

The Closing Image

David Trueba's *Soldados de Salamina*

By David Archibald

Soldados de Salamina/Soldiers of Salamis (David Trueba/2003/Spain), an adaptation of the best-selling novel by Javier Cercas, problematises the ability to both access and represent the past. Set in Gerona in the present, the film centres on Lola (Ariadna Gil), a journalist and author suffering writer's block. Commissioned to write an article on the Spanish civil war, she begins an investigative journey to uncover the truth behind the execution of 50 Nationalists during the closing days of the Spanish civil war (1936-39).

The opening image of *Soldados de Salamina*, Spain's entry for the foreign language category at the 2004 Academy Awards, is of a tattered Spanish flag lying in a muddy field. The subsequent sequence, intercut with monochrome credits, consists of a lengthy following shot across a barely colourised mass of motionless, mud-splattered, male bodies. The buzzing sound of flies hovering around the putrescent corpses contrasts with Arvo Pärt's melancholic *Spiegel im Spiegel*. As Lola's search gathers pace, the flashbacks are slightly colourised as the past is seemingly resurrected. Yet one central concern raised by the film is the extent to which the history of the civil war can be resurrected after a combination of three factors: the passage of time; the silence imposed by the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) and the *pacto del olvido* (pact of forgetting) – an unwritten, voluntary pact entered into during the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the late seventies and early eighties.

Initially disinterested in the civil war, Lola slowly becomes engrossed in the past. Her article, entitled 'An essential secret', begins by discussing the Republican-supporting poet, Antonio Machado, and his fascist-sympathising brother, Manuel, thus touching on the biblical theme of *Cainismo*, evident in films such as *Las largas vacaciones del '36/The Long Vacation of '36* (Camino/Spain/1976) and *La lengua de las mariposas/Butterfly's Tongue* (Cuerda/Spain/1999). Actuality footage of the conflict appears on screen as Lola proceeds to discuss another real-life writer, the lesser known poet and principal founder and theoretician of the Falange, Rafael Sánchez Mazas (Ramón Fontserè). The actuality footage is contrasted with reconstructed, black and white footage of Sánchez Mazas (or the actor playing him?). A sepia-filtered flashback sequence shows him escaping, only to be sighted by a young Republican soldier (Alberto Ferreiro) who refuses to either shoot his prey or take him into custody. In the closing lines of Lola's article she writes: 'Who knows what exactly happened on the day when Rafael Sánchez Mazas was due to be shot – but perhaps there lies the essential secret of the Spanish Civil War.' Lola's newfound

enthusiasm for the past is undercut, however, when she reads the article to her father (Luis Cuenca) who asks blankly: 'What war?' If her father's senile dementia is symbolic of how an older generation turned their back on the civil war (either forcibly or tacitly), Lola's approach stands as representative of a renewed interest in the conflict within Spain.

The article becomes the starting point for Lola's planned next book. In contrast to her friend, Conchi (María Botto), who makes a living by reading Tarot cards, Lola adopts a more scientific and objective approach, placing her trust in empirical evidence as she trawls libraries and secondhand bookshops, digging up the traces of the past in the present. The key that appears to unlock the door to the past lies in the personal testimonies she receives from old men who were either direct witnesses to the events, or who were related to those who had been, creating a real-life continuity between past and present. She lacks, however, the star witness she needs, the young soldier himself. When a young Mexican student Gastón (Diego Luna) tells her of his hero, Miralles (Joan Dalmau), an old Republican soldier

who he had befriended on holiday, Lola connects the two stories and draws the conclusion that Miralles is the young soldier that she needs to complete her jigsaw – and to complete her book. Gastón suggests that Lola does not require the exact details of the past commenting that '(r)eality always disappoints. What you're looking for is here,' as he softly touches her head. Lola's response prioritises the real over the fictional when she says: 'I

will not make him up', indicative of a wider tension between truth and fiction in the film.

