THE PAST IN THE PRESENT.
REFLECTIONS ON THE IMAGINARY CONSTRUCTION OF
THE 19th CENTURY SPANISH WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE
IN THE SERIES LOS DESASTRES DE LA GUERRA
(M. Camus, TVE, 1983)¹

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The historical events which developed in Spain following the
dethroning of the Bourbon monarchy through the work of Napoleon have
been remembered and reconstructed in different forms in the cultural
history of the country (plastic arts, monuments, literary texts, audiovisual
media) and throughout the entire last century. The imminent celebrations
of the anniversary of the uprising of the people of Madrid on May 2, 1808
once again place emphasis on the depth and richness of the effort to
constantly bring up and reinterpret what was such a crucial moment in
the history of Spain. The analysis presented here of the television series
Los desastres de la guerra, shown by Televisión Española in June of
1983, seeks to analyze a part of that long and ample history, and to
underscore the relevance, in that context and within the framework of
that long tradition, of the view which was given to the historical events
of the Napoleonic wars by a mass media controlled by a public entity and
without competition from private channels, at a point in time when
Spain’s period of transition to democracy was considered to be complete.

The analysis will be carried out on three levels, which in turn
ought to serve as a means of reflection on what is in play, of the way in
which public television reconstructs the War for Independence. First, I

¹ The illustrations accompanying this article are photoframes from the series as it is reproduced in the
DVD set Los desastres de la guerra (RTVE, Servicios comerciales).

² I would like to thank Jesusa Vega for her the valuable help which she has given me for the analysis
I put forth here. Without her intellectual generosity this article simply would not exist. Though I am
responsible for any shortcomings of the final text, I gratefully and warmly thank her for having taken
me into the project which she is coordinating for May 2, into which this article fits (Title of the
project: “El archivo del dos de mayo: mito, conmemoración y recreación artística de una memoria e
identidad compartida”, ref. HUM2005-01612), and for having collaborated actively on the
configuration of the cultural framework of these pages.
will review the production and reception histories of the series; second, I will propose an interpretation which emphasizes its narrative quality as it pertains to the public history of Spain; and, finally, though not less important, I will reflect on the relationship it is possible to establish between history as "it was" and how it is told in the series.

The series:

In March of 1983, Televisión Española informed the readers of its official publication, Teleradio, that it was putting the finishing touches on "una de las producciones más importantes realizadas por TVE, Los desastres de la guerra." Directed by the prestigious film and television director, Mario Camus, who had just received a Golden Bear prize at the Berlin Film Festival, and written by cultural heavy weights of the time, like Jorge Semprún and screenwriter Rafael Azcona, the series is described as possibly the "acontecimiento cinematográfico del año, reflejo del nuevo enfoque de producciones de nuestra televisión."³

The objective, as the title would lead to believe, was to shape a reconstruction of the historical period of Spain’s War of Independence (1808-1814), through the afflicted and penetrating view of Francisco de Goya.

There appear in the heading of the article, in quotation marks as though it were a quote, the same words which appear in the prologue of all the episodes spoken by Francisco Rabal, the actor who would play the role of the Aragonese painter.

"El rey me ha perdonado," decía. Lo que no significa que yo sea inocente. Nadie es ya inocente cuando ha visto tanto y todo lo que yo he visto. He visto cómo las ideas más nobles de la Ilustración, libertad y progreso, se convertían en lanzas, sables y

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³ Eduardo Chamorro was also a co-writer.

bayonetas... No hay inocencia en mí, ni en mi época. Quizá sólo son inocentes mis pinturas, reflejo del espanto.\textsuperscript{5}

Goya (Francisco Rabal) as he gives the quoted lines.

