

MELODRAMATIC VICTIMIZATION AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR: THE CASES OF *RAZA* AND *EL LÁPIZ DEL CARPINTERO*

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Spanish cinema has a long, complex relationship with melodrama and films that address national history and identity. Marsha Kinder, among others, has shown how the Francoist dictatorship embraced melodrama as the primary form of approved cinematic production. In the context of Francoist Spain, she observes:

Melodrama had an immediate appeal to Fascist discourse, partly because the two share so many crucial characteristics. They are both highly contradictory (which may be partly caused by their adoption of a Manichaean morality), both capable of being read as both radical and reactionary, both historical and ahistorical, both rooted in realism yet highly idealized and hyperbolic. (71)

However, as the regime's preferred cinematic discourse, melodrama also appealed to oppositional film-makers who used its language subversively.<sup>1</sup> While the regime produced state-sanctioned melodrama of the traditional kind, that is, “a reactionary escapist genre that naturalizes the dominant ideology by displacing political issues onto the personal plane of the family” (55), film-makers opposing the dictatorship used melodrama's excess subversively—to the point of irony and self-consciousness—which in turn suggested ideological contradictions in Nationalist discourse. Kinder argues that melodrama supporting the regime and “reinscribed” melodrama on the part of oppositional New Cinema constitute a large part of Spanish film trends from the 1940s through the transition in the 1980s, when Pedro Almodóvar produces his melodramas/ironic melodramas that seem to be the quintessence of parodic doubling within the same film.<sup>2</sup> Melodrama certainly outlives the dictatorship, and on the first page of her book on *Spanish National Cinema*, Nuria Triana-Toribio wonders if Álex de la Iglesia is the future of Spanish cinema, noting particularly that two of his most significant influences come from melodrama (and the third is one of Kinder's practitioners of “reinscribed” subversive melodrama of the Francoist period).<sup>3</sup> Melodrama in all its forms continues to be integral to Spanish cinematic production with an especially charged history owing to its connection with regime film-making.

As a result of early associations with Francoist ideologies of *familia* and *patria*, melodrama in Spain often seems to intertwine the domestic and the national, inviting political readings of personal

conflicts.<sup>4</sup> This intertwining continues in a number of Spanish melodramas produced since about 1990 that take place during and around the Spanish Civil War and explicitly evoke national, political contexts in tandem with individual, familial ones.<sup>5</sup> At a surface level, the two films of this study, *Raza* (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1942) and *El lápiz del carpintero* (Antón Reixa, 2003), are quite different. In addition to the more than 60 years separating their respective productions and the historical contexts this separation entails, each film also takes an opposing side in its re-telling of the Spanish Civil War. Despite these differences, however, the two films offer remarkably similar stories with at times astounding visual parallels. Both films also rely on the conventions of melodrama, especially victimization of the protagonist and the resulting pathos, to produce their sympathetic visions of a Nationalist and Republican victim-hero respectively. Melodramatic over-simplification and Manichean depiction of right and wrong help redirect these films towards extreme moments of emotional identification and moral legitimacy displayed through suffering rather than towards specific political, economic, and social differences at the heart of the Civil War. As both films elide political details, what remains strong in each is a portrait of (melodramatic) victimization tied intimately to overt depictions of Spanish history. By exploring the features of melodrama that are very similar in both films, this study looks at how victimization, pathos, and moral legitimacy configure these cultural readings of the Spanish Civil War in ways that have significant, and perhaps contradictory, implications for representations of modern Spanish national identity.

Melodrama, its definitions and its value as a cinematic form continue to inspire scholarly debate.<sup>6</sup> A foundation of early silent cinema, melodrama's theatricality and exaggerated gestures helped produce meaning in scenes lacking spoken dialogue.<sup>7</sup> Most often, however, critics associate melodrama with the family melodrama which "chiefly concerns the conflicts and tensions of a middle-class family" and came to prominence in Hollywood sound pictures of the 1930s-1950s (Mercer and Shingler 12). Melodramas invite audience identification with a central protagonist who is portrayed as a victim in highly emotional conflicts that generate pathos towards the protagonist. Sympathy also results from rigid, simplified depictions of good and evil, right and wrong, that underpin domestic and social conflicts. Music, both diegetic and extra-diegetic, *mise-en-scène*, and lighting typically play an important, even symbolic, role in underscoring emotional contexts.<sup>8</sup> Feminist scholars, who often link melodrama with the "woman's film" about domestic traumas, have typically engaged with the genre by reading the emotional excesses of these films (previously read pejoratively) as subversive and ironic commentaries on gender roles.<sup>9</sup>

However, several studies have more recently worked to revise the definitions of melodrama to include a wider variety of films than the family and woman's melodrama and to re-evaluate the non-ironic potential of melodramatic excess.

