldita, 1930). When he congratulated me after watching *Furrows*, I told him that, in a way, my film was a continuation of his.

Your reworking of previously written scripts and giving them a personal touch, as you did in *Las señoritas de mala compañía* (1973) or in *Impossible Love* (La casa manchada, 1975), requires a more detailed comment from you.

Actually, in the case of *Las señoritas de mala compañía*, by Juan José Alonso Millán, I worked out a version that Fraile liked, but he did not dare face the writer. I told him that I would talk with him and explain how and why I wanted to transform it, in addition to the changes that would occur to me during the shooting. It is a film that I am satisfied with. There are certain aspects that come from my own memories... for example, there is a sequence where they are all in single file in the *hall* of the brothel and are passing by one by one, that is based on something I myself saw in Burgos... we went to a brothel during the war... “Next!” Whorehouses were not forbidden; during the Franco era they were never banned. The banning came from UNESCO. I was doing research; I went to the National Library and, while looking for documentation, I found out that it had happened at the same time in other European countries... which was also amusing—and part of that is also in *Las señoritas de mala compañía*, when they leave the church, although it doesn’t show it exactly as it was. It was like in Segovia, on Thursday mornings after 11 a.m., everyone in Calle Real watched the prostitutes crossing the street to

the hospital for their check-up. I don't know if they do it now... people greeted them, it was funny. It was a bunch of poor women, in reality.

That was, in broad strokes, my way of working. In *Marta* (1971), for example, the script I had worked out was sent to Marisa Mell in Rome and she liked it. It was similar to a Hitchcock story. She loved it. But then that script wasn't the one we used. We couldn't convince the producer. In my last film, *Más allá del deseo* (1976), it was a disaster. Nothing could be done. I have never met a man more stubborn and awkward than that scriptwriter, Ramón Solís. I tried to fix it up every night at home, the best that I could. But we needed to film, due to problems with the dates... and we had to eat.

Tell us about your work in *Volvoreta* (1976), because for that film Wenceslao Fernández Flórez's story was also partially changed.

What happened was a pity. I had to *save* Rafael Gil, my first teacher and friend, after the dismissal of Rafael Moreno Alba. We had to begin immediately. Amparo Muñoz had a set time for filming written into her contract and she only

Shooting of *Surcos* (1951). Origin: Archivo Gráfico de la Filmoteca Española. Courtesy of Juan Miguel Nieves



cared about looking pretty in the film. I took the novel by Fernández Flórez, several copies, and I shared them out to assistants and actors. The only thing I did not follow was the story of the two boys and that was a mistake. Consequently, it came out the way it came out. Additionally, I wasn't able to have complete control over either the editing or the soundtrack. But the distributor was economically satisfied with the result. I had to agree to things that I never should have, but I had no other choice. I had to help my friend, whatever the outcome.

In some interviews you have said that there have been times when you were short of money, that you had bad times. Was this very common in Spanish cinema?

Yes, it wasn't something that just happened to one person, but on the contrary, to nearly everyone. They appeared suddenly and then disappeared. I had to suffer that problem. In between I did those things with the Americans, like *Sound from a Million Years Ago* (*El sonido de la muerte*, 1965). The scriptwriter and co-producer, Sam X. Abarbanel, a man of Jewish descent, was a scriptwriter of those kinds of stories, B-movies, about monsters and things like that, in the style of Roger Corman. They wanted the monster to appear from the first moment and I told them to forget it. The monster, if it appears at all, appears at the end, in the last moment, and I wanted to convey the sensation of its presence more than really show it. It was filmed like that, but then the Spanish and American producers got together and told me that it had to appear in the end, and that was when we filmed the part with the monster. (The monsters that appeared in the shadows were done with mirrors that Alarcón had that we placed in front of the camera and the actors to create that effect.) When they offered me the project I thought it would be fun, because these are things that everyone wants to do professionally, that require ingenuity. But it was all very modest economically, and we worked at Bronston Studios, who lent them the set and various other things. I told Abarbanel that we needed a good scriptwriter in the genre... without realising that he himself was the scriptwriter! In the end, the film won an award at the 4th Trieste Science and Fiction Festival. It's a story that could be entertaining if it were done again today in colour...

