

**BROKEN DREAMS. AGRICULTURAL PROBLEM, HISTORICAL REFLECTION AND THE  
CIVIL WAR IN RÉQUIEM POR UN CAMPESINO ESPAÑOL (FRANCESC BETRIU,  
1985)**

**SUEÑOS ROTOS. PROBLEMA AGRARIO, REFLEXIÓN HISTÓRICA Y GUERRA CIVIL  
EN RÉQUIEM POR UN CAMPESINO ESPAÑOL (FRANCESC BETRIU, 1985)<sup>1</sup>**

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## Resumen

Este artículo analiza la importancia que cobra el cine de ficción ante el problema agrario en España a través del filme *Réquiem por un campesino español* (1985), basado en la novela homónima de Ramón J. Sender. No hay duda de que el cine es uno de los codificadores más importantes del imaginario colectivo. Su representación del pasado es enormemente significativa porque comporta el modo en el que una sociedad se ve y representa a sí misma. Obviamente, es importante señalar la relevancia que tuvo el problema campesino en todo el primer tercio del siglo XX hasta el estallido de la Guerra Civil española. El estudio de esta realización desvela la representación de una sociedad rural que ve, además, como experimenta una serie de importantes transformaciones, tras la instauración de la Segunda República (1931-1936), y el modo en el que acaban resolviéndose brutalmente dichas tensiones sociales como consecuencia de la sangrienta represión franquista.

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<sup>1</sup> Esta investigación es parte del proyecto de I+D+i PID2022-138385NB-I00, financiado por MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

## Abstract

This paper analyses the importance fictional cinema takes on in regard to the agrarian problem in Spain concentrating on the film *Réquiem por un campesino español* (1985), based on the homonymous novel by J. Sender. There is no doubt that cinema is one of the most important representations of people's collective imagination. The way it shows the past is enormously significant as it demonstrates the way in which a society sees and represents itself. It is obviously important to point out the relevance that the peasant question had throughout the entire first third of the twentieth century until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The study of this work reveals the representation of a rural society that also sees how it undergoes a series of important transformations after the establishment of the Second Republic (1931-1936), and the brutal way in which these social tensions end up being resolved as a consequence of Franco's cruel repression.

## Palabras clave

Imaginario; historia; cine; Betriu; Segunda República; Guerra Civil; represión franquista; problema campesino.

## Keywords

Imaginary; history; cinema; Betriu; Second Republic; Civil War; Francoist repression; peasant question.

## 1. Introduction

The past becomes a constant source of collective learning; this fact goes a long way in explaining just how important fictional cinema is when approaching the study of history. Cinema, though, also reveals the conflicts present in a society's collective memory, its traumas and antagonisms (Sánchez-Biosca, 2005; Sánchez-Biosca, 2006; Aguilar, 2008; Cuesta, 2008; Álvarez Junco, 2022; Prada Rodríguez, 2023). This particular case, *Réquiem por un campesino español* – an adaptation of Ramon J. Sender's novel (1953) – reminds us how sad and bitter were the experiences of the peasantry at the beginning of the twentieth century and captures the historical changes in Spain from the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera up to the Civil War and its aftermath. However, we should not ignore the fact that the context in which the shooting of the film occurred is also of significance when assessing its meaning and intentions (Ferro, 1995; Rosenstone, 1997).

The director, Francesc Betriu, wanted to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the conflict in the socio-political landscape after the end of Franco's dictatorship (Franco died on November 20, 1975), as well as the consolidation of a democratic regime brought about by the election of the first socialist government after the termination of the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939). If democracy was in good health, Spain's memories of the war didn't seem to be – a fact which did not receive much attention from the country's public institutions<sup>2</sup>. *Réquiem* confronted a theme rarely seen on the filmmakers' agenda: «the existence of large peasant masses, whom the ruling classes may have failed to save from penury... one of the most serious social problems in contemporary Spanish life» (Jimenez, 1975: 5).

