

# WHEN THE FACE HIDES THE MASK: THE ROLE OF SUPPORTING ACTORS IN *LOS QUE NO FUIMOS A LA GUERRA*\*

It is curious to observe the way in which old fables resonate in different contexts and different eras. Consider, for example, the famous fable attributed to Aesop of the Tortoise and the Hare, in which the tortoise, paradoxically, beats his agile, fast-footed adversary in a race. If we attempted to transpose this story to a particular history of Spanish cinema, we would be in for a number of surprises. A country like Spain, which, like the tortoise, has trudged along the paths of history at a noticeably slower rate than most of its neighbours, at least on its most recent lap (I refer here of course to the long forty years of dictatorship), has managed to establish some formulas in its film tradition that have been viewed as ground-breaking some time later in the *hare countries* (i.e., the free nations). Among these are the breaking of the fourth wall and the highlighting of the materiality of the film medium with its consequent exposure of the illusion of mainstream cinema, formal techniques of Brechtian origin which in Spain have been applied in a similar way, but with very different sources. One such case is a film by Fernando Fernán Gómez, *La vida por de-*

*lante* (1958), and its legendary scene in which José Isbert gives his testimony of events in a trial, while on the screen we see the story he tells unfold in time with his halting stutter, just as in the statements of other witnesses in these absurd proceedings the image adds or removes elements in response to the testimony of the character speaking. The manipulation of the image and the materiality of the cinema could not be made clearer, but what we are seeing in this case is not a *Brechtian operation*, as it may seem; it would be more accurate to identify its origin in the humorous books of Enrique Jardiel Poncela, which also ironically expose the materiality of their medium, with curious ploys like twisted phrases that compel the reader to turn the book upside down in order to keep reading. In this way, in Fernán Gómez's film a formal mechanism is introduced which would some time later be considered innovative, but which formed part of an eccentric tradition of its own and thus, in a certain way, went by unnoticed.

As for the breaking of the fourth wall, there are also a diverse range of examples. Indeed, we need look no further than Fernán Gómez's next film,

*La vida alrededor* (1959), in which see characters speaking directly to the camera, addressing the spectator and thereby short-circuiting the story, and making visible the illusory world established by the film. We could even go back further and consider a film from the 1940s, *Dos cuentos para dos* (Luis Lucia, 1947), in which, in the final shot, “as Tony Leblanc turns around, we see the word ‘FIN’ (‘THE END’) written in chalk on the back of his sports coat” (CASTRO DE PAZ, 2002: 115), in a clearly self-referential gesture. Yet these practices were not viewed as ground-breaking by a spectator familiar with similar strategies in popular theatre.

It is precisely this coexistence with a Spanish popular tradition in which self-consciousness is often associated with humour and which naturally includes what allows Julio Diamante in his first feature film, *Los que no fuimos a la Guerra* (The Ones Who Didn't Go to the War, 1961), to posit a curious and productive ambivalence of meaning through the performances of the supporting actors who abound in the film. With this in mind, in this article I will analyse Diamante's film in order to raise some issues related to the theoretical framework within which we might locate the particular *modus operandi* of that glorious breed of the Spanish supporting actor, a breed of which few survivors remain.

### The Ones Who Didn't Go to the War (or The Ones Who Didn't Go to the Post-War)

In an article whose title gives away its content and tone (“Queridísimos actores de reparto”, or “Beloved Supporting Actors”), Julio Diamante suggests that “[s]upporting actors are the actors who represent the nation's masses: mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, faithful wives, good or bad hookers, pimps, noble or sinister doctors, teachers, holy or whiskey priests, outlaws, peasants... Good or bad characters in larger or smaller roles, but who all together contribute decisively to offer a vision, whether ac-

curate or erroneous, true or false, of a time, of a country, of a society” (DIAMANTE, 2005: 52).