The fact that these lines are the fruit of the imagination of the series authors is interesting, as is the visual presentation of Francisco Rabal/Goya giving the quote at the beginning of each chapter.\textsuperscript{6} To the contrary of what historians frequently affirm, however, to denounce the way in which the audiovisual document manipulates and falsifies historical facts, specifically what Goya could have thought about the War

\textsuperscript{5} Before the credits, Rabal gives these lines in the prologue of all the episodes of the series. Nigel Glendinning y Jesusa Vega deny the authenticity of those words, of which, according to them, there is no evidence in any of Goya's writings or from witnesses of the time (interview, June 2007). It might be an interesting exercise to compare the apocryphal quote, chosen to define the content of the series, with the sentiments historians consider to be authentically reflected in Los desastres. See N. Glendinning, "Portraits of war", New Society, 19 March 1970, 474-476.

\textsuperscript{6} The image is a synthesis of the iconography associated with the painter, which at that time represents the "image of Goya" commonly accepted as such.
for Independence, does not seem relevant here. The question upon which the present study is based is a different one. Precisely because it is not a mere quote, but rather an invention, those falsified words lead us to inquire as to the reasons for and circumstances surrounding their invention: our problem is not nor can it be one of greater or lesser historical fidelity, but rather, what does that falsification reveal about the society which has produced it? The idea is, as Marc Ferro observed thirty years ago, "esta historia imaginada puede tener igual pertinencia que la otra".

Neither the model (of the European miniseries born in the 1970’s), nor the topic (the pertinence of the reference to a certain image of Goya to evoke a committed approach to the history of Spain) were particularly novel, for the historical circumstances in which the series was made. Even though the Aragonese painter might not have yet come to be transformed into the icon of the culture of the masses which he possibly is today after all the incursions into his life and creative

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7 As Jesús Vega acutely observed in our conversation, in general it is striking that Goya’s "real" words are never used in the series, as could have been done with the very titles of the etchings, many of which are very suggestive (for example, "Duro es el paso!", el n. 14, o "Grande hazaña! Con muertos!", el n. 39, o "Murio la verdad", el n. 79 – the numbering is that used by The Disasters of War by Francisco Goya y Lucientes; Nueva York, Dover Publications, 1967). On the other hand, it must be said, according to studies cited by Vega y Glendinning, the act of separating the images of the etchings from their context, and also the words from their very own specific historical reality was a process that began at the time of their first publication Desastres, in 1954.

8 Marc Ferro, "Esiste una scrittura filmica della storia?", in Cinema e storia. Linee per una ricerca, Milán, Feltrinelli, 1980,157 (ed.or., París, 1977). [This imagined history can have as much relevance as the other.]

9 As they are defined in M. García de Castro, La ficción televisiva popular, Barcelona, Gedisa, 2002, 63-66.

personality by Carlos Saura, Bigas Luna and Milos Foreman,\textsuperscript{11} at least since the 1920’s entertainment films had learned to mix stories of the Spanish War for Independence with visual and thematic clues which, from the perspective of a public history of art, had been associated with Goya.\textsuperscript{12}

Originality, on the other hand, was not the primary objective of the program. As Camus himself recognizes, “la serie es muy didáctica... Desde mi punto de vista... no creo que tenga mucha personalidad. Es una crónica desde fuera, muy desde fuera. Se trataba de personajes de los que no puedes enamorarte de ninguno. En Goya se encuentra un poco la clave de todo. Los demás personajes son muy máscaras.” And, in fact, if there is any marked trait which all the characters, the scenes, and the situations of all the episodes of the series share, it is precisely a clear desire not to stray from known references known and studied from textbooks, from the political history of important people, and from obligatory topics of conversation. Another article appearing *Teleradio* gives a clue as to the reasons which could have motivated such a conservative view of an historical time apparently so far from being conservative as were the early 80’s in Spain. The prevailing idea among the scriptwriters was, according to the reporter, that of “rigor histórico.”\textsuperscript{13}

It is interesting to see how easy it was, in a world outside of that of the professional activity of historians, to identify historical rigor with the idiosyncrasies of erudite discourse, with important people, with high politics. It is, in synthesis, 19th century “historical rigour,” filtered by an urgency to not stray from what the public might recognize as versisimilar, and, in some measure, interesting or entertaining. In it are signs of a will to innovate, of a democratic culture, applied simply to the transformation of the value system assigned to an important person, and in the construction of a web of complex relationships, but not in the way of viewing history. This is perhaps the first point which must be highlighted:

\textsuperscript{11} With their films *Goya en Burdeos* (C. Saura, 1999), *Volaverunt* (Bigas Luna, 1999); and, most recently, *Los fantasmas de Goya* (*Goya’s Ghosts*, M. Foreman, 2006).