Many scholars have looked to Peter Brooks's 1976 book, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, as a foundation for these important reconsiderations of melodrama. Brooks' study links melodrama back to theatrical and literary traditions in a way that acknowledges rather than ironizes melodramatic excess. Furthermore, he sees the mode as an effort to re-inscribe the "moral occult" in increasingly secular Western societies. As Linda Williams summarizes:

Brooks takes it [melodrama] seriously as a quintessentially modern (though not modernist) form arising out of a particular historical conjuncture: the postrevolutionary, post-Enlightenment, postsacred world where traditional imperatives of truth and morality had been violently questioned and yet in which there was still a need to forge some semblance of truth and morality. (51)

Brooks' work characterizes melodrama as a portrayal of pathos and suffering through victimization for the purpose of expressing the protagonist's virtue or morality. Building on work by Brooks and Gledhill, Linda Williams' essay "Melodrama Revised" defines the basic pattern of melodrama along familiar lines, emphasizing victimization, pathos, and moral virtues: "If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama" (42). Williams goes on to add the importance of action to the pathos of melodrama, noting that characters need not be passive to be victims. In what she calls "male melodramas," especially, action often forms a significant part of strategies to prove the victim-hero's worth and substitutes for verbal psychological expression much as do *mise-en-scène* or music (60).<sup>10</sup> Following Brooks, Williams concludes that "the quest for moral legitimacy is crucial to melodrama" and ultimately argues that this "quest" takes the form of both victimized suffering and deeds or actions that lead to emotional and spectacular climaxes (52).<sup>11</sup> *Razqa* and *El lápiz del carpintero* are both male melodramas in this sense, where victimization and deeds lead to a sense of pathos that eventually produces an acknowledgement of the hero's moral legitimacy—with a broader significance due to the national context of the Civil War.

In discussing her revised vision of melodrama, Linda Williams re-affirms the primacy of pathos as the dominant emotional register of melodrama and concludes that theories advocating critical distance (often by way of irony) from melodramatic emotions “failed to confront the importance of pathos itself and the fact that a surprising power lay in identifying with victimhood” (47).<sup>12</sup> The power of melodramatic sensibility in the exaltation of victimhood and in the exaggeration of emotional identification plays an important role in converting melodrama into a vehicle of social, and, in the case of these Civil War films, national perspectives. Williams’ observation about the power of victimhood recalls, especially in the Spanish context, both Marsha Kinder’s discussion of how Counter-Reformation Catholicism promoted images of sacred victimhood that were redeployed by Francoist-era cinema and Jo Labanyi’s exploration of an on-going Spanish victimhood as “history’s losers” (2002: 2). Both an alliance with sacred victimhood through Catholicism and an emotional status as “history’s losers” through a problematic pursuit of modernity point to a melodramatic interpretation of Spanish history that peaks precisely in many portrayals of the Civil War.

First, in exploring the aestheticized, idealized suffering of protagonists in Spanish films of the Francoist era, Marsha Kinder reads a masochism in Spanish Catholicism that connects to Brooks’ vision of melodramatic morality and suffering as a substitution for sacred morality. She argues that in Spanish culture the masochistic son and the virginal mother of the New Testament “costar in a ritual sacrifice that, despite the violence at its core, is artistically represented [in Spanish culture] with a sensual beauty that masks all brutality and ugliness” (239). Kinder also sees this ritualized, beautiful suffering as embedded in Counter-Reformation iconography and discourses prevalent in Spain of the sixteenth century and beyond.<sup>13</sup> The assertion of moral virtue through the victimization of Christ and the Virgin in Counter-Reformation Spain is in this sense a family melodrama reinforced historically at the precise moments of Spanish nation- and empire-building, intertwining with early concepts of national identity. Furthermore, Catholic icons of beauty and suffering, made manifest for example in crucifixes and pietas, already partake of a melodramatic substitution of visual expression for the verbal. Kinder concludes that a legacy of Catholic exaltation of suffering and victimhood, originating in a masochistic reading of the Christ-story itself, has a significant influence on representations of Spanish identity, especially in cinematic portrayals from the Francoist era which borrowed overtly from the Catholic Monarchs and Counter-Reformation imagery and discourse.<sup>14</sup>