This view of supporting actors, which in my opinion hits the nail square on the head, effectively puts into writing a strategy that Diamante had employed years earlier in *Los que no fuimos a la guerra*, an adaptation of the (fragmentary) novel of the same name by Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, a writer astutely described by Fernando Fernán-Gómez as “a man who was absolutely right wing, but whose writing was absolutely, distinctly leftist” (GALÁN, 1997:14). The novel in question is actually, as suggested by its subtitle (“Notes on the History of the Spanish people during the European War”), a succession of stories about a group of characters living during the First World War in the (allegorical) city of Iberina. Although not a leftist novel in any real sense, it offers a wry depiction of a set of attitudes and opinions that could be read as illustrative of a particular time and society. And it conveys not only the mood of the era in which the novel is set (as it tells in a tragicomic tone of the misadventures of the residents of the neutral Iberina during the Great War and the conflict between supporters of the Germans and supporters of the Allies), but also of the time when it was written, in 1930.

Diamante takes a similar approach in his adaptation of Wenceslao's novel, using its plot to construct a period film which, nevertheless, not only tells of those who didn't go to war in 1914, but also of those others who, like him and his generation, did not take part in the fateful Spanish Civil War, but experi-



*La vida alrededor* (Fernando Fernán Gómez, 1959)

enced the aftermath of the rebel victory: a grey post-war period imposed by the winners with an unabashed vindictiveness.

In his film Diamante thus posits various strategies to refer to the Spanish Civil War in the narration of a story that occurs, for the most part, during the First World War, of which two strategies stand out above the rest. The first is the adaptation of the age of the protagonist who connects the different stories told in the novel, which is changed from forty to seventy years old in the film, so that what he narrates in flashbacks becomes inevitably tinged by the experience of a man who has lived through the Civil War. This adaptation would be a key factor, for

example, in the inclusion at one point in the film of a nightmare in which the protagonist dreams he is caught in a surreal war (in which the same characters, dressed as officers on one side and soldiers on the other, engage in a battle with one side using strange typewriters turned into improvised machine guns and the other with actual machine guns), which can be read as an uncanny recollection of the national conflict<sup>1</sup>. But it is the second of the strategies used in the film with which my analysis here is most directly concerned. This is the use that Diamante makes of the rich tradition of Spanish supporting actors to achieve this double layer of meaning between the past in which the film is set and the present in which it is filmed, using the war in which Spain remained neutral (the First World War) to allude to the other more recent conflict that established a coercive apparatus still in effect when the film was made (the Spanish Civil War). And it was precisely this apparatus that had erected the ominous watchtowers of censorship which Diamante's oblique approach to the Civil War sought to circumnavigate; nevertheless, *Los que no fuimos a la guerra* had to fight a hard battle with the censors, as it was not released until three years and five months after its completion, following a long and tortuous administrative process. Only after this time was the film finally able to see the light, once the rights to it had been acquired by Universal Studios' subsidiary in Spain, which colluded with the Censorship Board to make changes that reduced



*Los que no fuimos a la guerra* (Julio Diamante, 1961)

the length of the film, with some decisive cuts (including the nightmare scene mentioned above) that effectively garbled its meaning.<sup>2</sup>

As noted above, a fundamental factor in the establishment of the relationship with the Spanish Civil War was the choice of certain actors who belonged to a tradition of supporting performers that had its origins in Spanish popular theatre. This tradition was continued (although in our times it is disappearing, if it has not already disappeared) in films associated with the Spanish farcical genre of the *sainete*, due largely to the interest of the studios in the 1940s and 1950s in having a few faces well-known to the public and with whom audiences