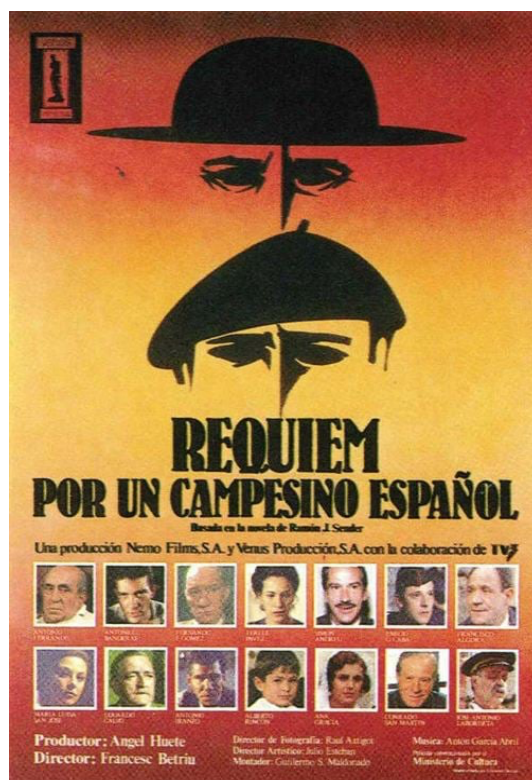
Likewise, the film has never ceased to serve as a metaphor for social injustice and the loss of thousands of lives; these themes are symbolically represented through the character of this farmer after the triumph of the reactionary forces. Thus, quoting Gubern, it was this «unprecedented vision of the Francoist

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<sup>2</sup> In this framework, reconciliation achievements such as *Volver a empezar* (José Luís Garci, 1982), *La plaza del diamante* (Francesc Betriu, 1982), *Las bicicletas son para el verano* (Fernando Fernán Gomez, 1984), *La vaquilla* (Luís García Berlanga, 1985), *¡Biba la banda!* (Ricardo Palacios, 1987), *La guerra de los locos* (Manuel Matji, 1987), etc, were promoted. (Gubern, Monterde, Pérez Perucha, Rimbau & Torreiro, 2015: 399-454).

repression which aroused such great interest» (1986: 172). As expected, the film itself became the focus of historical discourse, given that it expounds straightforwardly the drama lived in times of repression and society's need to deal with its memory. In this way, the image converts the past into the present, with the singularity that the laws of historical memory had not yet been approved (law 52/2007 of December 26, 2007 and law 20/2022 of October 19, 2022).

## 2. Synopsis of the film<sup>3</sup>



F1. Movie poster (Betriu, 1985).

Mosén Millán is the priest in a small town from Aragon bordering the County of Lleida who baptizes Paco – nicknamed by the locals as «him from the mill» (F1). Mosén Millán recalls the years up until the time when a requiem mass for Paco is to be held after Paco was put to death by a firing squad following the triumph of the rebel forces and condemned for his commitment to defend the

<sup>3</sup> Film credits and technical details: Spain 1985. Directed by: Francesc Betriu. Plot: *Réquiem por un campesino español* by Ramón J. Sender. Script: Raúl Artigot, Francesc Betriu, Gustavo Hernández. Director of photography: Raul Artigot. Music: Antón García Abril. Film editor: Guillermo S. Maldonado. Producer: Angel Huete. Associate producers: Germán Lorente, Juan Moser, Ikiru Films P.C. Artistic director: Julio Esteban. Set designer: Josep Rossell. Sound technician: Ricardo Steimberg. Religious advisor: Jesús Moreno Lez. Film length: 97 minutes. Cast: Antonio Ferrandis, Antonio Banderas, Fernando Fernán Gómez, Terele Pávez, Simón Andreu.

improvement of the conditions of rural peasant life. After baptism, Paco spends his formative years as an altar boy to Mosén Millán. He assists the priest in his religious duties and visits to dying parishioners as well as the religious festivals celebrated in this small rural settlement. One day, on which he accompanies Mosén Millán to the caves where marginalized townspeople live, he is shocked to see their miserable living conditions.