Jo Labanyi arrives at a discussion of Spanish victimhood from another direction, that of issues of modernity and Spain's historical marginalization from "modern" Europe. Labanyi explains Spain's problematic relationship to modernity as the defining characteristic of its status as one of "history's losers": "A key difference, frequently commented on, between Anglo-Saxon cultures (which generally have been the winners in modernity) and Latin cultures (which generally have been modernity's losers) is that the latter tend to choose as their national heroes and heroines not those who triumphed but those who lost spectacularly because of their refusal to compromise" (6). She goes on to argue that the act of disappearing or de-legitimizing the cultural products consumed by history's losers "is a process specific to the construction of the modern nation-state" (2).<sup>15</sup> Through representations of both personal and national levels, an apparent imbrication of national identity with victimization in Spanish history points to yet another way that continued struggles with and for modernity in Spain are cultural as well as political and economic. The appearance and success of many melodramatic portrayals of the Spanish Civil War, including the two very similar films studied here, suggest a continued reliance on narratives of victimization in Spanish cultural products read as national representations that perpetuate Spain's identity as one of history's losers.

An emphasis on victimhood links these two films to melodramatic conventions as well as to more complex studies of Spanish identity and history. State-supported throughout production and based on a script written by Franco himself, *Raza* is considered by many to be the archetypal film of Francoist discourse.<sup>16</sup> Loosely autobiographical, it presents the story of the Churruca family from the Spanish-American War in 1898 to the Civil War and Nationalist victory. The protagonist, José Churruca, supports the Nationalists when war breaks out (his brother Pedro supports the Republic), is eventually caught, imprisoned, and brought before a firing squad. As melodrama, history appears as it affects the members of the family, and their personal conflicts stand in for national ones. On the other side, *El lápiz del carpintero*, based on the best-selling Galician novel *O lapis do carpinteiro* (1999) by Manuel Rivas, follows the story of a Republican activist who is also imprisoned during the Civil War and also faces a firing squad. Family ties are brought into focus through the hero's girlfriend and an odd, implied romantic triangle between the Republican prisoner and the Nationalist guard. Each film carefully constructs its protagonist's victimization and highlights the pathos his suffering engenders. The basic stories of the films—centered on the capture, imprisonment, and moral triumph of each hero—are already quite analogous; melodramatic structures reinforce this resemblance by emphasizing similar emotional tones

throughout each film. The first two themes of melodrama, victimization and pathos, are achieved in nearly identical ways in both films; and yet, subtle differences in the final moral legitimization at the end of the two films opens a space for increasingly complex understandings of the relationship of victimization with Spanish history and identity.

The first point for melodramatic engagement in both films comes from the explicitly pictured and emphasized victimhood of the protagonists. *Mise-en-scène*, music, and camera angles all contribute in melodramatic ways to rendering the emotional intensity of several sequences depicting the protagonists' suffering and struggles against cruel, dominant opposing forces. The first sections of *Raza* focus on victim-heroes in the Churruca family and culminate with the presentation of the film's protagonist, Captain José Churruca. In one sequence in the early part of the film, Commander Pedro Churruca, home from sea, is framed by his children as he tells the story of the family's (and Spain's) illustrious past. He recounts the death of their ancestor Cosme Damián Churruca who died at the battle of Trafalgar. The film dissolves to scenes of naval battle with Pedro's continued voice-over as he narrates the ancestor's final moments valiantly attempting to defend his ship from the attacks of numerically superior English ships. This scene will be repeated in the death of Commander Churruca himself in a naval battle against numerically superior American forces in the Spanish-American war. In both cases the film draws attention to the overwhelming odds that convert each hero into a victim of numbers and superior forces, not of his lack of bravery or skill. However, Commander Churruca's interpretation insists on the beauty of the ancestor's (and ultimately his own) sacrifice. When young Pedro asks how death can be beautiful, the Commander responds, "El deber es tanto más hermoso cuanto más sacrificios entraña," linking heroism to sacrifice. Kinder argues that although Francoist melodrama participates in "fetishizing suffering and death, [. . .] the neo-Catholic Spanish context always ensures that such suffering ennobles the martyred losers" (73). Even within the film's efforts to construct an uplifting tone around these deaths, the two men emerge as victims of an overpowering and seemingly inevitable (perhaps for this very reason glorious) history.<sup>17</sup> The reasons for the Churrucas' participation in these wars are never explained beyond it being "right" or their being "called," and the politics behind both wars are treated as irrelevant in favor of the more stirring and noble sacrifice of these victim-heroes.<sup>18</sup> Through these two exemplary deaths, the film initiates a melodramatic discourse of heroic victimization associated with distinct moments of family (Spanish) history.