had forged a special relationship in the context of the theatre.<sup>3</sup> Most of the actors who appeared in Diamante's film formed part of this tradition: Félix Fernández, José (Pepe) Isbert, Tota Alba, Julia Caba Alba, Erasmo Pascual, Xan das Bolas, María Luisa Ponte, Gracita Morales, Ismael Merlo, Sergio Mendizabal, Juanjo Menéndez and Agustín González, the last of these in his first starring role. The reason for the existence of this uniquely Spanish star system made up of actors that Berlanga defined as "*cómicos de tripa*" (natural born comics) (BERLANGA, 1984: 33) can be found, according to the authors who have analysed the question, in the absence in Spain of the revolutions that occurred in the theatre in other parts of Europe in the early twentieth century; with respect to its origin, some argue that it could be traced back to the theatre comedy of

the Spanish Golden Age, and more specifically to the figure of the *gracioso* (joker) who "comments on and at the same time ridicules the main story of the protagonists" (COMPANY, 1984: 53).

In any case, I find the choice of these actors to perform in this film important, above all, for one reason: the particular style of acting that defines them and that has been identified by several important Spanish film historians. While Santos Zunzunegui refers to this style as a "dialectic between the newness of the character [they represent] and the continuity of their physical presence" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 2002a: 182), Jesús González Requena views them as a type of "actor whose body resists the signs it portrays. Not out of a lack

of professionalism, but quite the contrary, because in this body these signs do not negate the physicality that sustains them: they signify with precision, but they do not exhaust their signification. This actor's body, solid and thick, gives its signifiers a unique irreducibility. It is a body at odds with signification, resistant to the meaning it sustains and therefore equally resistant to the story in which it participates" (REQUENA, 1984: 37). This is a type of actor who Francesc Llinás suggests is suspended in a "balance between excess and submission to the story" (LLINÁS, 1984: 30). It is thus a style of acting that is sustained through an incredulity shared between actor and spectator with respect to the role portrayed, and which Zunzunegui (referring to one of these actors, Antonio Casal) has defined as a "strange form of Brechtianism" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 2002b: 189).

Indeed, Brecht's theories on acting are not far removed from this particular performing style. Although epic theatre is diametrically opposed to the comic sketch or the *sainete* in its theoretical foundation and its political intentions, this would not be the first time that such distant points strangely converge. Walter Benjamin wrote, referring to Brecht's theatre, that "epic theatre is gestural. The extent to which it can also be literary in the traditional sense is a separate issue. The gesture is its raw material and its task is the rational utilization of this material. The gesture has two advantages over the highly deceptive statements and assertions normally made by people and their many-layered and opaque actions. First, the gesture is falsifiable only up to a

point; in fact, the more inconspicuous and habitual it is, the more difficult it is to falsify. Second, unlike people's action and endeavours, it has a definable beginning and a definable end. Indeed, this strict, frame-like, enclosed nature of each moment of an attitude which, after all, is as a whole in a state of living flux, is one of the basic dialectical characteristics of the gesture" (BENJAMIN, 1998: 3).

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This seems quite close to a description of those supporting actors, whose own features are difficult to falsify because of the role they play; actors whose contribution is decisive to the achievement of this distancing effect. It is Brecht himself who formulates this question more clearly: "The actor must show an event, and he must show himself. He naturally shows the event by showing himself; and he shows himself by showing the event.

## The film cannot be fully credible as a period film when these characters, who are characters only up to a certain point, undermine the possibility of believing in the historical illusion of what we are watching

Although these coincide, they must not coincide in such a way that the difference between the two tasks is lost."<sup>4</sup>

Inevitably, as I suggested above, this unique model of actor divided between character and person requires a no less unique relationship with the spectator. While in Brechtian theatre the actor enters into a dialogue with a spectator who is *awake* (or awakens a spectator in lethargy), Spanish supporting actors establish with the audience what Zunzunegui has called a *contract of trust*,<sup>5</sup> i.e., a relationship based on a *re-encounter* with bodies, gestures and voices that remain unchanged in spite of the different role they happen to play in each film, while at the

same time still performing that role.<sup>6</sup> It could be argued that, more than just playing a role, they assume different roles without losing their own physicality.