Once Paco becomes an adult, his intention to improve the lives of those living in the caves becomes evident and this project is helped by the establishment of the Second Republic. However, the military uprising shatters this hopeful outlook and means that the people from the town are forced to contend with Falangists who have come to «clean up» the town.

Paco hides away to avoid being arrested but, ultimately, Mosén Millán betrays his whereabouts, believing Paco will be treated fairly. Once arrested, though, he will be killed in spite of everything. Some time after, the three people that led him to his fatal fate -Mosén Millán, Valeriano and Gumersindo- are the only ones who go to church to hold a requiem in his memory.

### **3. A portrait of Spanish peasant Society**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Spain underwent a process of secularization, accompanied by a drive for modernisation –slower than in the rest of Europe– which began to take place in the big cities such as Madrid and Barcelona and in other parts of Catalonia, Asturias and the Basque Country. However, despite these significant socio-economic changes, Spanish society for the most part depended on and subsisted by means of agricultural activities.

Ever since the Restoration, the Spanish political system had been cementing the foundations of a Liberal-Conservative system which had allowed the despotism of caciques to take root. Therefore, the lukewarm reforms that were intended to have been brought to bear in the countryside had been held up or utterly cancelled out due to the impossibility of altering land-tenure, promoting agriculture, or even improving the working and living conditions of the peasantry (Payne, 1995; Tebar Hurtado, 2006; Preston, 2006).



With this historical framework in mind, Jose Luis Castillo-Puche writes that, from exile, Sender «invents, recreates, transmits and transfigures a rural drama with all the social and political nuances of the time» (1985: 28). This artistic spirit is sharply reflected in the film. Overall, the adaptation of the novel is almost identical to the filmic text, but for some small details. Moreover, although the film has a more complex structure than Sender's book, the use of flashbacks allows us to view the facts and events retrospectively (an element absent in the novel). This study will be guided chronologically, highlighting the most significant aspects of rural peasant life and the conflicts generated within it (F2).

The film commences with a baptism, in which it introduces us to the main characters in the story. Mosén Millán is the parish priest. In front of him, next to the baptismal font, is a baby held by his parents; this will be Paco. The presentation of the character of Paco and his social surroundings helps to unveil the values of rural life –founded in religion and the parish communities where they were registered (Casanova Nuez, 2007). Likewise, the «moral authority the clergy held over the population was quite considerable» (Gil Pecharroman, 2002: 52)– hence the weighty presence of Mosén Millán<sup>4</sup> in the narrative.



F2. Paco's town (*Réquiem*, 1985).

This socio-religious sphere was not only linked by rituals, baptisms, marriages and deaths (as will be shown in the film) but also by the extent to which these rites

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the novel was going to be called after the name of the parish priest.

followed the rhythm of agricultural cycles. All of this hangs on interaction procedures which will be gradually and significantly altered by occurring events. In this sequence, after the baptism, we find ourselves in Paco's parents' home, to which the people closest to the family and the most prominent village dignitaries have been invited. Additionally, the character of Jerónima– a «midwife and healer» (Sender, 2006: 14)–, who embodies the peasant mentality by which the official religion and coexisting popular beliefs are brought together (García Jeronimo, 1989), materializes.

Paco's birth symbolizes a new generation and its emergent values and ideas. This change follows a rather precise evolutionary path: one which can be observed in the series of events through which the main character is dragged.

Thus, considering the way in which the novel is put together -within and from the memory of Mosén Millán– it is understood that this story will string a series of events together which will place the characters as essential parts of History, though told from the perspective of the lower classes, far removed from the social elites with whom they come into conflict. The town, in short, incarnates values such as «courage, honesty, dignity, hard work, sacrifice, intelligence, ingenuity, willingness to suffer...» (Cruz, 2006: 30), all of which is represented by the characters in this drama and the actors who play them.

