

***Zepo*: An allegory of silence**

Abstract

The short film *Zepo*—an allegory of bewilderment, cruelty, horror and deceit—uses abstraction and the metaphor of silence to reveal the latent historical memory surrounding the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and subsequent dictatorship (1939-1975).

Keywords

- 1) Francisco Franco, (2) dictatorship, (3) *maquis*, (4) Spanish cinema, (5) war crimes, (6) sand animation.

Zepo need not rehearse the often-told story of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and subsequent Franco dictatorship (1939-1975). Instead, this short film portrays the horrors of the conflict through abstraction: blood on a face, a body staining the surface of a white lake, the vampire-like Civil Guards, the leg-hold hunting trap (whose name in Spanish, ‘cepo’, is homophonous with the film’s title), the expressionist use of sound. In today’s Spain, the atrocities of the war and post-war periods—never addressed through a formal state trial—remain shrouded in silence.

Zepo’s plot, surrounding a young girl’s discovery in the woods, uses an allegory of silence to reclaim Spain’s historical memory of this period. The film’s title is a clear reference to Carlos Saura’s *The Hunt* (1965), one of the most representative allegorical films to emerge from the new Spanish cinema of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s. In both films, hunting is an allegorical representation of the savage act of killing human beings in cold blood.

The plot of *Zepo* could well be a modern adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood, with strong connections to *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1974), *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) and *Black Bread* (2010). The naiveté of the young protagonist brings the cruelty of the story into sharp relief. In fact, the film offers a very basic plot; its poetry lies precisely in the way it peels away extraneous information in order to arrive at the simple core of its message. With an expressionist hint, especially highlighted by the two Civil Guards, the film swings between thriller and idyllic fable, reinforced by the sand technique that combines fine line drawings and childlike strokes. The alliance between technique and plot drives the story; the play between precision and imprecision offered by the sand technique mirrors a similar play in the plot between

terror and innocence. The landscape is disturbing and distorted, almost monochrome in parts, displaying dreamy sequences that freeze the scene. A heavy stillness permeates the shots, often only interrupted by the slight movements of the characters.

Zepo is a tale of terror, in which the metaphorical narrative acquires an extraordinary dimension thanks to its sense of veracity. The film proposes an exploration of a traumatic episode with multiple interpretations, although all of them point directly to the Civil War and the Franco era, in which the abuse of authority was shrouded in silence. The body lying on the snow looks like a *maquis*, a member of the Spanish anti-Franco *guerrillas* hidden in the Pyrenees. During this resistance period, many crimes were committed in the *hunt for the maquis*. The film's plot suggests that silence is the only way to survive in a state dominated by force and authoritarian interests. The monstrous figures of the two Civil Guards come to represent a regime of secrecy and silence; we are reminded that the atrocities of this period remain unpunished (Preston, 1990: 12). Like the protagonist herself, the crimes are submerged, vanishing from the view of society. *Zepo*'s plot does not come to a resolution, nor has the real-life "plot" of Spanish Civil War history. The Spanish state has provided no further account of the period's war crimes—especially those related to the resistance and the *maquis*.

The metaphor of silence extends to the technical properties of the film: its use of sound is expressionist and very sparse, creating a ghostly atmosphere. The sound is given in bursts along with percussive effects that emphasize the characters movements and the sand drawing effect. The ambient sound is one of deafening silence, sifted out by the wind and the emptiness of the mountains, which exaggerates the feeling of loneliness (shot 2). Also, in a very schematic way, similar to the plot and the drawing techniques, some sounds contribute to sharpen the mystery of the atmosphere: a few steps (shot 11), the cries of dark birds that lead the protagonist to the body (shot 13a). There are no words, only dialogue between glances and eloquent silences. The girl's agitated breath serves as a metronome for the plot. At the end, her thrashing in the water and the sound of her heartbeat suspend time, as if the story were waiting for a last-minute rescuer. When no such hero arrives, the viewer is left with an enormous sense of pessimism and the impossibility of salvation (shots 48, 50, 54a and 54b).

One of the last shots particularly highlights the plot: the ghostly shadow of the girl, begging for help from under the surface of the frozen-over lake (shot 58). She seems

to be an appeal to consciousness, an evanescent memory that suddenly re-appears and vanishes again with equal ease, and with no consequences.

After blowing sand blurs the shot, another object fills the screen. This is the leg-hold hunting trap used to ensnare the man. The two Civil Guards place it randomly in the snow to hunt more prey indiscriminately. Here we see the arbitrariness of this public authority in a totalitarian regime that lacks justice. In this regard, the last image is also significant: A policeman walks toward the camera and steps on it, blocking its vision completely and bringing the film to a close. Here we see a display of dominance and superiority, an example of the poetics of cruelty and the typical features of revenge and injustice of the Spanish Fascist melodrama (shot 64b; Camino, 2011: 16).

Unlike other war stories, the Spanish Civil War offers the subtleties of a fratricidal conflict: secrecy; distrust among family, friends and neighbours; the difficulty of distinguishing enemy from ally; the lack of communication between parents and children; and finally, silence. As Marsha Kinder points out, the Spanish fascist melodrama connects privacy with the public sphere, increasing the feeling of ubiquitous vulnerability and danger (Kinder, 1993: 72). After a long tradition of film images, the only way left to express these sentiments is through abstraction. *Zepo's* story is an asphyxiated scream—a cry for justice and freedom that is lost in the immensity of the forest and silenced under the ice. The film unearths memories and claims respect for victims; in this sense, it is not just an allegory of silence, but also an emblem of hope.

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