The next part of the film features José Churruga, dashing son of the current generation, in a series of episodes detailing his failed efforts to pass information to the Nationalists, his arrest and imprisonment as a traitor to the Republic, and finally his intended execution before a firing squad. All of these sequences display the protagonist's heroic victimization as he accepts his fate and maintains his faith in a larger cause of righteousness against unfeeling and unpatriotic forces (the Republicans).<sup>19</sup> The two scenes of José's confession and execution in particular stand out for their emotional portrayal of his victim-hero status. A lead-in slow traveling shot dramatically brings the camera (and spectator) through the prison walls inside José's cell. The camera pauses several times to focus on the play of light through the bars creating shadows in the form of crosses on the far wall.<sup>20</sup> The over-determined *mise-en-scène* as well as somber, ominous music adds to the emotional intensity of the scene without explicit dialogue. Behind the stout iron door, José is receiving last rites, an intense moment that ends with a confession of love. From a high angle shot, the camera looks down on José and the priest as dramatic, soft shafts of light cross the scene. He laments that he is going to die just when he has started to figure life out, emphasizing the tragedy of this sensitive life cut unnaturally short. The scene cuts to close-up shot-countershot as the priest asks José, "¿Amabas?" and José responds, "Sí, padre, yo creo que con toda mi alma," with his face illuminated and in tones of adoration. Repositioning the frame of the scene suggests greater intimacy and closer emotional access to the impassioned and resolute José. He never tells the priest (or spectators) what/whom he has loved (Spain? girlfriend Marisol?), leaving again emotional intensity with unspecified causes or motivations. The soldiers come, and José marches bravely out to face his death. The film elides politics or even the (mis)fortunes of war to focus instead on the sentimental, powerful moment of noble sacrifice of a man condemned to death.

In the transition between the scene of José's last rites and the actual execution, José walks towards the camera until visibility disappears as if the camera were moving into his body. After a fade to black, the scene re-emerges as the camera pulls out from José's chest as he stands now in the prison yard. This melodramatic transition invites symbolic interpretation as the film goes literally "inside" or "to the heart" of the victim-hero. Refusing to be blindfolded or to turn his back on his executioners, José faces his final moments as the music swells to inspirational tones. In a tight medium shot, he exposes his medals and shouts, "¡Arriba España!" as the soldiers fire (see Fig. 1). The actor jerks dramatically with every hit and sinks slowly out of frame. The scene fairly melts with pathos as the hero is gunned down; indeed, his entire execution from confession to death relies on melodramatic sensibility to portray and

exaggerate the emotional intensity of the victim-hero's final moments. Presented as a sacrifice for a just cause, few scenes could engage the audience more sympathetically or depict more melodramatically the victimization of the protagonist than those of his heroic death.

In *El lápiz del carpintero* victim-hero Daniel Da Barca, a doctor and Republican activist arrested when Galicia falls to the Nationalists, faces execution by firing squad not once but three times, again melodramatically exaggerating audience sympathy and sacrificial victimization. Imprisoned for unspecified reasons that are assumed to be political, Da Barca becomes the leader of a band of righteous, oppressed victims of Nationalist abuse. Much as the older generations of *Raza* provide an example of noble sacrifice for José Churruga, in *Lápiz* a series of other prisoners set the stage for Da Barca's culmination of the Republican victim-hero. An enlightened "family" of brothers, the prisoners include artists, musicians, simple but sensitive laborers and the impassioned doctor Da Barca. When anyone shows a shred of resistance or dignity, he is taken away for a dramatic and secret midnight execution. The assassination of the painter establishes the prisoners as victims of cruel, unfeeling Nationalist guards when they discuss the tortures they intend to inflict upon the helpless artist before they shoot him. The most sympathetic prisoners, those who sing, draw, and tell stories that engage the sympathy of the audience as well as of their fellow inmates, are those singled out for execution. Their engagement with the audience increases the pathos of their unjust deaths and constructs sympathy for their political cause without ever identifying its specific details. Victimization takes place through the maltreatment of the prisoners and the constant terror of the threat of violent death by unjust execution.