Later, a temporal ellipsis transports us to the period in which Paco has become a boy and messes about with another friend in the church attic, both of them playing with the holy images of the saints. That is, until Mosén Millán discovers them; then, instead of punishing Paco, he offers to make him his altar boy. Paco takes this offer very seriously. On the way home, he bumps into the shoemaker, a man who «did not go to Mass but worked with painstaking care for the priest and charged him less. That cobbler and Paco ('from the Mill') had been close friends» (Sender, 2006: 11). Paco blurts out: «Do you know who work hardest not to work? priests!». This signals that some symptoms of anticlericalism do exist in Spanish rural society, despite the religious climate (Álvarez Tardío, 2002). Despite this, in subsequent scenes, Paco is shown doing his very best to fulfil his duties in preparation for an Easter-Week procession, in which the whole town is involved. This reveals «the traditional power of Catholics in the local community» (Del Rey, 2008: 167).

However, the key scene will come to pass when, one day, Paco accompanies Mosén Millán to give the last rites to a dying man from beyond the town, in what are called *the caves*. That place shakes young Paco, as the living conditions are dreadful. The old man is lying on a kind of bed made from rudimentary planks. Mosén Millán blesses him and pronounces Latin phrases to complete the ritual (F3). «Being poor was something both natural and loved by God to which he had to resign himself» (Casanova, 2001: 278). But Paco the child is not able to see things this way and intends to do something to reverse the situation even though both his father and Mosén Millán oppose him. Nobody can do anything; only the childish innocence that allows him to perceive this social injustice is capable of spurring him, and him alone, to act; but he must wait. These images neatly sum up the level of hardship endured by a large number of rural laborers, whose standard of living was one of bare subsistence. As it is noted in the film, it was «believed that the roots of social problems were of a spiritual and moral nature and had nothing to do with the unequal distribution of wealth and power created by men themselves» (Casanova, 2001: 279).



F3. Mosén Millán in the Caves (*Réquiem*, 1985)

Paco understands that this is not the case, that it is their neighbours and fellow citizens who are responsible for helping these people, and that their situation is not merely a question of morality. For this reason, an opportunity to help presents itself at the beginning of the Second Republic (Abril, 14, 1931) - a moment of many hopes- (Barrenetxea, 2023) is proclaimed.



Similarly, the absenteeism of many landowners is underscored as a relevant factor, without worrying about its modernization or its inhabitants. At another point in the film, Paco, who has now become a man, helps his father out with the farm work. They are on a plot of land, and his father points out to him that he must now take care of the family's land. Paco takes an interest in what they pay as rent to the Duke, who owns the land. When his father tells him, Paco replies: «Doesn't it seem a bit much to you to pay dues to a man who has never even been in town? It does not seem fair». The father, not wanting to argue, replies: «Whether it's fair or not, ask Mosén Millán who is friends with the manager. Just try it and see what you get». This scene is a reflection of a generational change in mentality, where Paco rebels against prevailing social injustices while his father is resigned to their inevitability; the father also makes clear the important role the social hierarchy of the Church has in contributing to the perpetuation of such inequality – hence the allusion to Mosén Millán.

This was a time when it was felt that «the distribution of that land could put an end to the utter poverty of a large part of the population», while there were yet those who believed that landlordism and the existence of large estates were necessary. In any case, it would be «this clashing of viewpoints which would cause major conflicts in the Aragonese countryside» (Casanova, 1985: 46). Nevertheless, the omniscient figure of the Duke continues to be a character who symbolizes traditional Spain, archaic and *cacique*: a Spain where social injustice was doing so much damage to the working classes (Robledo Hernández, 2022).

In relation to this, in another scene in which Paco and Mosén Millán are in the town square, the former reproaches the priest for allowing this situation to continue and exclaims: «In this town there are people living worse than animals. Couldn't we use that money to remedy this terrible poverty instead of giving it to a stranger?». Mosén Millán chooses not to listen. However, all this makes clear that the underlying thesis of the film can be found in the idea that «economic backwardness was a root-cause in the outbreak of the civil war» (Cenarro, 1997: 29).