José María García Escudero was the General Director of Cinema on two different occasions during your career.

Before *Furrows* I didn't know him...

Did you know he came from the National Syndicalist Offensive (JONS)?

According to what I read in his book, it just so happens that he knew some personalities in 1935 that I had met when I went to see Dionisio Ridruejo at a hostel on the

street that was then called Príncipe de Vergara (later called General Mola). I remember that we were constantly meeting. He told me about his conversations with José Antonio Primo de Rivera and, in fact, he was the one who introduced him to me. García Escudero, according to what he tells in his book, studied at the school of journalism run by the newspaper *El Debate* at the same time as Ridruejo.

When I made *Furrows*, they wanted to cut it up, and thanks to Fray Mauricio de Begoña, they only cut the ending. I remember that I didn't like the new ending at all, and I tried to make the original one secretly, but Natividad Zaro didn't dare to do it; people were logically afraid in those days... as the film was going to Cannes I came up with the solution to end it in a different way for that screening: after the arrival of the train that follows the *Chamberlain* throwing Pepe's body onto the tracks, to put the ending coinciding with the smoke from the machine... but it was decided it would be too risky to do it. It was a moment... the same thing happened to me with the ending of *Los peces rojos*: I wanted the protagonist to commit suicide for real and the girl to stay there, screaming... it happened to me like it did to Fritz Lang, who proposed endings that were not accepted. Something similar also happened with *El diablo también llora* (1963), where the expected ending is only suggested. The producer is always very important and makes his decisions, for better or for worse. Thus, for example, the one who took me to see Natividad Zaro—a meeting that would result in *Furrows*—was Felipe Gerely, a Hungarian emigrant who had worked in Vienna with Pressburger, and who was a great friend of hers.

Talking about altered endings, another *casus belli*, and very well-known too, is the ending of *The Tenant*, a film that we've been able to see in its "original version" and that proves to be an incendiary plea against the Regime in the mid-fifties. It is a film which also combines, in an extraordinarily subtle way, certain elements typical of the *sainete* and others of farce with the most dismal tragedy.

In reality, I was always wanting to make a film like *Furrows*. When we created the cooperative, I put forward the script for *The Tenant*. It was a disjointed script by José Luis Duró from which we only took the first episode; all the rest was thrown away. The ambition was to make a *Furrows* with humour. The subsequent problem, as you know, was with Arrese, the recently appointed Minister of Housing...

As the film progresses with what is really an almost Kafkaesque nightmare, while the situation of the protagonist becomes increasingly dramatic, without a single ray of light for him or his family, the other characters progressively begin acting in a way that is increasingly farcical. There is a kind of playing with contrasts.



Surcos' launch ceremony in Cannes. Origin: Archivo Gráfico de la Filmoteca Española. Courtesy of Juan Miguel Nieves

Yes. That was the result of the construction of the script, which I got directly involved with a lot. We basically kept in mind one central idea: to narrate the tragedy of a character surrounded by eruptions of humour, but eruptions of humour that actually brought out eruptions of extreme farce... like the episode with Don Tancredo, which I saw when I was a boy and suggested to the scriptwriters.

In the film there is a series of camera movements, of descending pan shots (over the façade of the house that is going to be demolished, on the mansion of the Marquis, the profit curve of the company Mundis S.A.) which, in a consonant rhyme, trace an unequivocal discourse on the forces that are ultimately behind the eviction of the González family...

Yes, yes. It is done that way on purpose. Although today I probably would not have filmed it in that way and, certainly, I would have edited it differently. I would have made it choppy, sharper, in an effort to make more impact. Because as it is, with the pan shots, it seems to soften the intended effect, to flatten it. It is a film that I would have *corrected* today, but that is a possibility that writers have and that we filmmakers do not.



Poster of *Senda ignorada* (1946). Origin: Archivo Gráfico CulturArts IVAC (Instituto Valenciano del Audiovisual y de la Cinematografía)

In any case, it is a fierce film, with a surprising harshness... the problems it had with the censors are not surprising; in fact, it would seem logical that it should have had more...