Da Barca's time in prison, almost the entire duration of the film, emerges as an emotional rollercoaster of righteousness and terror, punctuated especially by the three attempts to execute him. Melodramatic sensibility governs the attempted executions of Da Barca both for the emotional intensity of the scenes and the unlikely reversals of their outcomes. In the first instance, Zalo, the prison-guard Herbal's nasty brother-in-law and leader of a group of bully-assassins, comes for Da Barca for one of their midnight adventures. Herbal lies about Da Barca's being transferred, thus saving him from the blood-thirsty Zalo. Throughout the film, the crude, wife-beating Zalo takes on the Manichean, caricatured evil to Da Barca's equally simplistic and idealized good, leaving Herbal somewhere between.<sup>21</sup> In the second attempt to execute Da Barca, the doctor is marched out among a line of prisoners towards a dark, abandoned field where Nationalist guards and soldiers are shooting a previous group of prisoners. A mostly dark long shot—again it is a secret, midnight execution—is punctuated by the taunts



of the Nationalist soldiers who mock Da Barca as the group moves closer. As the soldiers load their guns, one informs the others that one bullet is a blank so that one prisoner will survive to tell the story to others. The music swells ominously as the camera shows a dramatic view down Herbal's rifle towards Da Barca's face (see Fig. 2).<sup>22</sup> A long shot displays the line of prisoners as the soldiers fire, and Da Barca falls to his knees in fright but is, of course, the one spared. Nearly sacrificed, Da Barca survives to become even more victimized in living by the cruel games of the Nationalist guards. In the final attempted execution, Da Barca moves closer to death and is actually shot, but not fatally. Again cruelly taunted and witness to the torture of another prisoner before his own execution, the scene shows close-ups of Da Barca with a pistol shoved in his mouth before Herbal finally fires. The drawn-out teasing of the audience with the repeated threat of Da Barca's execution strains credibility and begins, as Mercer and Shingler note of other melodramas, to "reveal the contrivance of the scene [. . .] which simultaneously ruptures the realism of the film itself" (13).<sup>23</sup> The man (or idea or cause) who cannot or should not be killed becomes so melodramatically exaggerated and repeated that it begins to undercut the very pathos the scenes are designed to elicit. However over-the-top and melodramatic, both *Razza* and *Lápiç* work to establish sympathy with the hero-victim (and his cause) through this miraculous survival of a firing squad execution and its inherent emotional intensity.

A second point for audience emotional engagement and identification that encourages a transfer from heroic victimization to pathos comes in both films from each man's adoring girlfriend. The women's love and heartache emphasize a compassionate sympathy for the victims' suffering and ultimately noble sacrifice. Both films intertwine the hero's romance with his political situation so that romantic separation, loss, and eventual fulfillment form part of the intimate experience of the war. The two women each visit their lovers in prison to produce remarkably similar scenes as each man accepts his fate and says goodbye to a tearful woman. Both scenes feature medium shot-countershots across the intervening space created by the prison bars—a separation that underscores physically the loneliness of the heroes as they face their deaths (see Figs. 3 and 4). The women's reactions to the men's fates also serve to highlight the pathetic response inspired by the treatment of the victim-hero. When José is shot, the scene immediately cuts to a sobbing Marisol who is waiting with a wagon to collect the body; through her immediate attention, José is discovered to be alive and recovers before her adoring eyes.

While Marisa does not witness any of the attempted executions of Daniel, the scene of the second one is intercut with her attempted suicide because Daniel has refused to continue their

relationship, for her own good, while he is in prison. These intercut sequences effectively transform her act into a reflection and doubling of Da Barca's sacrifice, underlining a melodramatic transposition of the political to the personal. Furthermore, each man's eventual triumph over adversity is pictured partly as romantic fulfillment with the long-separated girlfriend. After the Nationalist victory (represented by a montage of moving tanks, marching soldiers, and happy reunions), José finds Marisol in a crowded room and the two joyfully embrace at last. When discussions with the Mexican embassy suggests that Da Barca will be set free (he was born in Mexico and can claim citizenship), he marries Marisa by proxy. The two manage to spend a night together in a matrimonial consummation that stands in for the liberation of Da Barca which is never pictured in the film. In both films the romantic storyline is layered with the historical one and contributes to the pathos of the hero's suffering by providing a model of emotional reactions in the girlfriend and by focusing on difficult personal consequences.