\textsuperscript{13} E. Chamorro, “Historia general de los desastres”, *Teleradio*, n. 1328 (10-16 de junio de 1983), 22.
the means of narrating is explicitly indebted to the past. In spite of the strong popular content of the historical events portrayed, the weight of the dramatic progression falls completely on the solid and customary shoulders of Napoleon, José Bonaparte, Fernando VII, and Carlos IV. At the same time, the treatment of the mythical figures of the uprising, like El Empecinado, the popular leader of the antifranquists, is rather conventional, although it is a question of another set of conventions, since here it is above all the attribution of this part of the tale to the codification of the genre of outlaws (and spaghetti-western, basically) that which determines representation.

Napoleon (Pierre Santini) in Bayona: "Los países que tienen tantos curas, son más fáciles de someter"

Nevertheless, and as is obvious, in spite of getting in large measure its way of looking at the history of the War for Independence from the past, the series is a product of its time, of that first year of a
socialist government, when democracy in Spain seems more established, after having overcome the attempted coup (February 23, 1981) and moving towards a new presence of all things political in society.

There are at least three levels on which it is possible to detect those elements that index toward the historical-political state of affairs of the early 80's. First, which could be defined as a longstanding trait of societies where military values are not hegemonic, there is a manifest appeal to a vague pacifist culture, which specifically in the Spain of those years also means attempting to avoid too closely approaching images and ideas that could be related to relatively recent memory, most importantly, to the Civil War of the 1930's. The series, *El país* explained to its readers, "quiere reconstruir los hechos a partir del principio pacifista de mostrar los horrores de cualquier guerra." In the decidedly consensual political climate that characterized the Transition and getting accustomed to democracy in Spain, the insistence on the celebration of universal values implies, in the series, the omission or subordination of the civil conflicts which dramatically confronted Spaniards between 1812 and 1814.

The second thematic coordinate corresponds with the political sensibility of the time; it has to do with the elaboration of a national identity which, without refusing to define unique traits, might avoid a Manichaeian view of the “other,” in this case Napoleonic France. One of the scriptwriters, the future socialist Minister of Culture, having recently return from his exile in Paris, brings to the writing of the script the information and the vision of the memoirs of Leopold Hugo, son of the great Victor, a general for Napoleon and the leader of the French troops whom the Spanish "patriots" confronted. This, along side a certain finesse when it came to representing the brother of the emperor, José Bonaparte, serves to modulate the nationalist spirit and to eliminate frictions which would be unacceptable in a Spanish-French co-production.

The third element, which indexes towards a democratic culture desirous of firming up new values as the cultural foundation for post-Franco Spain, brings into play an even more substantial question, possibly

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14 *El País*, 6 de junio de 1983, 54. According to Chamorro (article cited in num. 6), Estelrich and Azcona began working on the script with the idea of highlighting episodes that would represent the barbarity of war.
the thorniest that could be posed, and one that the series does not fail to put on the screen in the most genuine way. The proposition is based on an evident fact: no matter how identifiable and “rigorous” the reconstruction might be, spectators will read it from the perspective of their current circumstances –which means, from the perspective of someone, recently awakened from dictatorship, immersed in the task of building a democracy. "Será curiosa la reacción de la sociedad ante una serie que presenta los hechos quizá más determinantes de nuestras posteriores desventuras", is what Teleradio had pointed out in its first report. The debt the program owes to its own time is, then, twofold: on the one hand, it has to do with considering "la reacción de la sociedad actual", dialoguing with it, seeking its interest; on the other hand, that same dialogue requires it be measured against the whole of history of the 20th century, and, above all, of that portion of it which, in 1983, had ended eight years before, Franquismo. And, in that regard, the intentions of the creators were very clear: to clearly expose the importance of absolutism and religious, Oscurantist factors in the War for Independence. In a to-the-point summary of the thorny questions which May 2 did not clarify, Jorge Semprún explains: "los españoles, en su justa guerra contra el invasor, contribuyeron objetivamente a fortalecer el absolutismo en España." That is what another journalist speaking on the topic defined as "un precio excesivo." "Con la guerra de la Independencia", this journalist writes, "España acumuló a su retraso secular otros cincuenta años en relación a una Europa en pleno aceleramiento histórico. El precio de la soberanía fue quizás demasiado caro, habida cuenta, sobre todo, de que las demás naciones dominadas por Napoleón recobrarón fácilmente su independencia y además progresaron gracias al dinamismo de las ideas recibidas. En España