#### 4. Ambitions, suspicions and hopes during the Second Republic

In the Spain of the beginning of the century, land-distribution was highly unequal; plots were harvested poorly and there were uncultivated zones of huge potential; above all, thousands of day laborers lived in miserable, precarious ways, without much possibility of prospering (Sánchez Jiménez, 1975; Tebar Hurtado, 2006; Robledo Hernández, 2022), as exemplified by Paco's life journey in the film. It is, as Cruz writes, «a town which, in the end, felt that an injustice was being committed and which rebelled against it ...» (2006: 30).

The municipal elections of April 12, 1931 later became a plebiscite whereby the monarchy was lost. On April 14, the Second Spanish Republic was proclaimed in Eibar. The reformist spark had caught fire and put an end to the monarchical regime. As in other parts of Spain, in Aragon the elections of April 12, 1931 awarded to Republican and Socialist candidates clear victories (4442 councillors) against the Monarchists (876 councillors) (Gil Pecharromán, 2002; González Calleja, Cobo Romero, Martínez Rus and Sánchez Pérez, 2015). On the other hand, this entailed a more relevant issue, namely: «the possibility of allowing precise claims to reach decision-making headquarters without one's having to be situated near to the traditional local elite» (Cenarro, 1997: 31), since «the control of the Town Hall was, in any case, a decisive factor in town life» (Del Rey, 2008: 63), as it favoured the implementation of a series of local contracting policies and kept security forces under control.

Back in the movie, one night in the square, we see a considerable group of people, gathered to await the election results:

Sheriff: «Attention! I will proceed to read the list of elected councillors: Miguel Poza Baron; Mateo Laguna Esteve, Fernando...»

Valeriano: «This is an outrage», he tells Gumersindo behind the group, under his breath». You have elected low-class and uncultured people, with no principles».

Gumersindo: «Has anyone ever seen such riffraff; and now we've got to call these people councillors. Nooo! I simply refuse».

Valeriano: «This will not stand».

Paco will also be elected councillor. However, what interests us is the opposing reaction by Valeriano and Gumersindo, who personify the power and influence of traditionalism. They describe the elected councillors as *riffraff*. Their attitude is one of reluctance to accept change, which reveals a contrary and negative

posture. The establishment of the Republic «was not received with the same enthusiasm everywhere» (Reig Tapia, 2006: 150); and yet, it «was received in the countryside with the same hope and expectation as in the rest of Spain» (Cifuentes y Maluenda, 1992: 79). In certain disadvantaged social strata, it was thought that the introduction of the new regime would allow «the popular masses to achieve equality through mobilization and participation» (Cruz, 2006: 31).

Of course, it was not as simple as that, and existing power relations, although somewhat altered by the Republic, remained rigidly in place. Spain might have apparently fallen asleep Monarchist and woken up Republican the next day, but that did not mean that all of society followed suit, in sync or in unison. In fact, Gumersindo and Valeriano ask Mosén Millán to meet with them secretly to discuss the changes. This shows the relationship between «political and social Conservatism» and the Church (Casanova, 2001: 14). Both fear what might happen and ask him to talk to Paco. They attempt to mediate with the most publicly-recognized figurehead associated with the reforms to be launched. Consequently, Mosén Millán sets off to talk to him. Paco will remind him of his childhood experience in the caves; this a metaphor for his desire to see a proper redistribution of wealth, a drive for justice, and his wish not to depend on the Duke's charity, but to have equal sharing so that desperate penury and injustice might disappear for good. This meeting succinctly captures the feeling that the Republic was anxiously yearning for reform (Cruz, 2006).

Given the inability of Mosén Millán to change Paco's mind (the religious atmosphere seen before in the town disappears), Valeriano, the administrator, decides to interview him in his house. Here, we are presented with a contrast between the stark and miserable reality of the bare, grey peasant household, and the aristocratic living room where Paco and Valeriano have their meeting. This room is furnished with every manner of luxury and comfort and, as such, demonstrates the differences in living standards from one social class to another. But despite the vain attempts at seductive persuasion by Valeriano, who is intent on demonstrating the generosity of the dukes, Paco will not yield and insists that the mountains will still be expropriated adhering to the laws enacted by the Republic to require *forced tillage of the land* by labourers.