Lola's increasingly romanticised narrative does not appear to match the evidence she initially finds – an old man, crumpled and beaten, living out his dying years watching television in a old folk's home. In a shot-reverse shot sequence between Lola and the old man, Miralles questions her approach when he says: 'Writers. You're just sentimentalists. What you're looking for is a hero and I'm that hero, aren't I?' Miralles rejects his own heroic status, and continues:

It's the heroes who don't survive. When I left for the front a lot of other lads went too, all from Tarrasa like me. Though I didn't know most of them. The García Sugués boys, Miquel Cardós, Gabi Baldrich, Pipo Canal, Fatty Odena, Santi Brugada, Jordi Gudaayol. All Dead. They were all so young. Not a day passes without me thinking about them ... Sometimes I dream of them. I see them as they were. Young. Time doesn't



pass for them. Nobody remembers them. And never ... not one miserable street of one miserable village in one shitty country will be named after them.

It is a tender and poignant moment in the film, shifting the narrative focus from either Sánchez Mazas or the young soldier to embrace the memory of the dead, many of whom remain in unmarked graves throughout Spain.

Lola's attempt to write her account invites parallels with the historian's attempt to write objective accounts of the past; however, her lack of empirical evidence imposes limits on the type of book that she can create. Her inability, or the historian's inability, to uncover absolute truth, suggests that history cannot access the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Lola's novel is reflective of the Nietzschean notion that only subjective truths about the past can be produced. Terry Eagleton points out that the possibility of stating an absolute truth has become increasingly maligned when he writes '(n)o idea is more unpopular with contemporary cultural theory than that of absolute truth. The phrase smacks of dogmatism, authoritarianism, a belief in the timeless and universal.'¹ Eagleton rejects the notion that absolute truth is, what he describes as 'a special kind of truth',² arguing that 'truth is absolute simply means that if something is established as true – a taxing, messy business, often enough, and one which is always open to revision

– then there are no two ways about it. It does not mean that truth can only be discovered from some disinterested viewpoint.'³ For Eagleton, therefore, it is possible to assert truths about the past without laying claim to the idea of a totally objective, all-seeing, all-pervasive truth. Javier Cercas states of his novel: 'I hope it's contributed with its grain of sand to this facing up to the truth, because my aspiration was to lie anecdotally, in the particulars, in order to tell an essential truth.'⁴

Notably Cercas never asserts what the essential truth of the civil war actually is, or was. Thus, although both Cercas and the film raise the possibility of an essential history, one which would close down possible interpretations of the past, by problematising the search for the past, *Soldados de Salamina* opens up the civil war to conflicting interpretations, a feature reflected in the film's formal qualities.

Robert Rosenstone champions an experimental cinema in which '(r)ather than opening a window directly onto the past, it opens a window onto a different way of thinking about the past.'⁵ It is a similar position to Hayden White who calls for a cinema in which, as he puts it, '(e)verything is presented as if it were the same ontological order, both real and imaginary, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated.'⁶ In this new post-modern cinema, he claims, '(w)hat you get is ... "History as you like it", representations of history in which anything goes'.⁷ In juxtaposing different types of filmmaking *Soldados*

de Salamina veers towards this effect. Thus, in addition to the fictional footage, the film utilises a combination of black and white photographs of the civil war, black and white actuality footage and colour television footage of the 1981 coup. The film also contains fictional copies of the Spanish newspaper ABC, reconstructed black and white footage of Sánchez Mazas in captivity, radio reports deliberately made to sound of the period and reconstructed 8mm colour footage of Gastón's holidays with Miralles. The mix of forms creates a disorientating effect and the line between reality and fiction becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish. This effect is also present in the opening credits, which state that the film is based on Cercas' novel, but also on the testimonies of Joaquín Figueras, Daniel Angelats, Jaume Figueras and Chicho Sánchez Ferlosio. These real-life witnesses provide Catalan language testimonies of their recollection of the events, authenticating the film and further problematising its fictional status. For it is not immediately clear what role these witnesses play. Are they fictional characters acting out fictional lines, or fictional characters speaking real testimonies? Or if they are real characters, are they speaking fictional lines or their own testimony? This self-reflexivity is reinforced by a number of literary references, for instance, when Miralles reveals that his literary tastes lie with the 19th century novel, exemplified by his admiration for Balzac. Whereas the 19th century novel often utilised fictional characters within established historical events, thus grounding