The final step in the melodramatic journey through victimization to produce pathos and emotional identification with the hero involves acknowledgement of his moral legitimacy achieved through virtuous suffering. Here *Raza* treads a careful path necessitated by the contradictions of a film based in sympathy through sacrifice and victimization that ends with the Nationalist victory parade. In the somewhat disjointed last third of the film, the narrative loses direction once José's victimization has come to an end and he passes into the Nationalist ranks.<sup>24</sup> With little storyline to follow for José, the film instead finds another victim, the "bad" Churruca brother who had supported the Republic but changes sides at the last minute. Confronted by Republican officers come to arrest him, Pedro's dramatic confession of support for the true Spain is featured in a medium low-angle shot that slowly zooms in on his inspired, slightly elevated, and dramatically illuminated face. This remarkable conversion leads to a new victimization in the name of the true cause. Of course, never subtle, *Raza* forces a public acknowledgement of moral triumph by including fictional footage of the surviving characters marching in the Nationalist victory parade cut in with archival footage. Indeed, this victory celebrated with such triumphal excess threatens to overwhelm the pathetic tone created by the earlier victimization—so much so, that a re-cap montage of all the film's victim-heroes (especially generations of Churrucas) superimposed on the scenes from the parade is needed in order to maintain the melodramatic effects. Through melodramatic conventions and a little narrative re-direction, *Raza* manages successfully to co-opt a discourse of victimization to generate sympathy for the winning side of the Civil War.<sup>25</sup>

Recognition of Daniel Da Barca's moral legitimacy increases throughout the film as he gains adherents and admirers on both sides of the political divide. Less overt a triumph than in *Raza*, Da Barca's consummation of the relationship with Marisa must stand in for an absent political victory. But, in giving screen time to his fulfilled desire in an extended erotic scene, the film represents his moral vindication; Da Barca, of course, gets the girl.<sup>26</sup> The Nationalist Herbal remains captivated by the man as much as by the idolized Marisa, and his narration—the film itself—amounts to a belated confession of his admiration for Da Barca. The doctor's innocence and worthiness have co-opted the very voice of his enemy who feels compelled to tell his story and admits his respect at the end of his tale: "Daniel Da Barca, duro como un junco, ni yo fui capaz de matarlo, ni los piojos ni las palizas del Simón pudieron con él." On the Republican side, the film cannot show any victory parades to demonstrate support of Da Barca's virtues but instead offers a bit of poetic justice in the deaths of the two men decades later. Da Barca returns to Spain after the death of Franco and continues to practice medicine, dying respected at age 83, according to his newspaper obituary. Herbal, on the other hand, now works as a janitor in a roadside brothel and dies miserable in the street of a heart attack just after finishing Da Barca's tale. Bringing the story forward in time allows for the implicit judgment of history to come to the fore and imagine Da Barca's (and the Republic's) belated victory in the contemporary democracy where Da Barca has made his home and Nationalist-supporter Herbal has been marginalized.

In both *Raza* and *Lápiz*, a narrative of victimization followed by a final moral legitimation of the victim-hero (and implicitly his cause) leads to a sense of injustice or a debt of justice owed the victim-heroes.<sup>27</sup> In Francoist discourse like that in *Raza*, Alberto Medina notes the urge to redeem a lost past in which so many noble sacrifices have been made, connecting this urge to the payment of a debt to victim-heroes: "La restauración de lo perdido no es tan sólo el cumplimiento de un destino nacional, la recuperación de una identidad esencial. Es también el pago de una deuda, la necesaria compensación exigida por los muertos" (44). Significantly, perhaps ironically, *El lápiz del carpintero* seems to express the same urge and the same sense of recuperating the history of Republican victims, if not literally in this fictional story then at least in spirit. What is owed to the victim-heroes in each case is the recuperation of a lost, ideal past.

Indeed, an orientation towards the past configures both films. *Raza* explicitly evokes Spanish history in generations of Churrucas, and, of course, in the images of caravels (perhaps the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María) and the Conquest that serve as background for the film's credits. The

evocation of Spanish history occurs in *Lápiç* through Herbal's flashback narrative that brings the past into the present for the long-delayed repayment of debt to Da Barca. Just as Medina argues that in Francoist discourses, "[l]a historia no es ya una narrativa de búsqueda orientada al futuro, sino de recuperación de lo perdido," Antonio Gómez observes in contemporary films and novels about the Civil War, "un evidente movimiento cultural que busca recuperar la herencia de la República como ese antepasado noble en el que la democracia española puede y debe mirarse" (44, 31). Often accused of nostalgia (pejorative, much like melodrama, for its sentimentality and over-simplifications), films like *El lápiç* construct a lost, ideal past as a projection of democratic identity building.<sup>28</sup> Many recent Civil War films seem to offer an origin myth of paradise lost for the democracy, leapfrogging the dictatorship's assertion of the Spain of the Catholic Monarchs as mythical origins of national consolidation and proclaiming an idealized and more appealing source of Spanish nationality to be recovered from the Second Republic. Both films become caught up in portraying an idealized past and victim-heroes whose suffering calls for recognition in the present national imaginary.