I don't know how it passed the censors. I know that a critic for the journal *Ecclesia*, who was a censor, intervened and defended it. Because the censors as a whole, at first, were puzzled by its harshness and bitterness. The scene of the application for public housing, for example, was making fun of the bureaucracy and its inefficiency... but the curious thing is that there was no problem. They let us film and put up all those posters! And it is a really funny scene. They didn't cut it, but they did cut the scene when Fernán-Gómez is going along the street, progressively overwhelmed and dejected, seeing posters reading "For sale", "Apartments for sale", etc.

Even so, the version released in 1963, mutilated and with a new ending (the protagonist's wife finds, at the last mo-

ment, a new apartment in the La Esperanza housing development), is still devastating. It was beyond repair for them. It was impossible to change the direction of the discourse.

Yes, yes. It couldn't be avoided. The new ending was filmed a year later... and that neighbourhood you see in the added sequence is the Puente de Praga housing development. But *The Tenant* is perhaps a point of no return. Between 1953 and 1956 or '57 there were a whole set of social worries in the air, which unfortunately Spanish cinema was unable to reflect in all their intensity. When that development was smothered, we filmmakers were doomed just to play the game for its own sake, out of misfortune and to survive.

Actually, in the sixties, your career came to a halt a few times. Why, to your understanding, did García Escudero not support you but opted instead for the new Spanish cinema, so different from the Furrows model that he had formerly defended so fervently?

He came back when Manuel Fraga entered the Ministry of Information and Tourism. They were full of good intentions, but they did not know anything about how to make films. They couldn't and they didn't have the power to do it. It was only about making a supposed "youth cinema". Besides, when you economically support the cinema you ruin it. As with all the arts. Dalí is a good example of that.

CINEMA AND FALANGE: IMPOSSIBILITY AND DISILLUSIONMENT

In *Impossible Love* (Casa Manchada, 1975), a rather conventional film, with an accumulation of zooms that denote a certain annoyance over having to make a film not as you would have wanted, there is suddenly a series of personal issues of yours that we found quite striking. What is the work that allows you to introduce reflections in present that give life to the film now and then? Because they are reflections on what the Civil War was and on the role played by the Falange...

Indeed. It was a very weak novel by Emilio Romero. Andrés Velasco, the producer—who had been guaranteed financial support if he adapted it, which turned out to be a lie—and Pedro Gil Paradel created a very bad script, which did not interest me at all. We had a talk with Emilio Romero and I told him that it was crap and that it had to be re-done. He told he would do it, but he didn't do anything. And we had to start filming, because the actor Stephen Boyd was arriving... Hurriedly and on the run I corrected, crossed out and picked apart the script. I put in a number of things. The moment when it becomes more obvious is in the attack of the Maquis, because actually the story in the novel deals with other things. I inserted all the elements referring to the

actions of the Civil Guard and for the ending I made use of an interview that had been done with Valentín González, “El Campesino”¹, published by the *Pueblo* newspaper. It was quite long and I revised it, arranged it and created a dialogue that interested me. The strange thing is that it went down well at the office of the General Director of Cinema. And I didn’t put in anything else because the producer asked me not to please... it was already the beginning of the Transition. But I turned “El Campesino” into a central character of the end of the story. That conversation between two people talking about the war, saying you were Falangist and you... I tried to expand that conversation and give it some content... also, when the girl appears as a prostitute in that party and people talk about the war, it was something I had seen in the film *Arch of Triumph* (1948).

It seems that there is a base, Emilio Romero’s story, that it is obvious didn’t interest you at all, but on top of that there are twenty or twenty-five minutes that seem to be fixed on the landscape... they seem to have to do with a kind of assessment of the Falange and its activity from the war up to that time.

Exactly. And the opening, the firing squad, etc., wasn’t in the script either. It was an invention of mine from beginning to end. The result is a kind of potpourri. We even thought of Rafael Azcona to help to improve the script, but it wasn’t possible.

To move towards our conclusion, we would like you to think aloud, if you don’t mind, about the possibility or impossibility or the vicissitudes faced in developing a Falangist cinema...

I don’t think there was... I think there was an attempt... but I have never talked about it, not even with Dionisio Ridruejo. I joined the Falange in 1933, shortly after hearing the foundation speech by José Antonio.