A number of facts suggest that Diamante was aware of the signifying capacity of these *cómicos de tripa*, especially if we consider two of the most charismatic actors who take part in the film: Xan das Bolas and Pepe Isbert. Xan das Bolas played the role of the "Galician" in numerous films and his

mere presence mobilises a whole series of clichés that foreshadow the position that the character will take: in this case, for example, he is Fandiño, proprietor of a tavern who wants not only to keep out of the conflicts but, if he can, to profit from them. On his performance in the film Diamante remarked: "After deciding that the role of Fandiño would be played by Xan das Bolas, I made some changes to the dialogue, adapting it to the characteristics of this ac-

*Los que no fuimos a la guerra* (Julio Diamante, 1961)



tor" (DIAMANTE, 2010: 112). The role is thus at the service of the actor, not the other way round. More meaningful still is the use that Diamante makes of a man who is perhaps the best representative of this endangered breed of actor: Pepe Isbert. At one moment in the film, in his role as Aristides Sobrido, a militant Germanophile who even has under his command a group of pubescent boy scouts to whom he tries to teach the benefits of German discipline, we hear him say "we need to inject the germs of militarisation in every vein of the nation." There is an obvious ridiculousness in these words being spoken by Isbert, whose particular physique (of course quite lacking in any hint of Germanic svelteness) combines with his inimitable guttural voice, rushed and almost unintelligible in his most brilliant moments (for example, in the trial scene in *La vida por delante*, 1958). As José Luis Téllez has pointed out with remarkable astuteness, Isbert's style of acting (or of being on the screen) "immediately revealed the pompous or empty nature of any discourse that is or makes claims to being predominant. Isbert's place of enunciation is systematically situated at the paradigmatically opposite extreme of the enunciation itself" (TÉLLEZ, 1984: 42). By giving him the role of the Germanophile with a love of discipline, Diamante seems to know how to use Isbert's capacity for invalidating whatever he asserts, whatever he says, with his own presence (physical and vocal), in a clear example of that dialectic produced by an acting style that is not entirely acting. Perhaps this is why one of the assessments of the film's censors related to deficient performances, "as if the director had not known what to do with the actors."

In view of the above, I would suggest that the choice of this kind of actor is the fundamental reason why the film, set in the flashback to 1914 that takes

## In *Los que no fuimos a la guerra*, the present is also presented by certain faces that cannot hide completely behind the masks of their 1914 characters

up most of the story, *does not work* as a historical film. By this I mean that it cannot be fully credible as a period film when these characters, who are characters only up to a certain point, undermine the possibility of believing in the historical illusion of what we are watching; it is difficult to strip these comic actors of the uniqueness that irremediably anchors them in a particular time period. As a result, the contribution of the actors is decisive in bringing the meaning of the film towards a war that is chronologically closer to the bodies acting out the story, to the actual time of these comedians.

### Here and elsewhere: the constant state of flux of the Spanish supporting actor

Having thus considered how supporting actors are used in Diamante's film, I will now attempt to raise the question to a more general perspective. To this end I will refer to an article by film historian Santos Zunzunegui ("Los cuerpos gloriosos") in which he uses Greimas's semiotic square to develop a typology of actors. The axis of opposites on this square would be formed, on the one hand, by actors in the traditional conception of the term (those who adopt various acting methods to play a fictional character as faithfully as possible), while on the opposite end would be the Bressonian *model*, who reveals his essence through a "flattening of expressiveness [and a] mechanisation of gestures and poses" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 2005: 97); this is an opposition in which "the 'knowledge' of the 'actor' will find its logical correlative in the 'ignorance' of the 'model'" (ZUNZUNEGUI,

2005: 97). Applying the laws of opposition, the contrary axis for the two types described above would comprise the *not-actor* and the *not-model*. *Not-actors* would refer to what "Sergei M. Eisenstein had theorised about using the term *tipazh*, [a technique in which] the

aim is to present to the audience a face (a figure) capable of 'expressing everything' on the basis of his social and biological experience" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 2005: 97). Finally, the fourth category, the *not-model*, would refer to "bodies with autonomy. Autonomy that sustains their ability to go from one film to another, from one topos to another, from one story to another, from one narrative situation to another, *without ever ceasing to be themselves*" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 2005: 97). In this category Zunzunegui places our supporting actors, who move constantly between the two poles "from the Bressonian model to the actor proper" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 2005: 103).