Building on melodramatic conventions, *Raza* and *El lápiç del carpintero* produce similar narratives of Spanish national identity based in victimization that engage with a history of sacrificial discourse and Spain's losing or failed modernity. Melodramatic victimization is certainly sensationalistic, but it also, more constructively, eventually serves to assert the moral value of the victim-hero despite his or her being a victim. Addressing the role of victimization in Spanish culture, Labanyi proposes, "This glorification of heroic losers can be read not just as a 'making a virtue of necessity' in the absence of a gallery of victors, but, more positively, as a strategy for ensuring the ghostly return in the future of history's victims; that is, ensuring that those who were not allowed to leave a trace on the historical stage do leave their trace in the cultural arena" (6). Here the differences in the endings of the two films becomes quite significant in that *Raza*, despite its discourse of sympathetic victimization, is a propaganda piece produced by the victors in the Civil War. The final parade sequence, which breaks with pathos, is not the cultural product of "those who were not allowed to leave a trace," but rather of those creating hegemonic ideology. *Lápiç*, on the losing side of the war, effectively disappears its victim-hero, who returns to the film only in traces—the newspaper obituary and Herbal's story—much as Labanyi suggests. The Republican triumph is metaphorical and achieved only by linking its ideals to the democracy. Victimization and victory, sympathy and pathos in melodrama emerge through the

conventions of the genre; however, in these Civil War films the explicit presence of history complicates their perception by drawing attention to the realities behind the films.

Spanish melodrama, especially the run of melodramas produced in the democracy but set in and around the Civil War, calls for significantly more critical consideration. One reading of these contemporary Civil War melodramas featuring Republican victim-heroes—who cannot help but be history’s losers in this context—would suggest that melodramatic victimization reinforces, intentionally or not, a traditional Spanish status as victims and losers, however glorious or sympathetic. Such a perception of these films, which have been very popular internationally, may, in fact, serve to generate a comforting reassurance of Spain’s inferior “place” in European modernity just as Spain has assumed positions of power and influence in the European Union. However, we might also read these Civil War melodramas within numerous critical reconsiderations of modernity that attempt to broaden its traditionally exclusive definitions. In a 2007 article, Labanyi attempts not to discard Spain’s status as one of “history’s losers” but to re-interpret loss, victimhood, trauma, and a fixation on the past as signs of a different approach to modernity than a capitalist, secular Enlightenment insistence on progress that casts those who move relentlessly forward as winners and those who do not as losers in some great historical competition. She concludes, “It becomes possible to elaborate a conception of modernity that, while it accepts the importance of moving on and continues to believe in the possibility of creating a better future, is also respectful of the need to acknowledge the past” (91). Melodrama offers a mediating position that does not de-legitimize the past of victimization and loss (which historically cannot be denied) but instead reasserts moral victories and legibility into cultural interpretations when physical victories cannot be claimed in history books. In this sense, Spanish Civil War melodramas of the democracy might be seen as efforts towards working through the past that attempt to reconcile a history of victimization with a modern national identity.

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Fig. 1 José Churruca



Fig. 2 Daniel Da Barca



Fig. 3 José and Marisol



Fig. 4 Daniel and Marisa





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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kinder argues that a Spanish tradition of parodic doubling in dramatic forms, identified in a study by I. L. McClelland, “helps explain why it was so easy for Spanish melodrama to be dialogized and ideologically reinscribed both by the Left and the Right, why it could so readily serve the cinema of both the Francoist regime and the opposition and why it could so easily cross class lines” (65).

<sup>2</sup> Much like the relationship of *Don Quixote* to chivalric romance, Almodóvar’s films from the 1980s, I would argue, are both parodic and sincere melodrama at the same time.

<sup>3</sup> As maker of popular films that are at once too Spanish and not Spanish enough for classical definitions of “national” cinema to be discussed in her book, she notes that Alex de la Iglesia “cites among his influences that most Spanish of directors, Luis García Berlanga, but also two giants of Hollywood, George Cukor, master of the woman-centered melodrama, and George Lucas, master of the deep space melodrama” (1).

<sup>4</sup> Kinder observes, “Yet rather than suppress the political plane by focusing entirely on the private sphere as in most classical Hollywood melodrama, Fascist melodrama acknowledges and politicizes the connection between the domestic and public realms” (72).