But there was a good number of Falangists in the film world. It seemed like a high number of them suddenly appeared, after the war... anyway... I only knew one or two of them before the war. The only ones I could name are Sáenz de Heredia (but really just because he was José Antonio’s

cousin), although he admitted to me personally that he wasn’t a Falange member, and Fernando Delgado, whom I tried to work with during the Republic but, in spite of his positive talk, I couldn’t do it. In any case, in general, I don’t think the idea of a Falangist cinema existed.

But we don’t mean so much an organically Falangist film tradition as films made by progressively disillusioned Falangists whose critical points of view on certain social and political issues inevitably had to emerge in their works.

No, I don’t think it existed, or could have existed. Although I know that *Furrows* has been considered a Falangist film and, indeed, there is something in the picture that reveals my stale and disillusioned ideology and my interest in a social cinema. You should bear in mind that the Falange, before the war, was a vague idealistic project that was being constructed as it went and that depended to a large extent on the personality and charisma of José Antonio. In reality, it lacked an ideological corpus, beyond the famous “Twenty-Seven

Points”. It was a hazy movement that died before it could be established. I remember the first volume published by Aguilar of Marx’s *Capital*, and the impact that had on me... the Falange was a romantic, juvenile outburst. What could come out of that? It was all very poor, with no money. National syndicalism? It was a feeling, but there wasn’t a real ideological structure. Now then, what it could have turned into was never the war nor what happened after it. That had nothing to do with the original movement. I can’t say now what it was. A dream. Before the war, I talked about it passionately with Dionisio Ridruejo... but after the military plot everything changed. I didn’t like the plot at all. It wasn’t a political coup. I remember that I met Dionisio in the street wearing the [Falangist] blue shirt and the [traditionalist] red cap and I told him off: the two pieces of clothing were, in my opinion, incompatible. Later, as we all know, he would go back to his old way of thinking. The Falange under Franco and Serrano Suñer had nothing to do with it anymore. I didn’t like the way they mocked Hecilla either. When I heard some comrades saying that he didn’t have any class, I felt that I didn’t belong there.



Program of *Rebeldía* (1954). Origin: Archivo Gráfico CulturArts IVAC (Instituto Valenciano del Audiovisual y de la Cinematografía)

One day while going for a walk in Segovia, a young priest who had been studying in Germany explained to us what was going on there, what National Socialism really was... what I remember, exactly, is that among the people close to Dionisio Ridruejo there were Jews... for example, there was the Valencian Samuel Ros, who was Jewish and a good friend of his.

I remember that once I told a priest that he lived in the 19th century because he considered liberalism a sin. I told him that if he wished to be a Falangist he should remember what José Antonio said, that liberalism is the ultimate aim of all good politics; that, in the end, every authentic political conception ends up being liberal.

FINAL ASSESSMENT

To conclude, what's your assessment of your film career?

That it could have been and it wasn't. I wanted to make films, I have never wanted to do anything else. But I found myself in a world that... one day someone asked me, I think it was Fernán-Gómez, why during a film shot I stopped, what was I doing? "I'm thinking" I replied "that all the people around us are not interested at all in what they are doing. They do it because they get to dress up and they get paid." Ninety per cent of the professionals I have known were not really interested. (I only met one real devotee of cinema: Rafael Gil, with whom I started as assistant director, irrespective of the quality of his films. And the director, the poor thing, almost always the only one who is interested, was constantly being pushed around.

I have reached a point where I really don't care about what people say about my films, good or bad... years ago, in 1978, a moment came when I said "it's over". And it was over. I'd become convinced that nothing could be done. I talked with different people. A lot of positive talk, a lot of promises, but it didn't go any further. In the end, a representative from the Hispanic Mexican Society congratulated me for an idea (a rather long development: the story of a group of peasants who band together against the exploitation of big business... they give them one peseta and then sell the products for a hundred; there was a series of jokes about the transport situation, etc.), but he told me that he wouldn't dare make it, that light comedy or "soft porn" would be better. None of it had anything to do with me anymore. ■

Notes

- 1 The chiefs of staff for "El Campesino" included the late Manuel Mur Oti, another filmmaker of Nieves Conde's generation, to whom the Festival de Cine Independiente de Ourense dedicated a cycle and a book in 1999 (Castro de Paz, J. L. and Pérez Perucha, J. [coords.], *El cine de Manuel Mur Oti*).

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