15 Demange accurately describes the two factors making adoption of May 2nd as a national holiday difficult, and he identifies it with the power of the Church and the military. In C. Demange, El dos de mayo. Mito y fiesta nacional (1808-1958), [Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2004], (esp. “Conclusión general”, 279-286).

16 L.H. “Los desastres de la guerra”, Teleradio, 1327 (6-12 de junio de 1983), p. 46. Cf. also “Comienza la serie Los desastres de la guerra”, El país, 6 de junio de 1983, 54; from which the quote is textually taken.
aparece la represión, el exilio; continúa la Inquisición, el inmovilismo, la miseria. Surge por primera vez nítidamente el fantasma de las dos Españas. 1812 es 1939. Los desastres de las guerras se repiten a veces con macabra similitud"17.

Fernando VII (Francisco Cecilio) after Restoration: "Yo soy la autoridad. Yo soy la ley. Yo ordeno la vida y la muerte, la libertad, la cárcel, el destierro".

The ghosts it evokes, the questions there is a need to talk about, are really others. Obviously anti-historical, but as alive as the decision to always narrate great deeds and great people in the same way is dead, the questions are: ¿To what point, in what measure, have our heroic anti-French fighters made dictatorship possible? ¿Where do you find the weakness of liberal, laic discourse in Spain?

Conclusions about how to analyze audiovisual texts that narrate historical events

This quick review of a specific production, in particular historical circumstances can serve as well to suggest some more general reflections on the topic of the film-history relationship. Following the well-defined lines established some 30 years ago, thinkers like Ferro, Sorlin, Rosenstone have shown the way to an effective use of film in historical reflection, and, vice versa, I would like to end by mentioning two aspects of this study that seem to me of special methodological relevance.

The first has to do with an essential characteristic of film or television as they portray history: for those texts it is absolutely necessary that the public be able to recognize them as a description of deeds definable as “historical,” therefore belonging to what a particular society considers a versisimilar account of what happened in the past. This implies that the conception of such accounts destined for mass consumption, of what is history and who are its protagonists on the public stage, can not be innovative, nor can it reflect minority revisionism. The interest and contribution of the latter must be sought on another level, in their greater or lesser ability to insert into those conventional accounts points of view or elements which can aspire towards a modification of the public representation of history, through a logical integration and expansion, not by calling institutionalized discourse into question.

A second regulating mechanism for these audiovisual texts that must be considered is their need to be attractive, and at the same time comprehensible and interesting, to the public of their time. They have as an inspirational criterion the sharp awareness that history is always constructed from the perspective of the present, and the texts are the result of a more or less correct reflection on how that production will be read by specific viewers, who live at a specific historical moment. This


implies a tendency not so much, and not only, towards exploiting universalizing elements of history, as can happen with classic Hollywood cinema, but above all shifting attention towards content elements that might be more in line with the view of the past, and the world view, available in the public space at the time of reception. Also at this level, then, the researcher will get from the analysis of these productions not just elements to be used in the reconstruction of a narrated period, but also solid ideas about their possible readings. From this perspective, audiovisual works of mass consumption are configured as primary sources for questioning and decoding, as the historian always does with his sources, in order to understand what part of the past events holds sway in the historical time of their reception. The subsequent search for an explanation of those values and that force can produce fruitful results for our understanding of the past.

Translation: Richard K. Curry

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