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars have begun to note the significant presence of the Civil War as a persistent theme of recent fiction and film, see especially Gómez (2006) and Labanyi (2007).

<sup>6</sup> John Mercer and Martin Shingler's *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* provides an excellent, concise review of the relevant critical debates on melodrama in Film Studies.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Brooks and Thomas Elsaesser have also pointed to the development of cinematic melodrama from literary and especially stage theater.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Gledhill has emphasized the contradiction in melodrama of highly emotional situations and characters unable (often for social constraints) to express themselves. Accordingly, other aspects of the film, music, mise-en-scene, lighting, etc., take on additional significance in conveying emotional excess and result in films that seem over-the-top as several cinematic layers reinforce the same emotions (46).

<sup>9</sup> Two noted feminist revisions of melodrama are E. Ann Kaplan's *Woman and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (1983) and Mary Ann Doane *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (1987).

<sup>10</sup> Williams reads two very different "male melodramas" in terms of their integration of victimization and action, *Rambo* and *Schindler's List*.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Mulvey has noted that male melodramas tend to conclude with resolutions to social problems whereas in female melodrama such resolutions are absent (Mercer and Shingler 98).

<sup>12</sup> She further explains: "To suffer innocently, to be the victim of an abusive power, is to gain moral authority, to become a kind of hero, no matter how pathetic" (note 15). Williams does not attach this powerful victimhood to Christian ideals, as does Kinder, but the connection remains suggestive in an American context.

<sup>13</sup> See especially Kinder (140-50; 221-47).

<sup>14</sup> A special category of regime films about the history of Spain leading to the Nationalist victory have even been called "Cine de Cruzada."

<sup>15</sup> Labanyi calls such disappearing a "rendering ghostly" of these areas of culture, adopting Derrida's formulation of haunting to describe "the whole of modern Spanish culture [. . .] as one big ghost story" (2002: 1-2).

<sup>16</sup> See Kinder (150-151) and Yarza (42-43).

<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that both of these battles occur in wars that Spain will eventually lose, although that fact is certainly not expressly mentioned in the film.

<sup>18</sup> To explain the Spanish-American war, the film shows a montage of newspaper headlines with simple titles like "Desordenes en Cuba" and "La actitud de los Estados Unidos" that never indicate specific causality; the same technique will announce the arrival of the Civil War.

<sup>19</sup> Republicans in the film are depicted in one of two categories: dirty, disorganized, and rude or slick, materialist, and cowardly.

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<sup>20</sup> Alejandro Yarza studies this scene as an example of “fascist kitsch” (44). However, such use of light and shadow as part of an over-determined mise-en-scène has also long been associated with melodrama.

<sup>21</sup> Scholars of the novel have noted the intriguing complexity of the prison-guard narrator, Herbal. I would agree that he also emerges in the film as the most interesting character for the ambiguousness of his role in the events that unfold. The subtleties of his motivations, masterfully played by Luis Tosar, provoke deeper thought than the cardboard cutouts of Da Barca and Zalo.

<sup>22</sup> This scene is intercut with Marisa’s attempted suicide. Marisa’s role will be addressed in the next section.

<sup>23</sup> Such a melodramatic rupture in the film also occurs in the scene of the musician singing “Fue como un sueño” in the prison yard. Extra-diegetic music replaces the sound of the prisoners singing, and a bizarre animation turns shadows on the wall into images of a band. See also Derusha (forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> José, the valiant victim-hero, is reduced to sitting on his sister’s sofa speculating on the fates of their brothers.

<sup>25</sup> Francoist production of melodrama here might even be called deceptive, used to construct Nationalist sympathy through a fictional victimization that disguises the aggression and domination of the victors.

<sup>26</sup> The film constructs a sort of love triangle between Daniel, Herbal, and Marisa so that Daniel and Herbal are presented melodramatically as romantic as well as political rivals.

<sup>27</sup> The language of justice with regard to victims immediately recalls Derrida’s hauntological ghosts of the past who are ghostly precisely because they have been denied justice, the right to leave a trace on history. See Derrida (1994) 174-176.

<sup>28</sup> *El lápiz del carpintero* joins a host of other melodramatic films such as *¡Ay, Carmela!*, *La hora de los valientes*, *La lengua de las mariposas*, *El viaje de Carol*, and *El laberinto del fauno* with very similar moral legitimations of Republican Spain pictured largely through the victimization of its heroes. These films produce a nearly identical idealization of the Second Republic and its defenders against overwhelming Nationalist forces.