Returning to my analysis in the first part of the article, i.e. the use that Diamante makes in his film of the uniquely transitory condition between *actor* and *model* of these supporting actors, it becomes clear that it is this dual status that allows them, in their role of *actors*, to represent the characters of the story taking place in 1914, while their status as *models* is what evokes, in their faces, in each little dispute between the supporters of the Allies and the Germanophiles, a war that has not yet occurred in the time-frame of the diegesis. It could therefore be argued that while the past is represented in *Los que no fuimos a la guerra*, the present is also presented by certain faces that cannot hide completely behind the masks of their 1914 characters.

The discussion in this article points to a question that is in a sense methodological: whether the analysis of acting styles could serve as a scaffolding or basis for an exploration of film forms



in the context of their tradition. We have seen here how focusing the analysis on the question of performance in a specific film makes it possible to expand the framework to a theoretical level, while at the same time addressing the origins of the acting method studied in a related field like the theatre. This way of looking at a film or a film tradition will ultimately lead us to some productive albeit also paradoxical conclusions, such as the fact that cinematic traditions in countries subject to censorship may arrive at innovative formal solutions at the same time as (or even before) they are developed in free countries. It is a conclusion as paradoxical, at least, as the old fable attributed to Aesop. ■

## Notes

- 1 Uncanny even in the Freudian sense (*unheimlich*), since this absurd battle dream is the fratricidal episode known since ancient times, which, repressed, returns unexpectedly.
- 2 It is worth recalling here, to avoid possible confusion, the curious story of the censor's cuts to Diamante's film, one of which was the dream scene. The film received its screening licence in 1961, and premièred at the Venice Film Festival in 1962 with the inclusion of the protagonist's nightmare, a scene that was subsequently cut by Universal Films, in agreement with the General Directorate of Cinema and Theatre, prior to the film's première in Spanish theatres in 1965. Many years later, Diamante managed to find the scene and reinsert it, returning the film to its original state, as we know it today.
- 3 In the early days of Franco's regime, the debate over what kind of films were desired by the regime was, of course, interesting. On one side were certain official agencies that sought to eliminate *sainetes* and popular films that they deemed to be associated with the Second Republic, while on the other were certain studios that were far from willing to give up the audiences attracted by the actors (or comedians) with theatrical origins who appeared in these types of films. It could be said (while admitting the simplified nature of the definition)

that the solution, an intermediate one, was to soften the popular content of the films while keeping the familiar faces on the screen.

- 4 Bertolt Brecht (1930). *Versuche* 1-3. Berlin; quoted by Walter Benjamin (1998: 21).
- 5 A unique relationship which "at the end of the day allows the transmutation of a *body* into a *symbol*" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 2002: 183).
- 6 It seems timely here to note certain similarities and differences between the two models of acting described. In Brecht's theatre the aim was not so much to act as to make it obvious that one is acting and, as a result, a distance, visible and palpable, arises between the role portrayed and the audience, from the actor working and not so much from the work of the actor. In the performances of Spanish supporting actors, however, the aim is not to make it obvious that one is acting, but to act on the basis of an awareness of certain traits of one's own that are recognisable and recognised by the audience. In both cases, the illusion of reality is partial and the audience's disbelief is, necessarily, only partially suspended.
- 7 The censor's reports on the actors' performances included assessments like the following: "Rather mediocre. As if the director hadn't known what to do with the actors"; and: "Barely correct, discreet, the actors betraying the lack of coherent direction" (Administrative File 23.871, Alcalá de Henares, AGA, Caja/legajo 36/3876).

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