the fictional within the real, *Soldados de Salamina* creates a more fractured, slippery past. But, although it veers towards White's post-modern model, it does not quite travel the whole journey.

As with the novel, the film's main focus is on the central protagonist's journey from frustrated writer struggling to find a voice, to one ready to embark on her next project. Lola's writer's block is cured by her voyage into the past, but

only when she allows herself the freedom to write a small-scale, first-person account, free from the burden of absolute truth, where she puts herself in her book and writes '(t)he first time I heard of Sánchez Mazas and the firing squad I was just ...'. Referring obliquely to the *pacto del olvido* Miralles says: 'Years ago people decided that it was best to forget the war. That's fine by me.' Arguably, the main event of *Soldados de Salamina* is Lola's discovery to accept that the civil war cannot be recovered in its entirety, but to strive, nevertheless, in a concerted and collective campaign to bury the *pacto del olvido* and to remember the past.

Memory is a crucial part of the process of historical recuperation. David Lowenthal points to the collective nature of memory when he states that: 'We need other people's memories both to confirm our own and to give them endurance. Unlike dreams, which are wholly private, memories are continually supplemented by those of others. Sharing and validating memories sharpens them and



promotes their recall; events we alone know about are less certainly, less easily evoked.⁸ For Miralles the enforced silence and the *pacto del olvido* have forced his memories into the individual realm of dreams and denied him access to a public space where his memories can be discussed and shared. But his meeting with Lola opens up the possibility of actively remembering the civil war as part of a wider collective process of recuperating historical knowledge.

And for generations growing up with no direct reference to memories of the war the increasing representation of the civil war in cinema and literature can assist in opening up the past for Spanish audiences. Jo Labanyi suggests that '(i)n a country that has emerged from 40 years of cultural repression, the task of making reparation to the ghosts of the past – that is, to those relegated to the status of the living dead, denied voice and memory – is considerable.'⁹ The film's release coincided with increasing coverage of the work of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory), an organisation campaigning for the excavation of mass graves which hold the bodies of thousands of Republican supporters slaughtered both during and after the war. Although it problematises the ability to access the past, *Soldados de Salamina* also highlights the importance of that task. Miralles' words raise the ghosts of the countless, nameless young men from the civil war and the film demands that they be remembered. The closing image is a mid-shot of the rain-drenched young Republican soldier who saved Sánchez Mazas' life. Dancing slowly in the rain he looks directly to the audience, pausing briefly before he turns his back to the camera. *Soldados de Salamina* invites the audience not to turn away from his memory, but to embrace it.

The Scottish premiere of *Soldados de Salamina* will be screened at G12 on 24 June 2006.

Endnotes

1. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, Penguin, London, 2003, p. 103.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
4. Taken from an extract of *Diálogos de Salamina: un paseo por el cine y la literatura*, an exchange between Cercas and Trueba, translated by Ann McLean, viewed on www.wordwithoutborders.org/article.php?lab=cercas 11 July 2004.
5. Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 63.
6. Hayden White, 'The Modernist Event' in Vivian Sobchack (Ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp. 17-38, 1996, p. 19.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
8. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 196.
9. Jo Labanyi, 'History and Hauntology; or, What Does One Do with the Ghosts of the Past? Reflections on Spanish film and Fiction of the Post-Franco Period' in Joan Ramon Resina (Ed.), *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy*, Radopi, Amsterdam & Atlanta, 2000, pp. 65-82, p. 80.