These and other measures sought to rescue «much of the peasantry» from their «wretched living conditions» and abolish «the perpetuation of a model of oligarchic domination in rural areas; one which basically conformed to a property-ownership model and systems of rule which were obsolete» (Gil Pecharromán, 2002: 77). However, «the worsening social and economic tensions that, in turn, provoked contradictory processes of modernization» (Malefakis, 1972: 76), gave rise to a systemic unease which was felt across the whole social spectrum, not just among the ruling elite, but also among the most vulnerable peasants.

In the film, despite everything, Paco manages to occupy this land. Furthermore, Valeriano finds himself obligated to get out of the village because of such events, as a protest. Although, in the plot, it seems that the reforms lead to gains -in what is an exaggeratedly idealized version of reality-, the real historical reforms did not satisfy, nor address the demands of the peasantry, leading up to the Civil War. This fomented tensions between pro- and anti-revolutionary factions, more a product of propaganda and rhetoric than anything else, which resulted in fears and exaggerations that created fertile ground for military uprisings (González Calleja, 2011: 389-396).

In any case, it should be noted that, at the end of the Republican period, the question of land distribution had still not been resolved<sup>5</sup>.

## 5. The weight of guilt and reflection in the peasant tragedy

Even though this chapter takes us back to the beginning of the film, the moment when the priest Mosén Millán is waiting for his parishioners to attend the requiem for Paco is undeniably still the ending to the tragic story. It should not be ignored that «the major contribution the editing has made to the filmic narrative structure is that it allows the audience to see as parallel and simultaneous acts which happen in different places» (Vanoye and Goliot-Lete, 2008: 24) or that gone-by times can be brought into the present (Hueso, 1998).

The film, constructed around a far-from-accidental gaze on the past, contains significant flashbacks that always finish right at the present moment in history. This

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<sup>5</sup> For other cinematographic views on the Second Republic read: Barrenetxea (2023).

filmic mechanism, besides breaking away from the traditional chronological narrative form because of styling preferences, settles the close relationship between past and present, both of which are united by memory.

Mosén's pensive gesture as he looks at the ecclesiastical vestments he will have to don to officiate the requiem, evokes a life-story full of sadness and sorrow for him. After all, just as Agustín Faro points out, «this betrays an internal conflict within the character; one which he has dragged on until the present and from which he cannot free himself» (2006: 126).

In any case, through the film-adaptation, another interpretation is possible. Precisely because of his moral symbolism and importance in the plot, Mosén Millán embodies the conscience of one part of society which has not figured out how to face up its past.

It is no coincidental that it took so long to adapt the novel to cinema. Nor is it by chance that the interest in dealing with a guilty conscience has been reignited. This is not exclusive to the priesthood or the final cut of the film, which is haunted by the memory of still-un-exorcised ghosts, but also affects a certain part of society which collaborated with those groups favouring repression (Álvarez Junco, 2022). The scene continues as follows:

Mosén Millán: «Have the relatives come? »

Altar boy: «Which relatives? ».

Mosén Millán: «Don't be silly. Don't you remember Paco, him from the Mill?»

Altar boy: «Yes Father»

Mosén Millán: «And... »

Altar boy: «There's still no one to be seen in the church»

Displeased, he remains thoughtful for a moment until he hears a neighing horse. He ends up sitting, with an air of defeat, on a wicker chair.

The fact that nobody has turned up to the church –not even Paco's family, nor any other neighbours or friends– is, within a cinematic framework (and, in this case, in Sender's novel itself), representative of something. Despite being a devout village, as it was shown in the film's opening scenes; now, after such unjustly unleashed violence, the situation is other. The town has regained social peace in exchange for abandoning its conscience. As such, their absence represents their disapproval of the way in which the parish and local power have



proceeded. The latter have returned to their positions after the destruction of the Republic by complying, without qualm, with the victors and actively participating in the construction of a new state (Prada Rodríguez, 2012). For the most part, the attitude of the Church, which did not accept the role it played in the consolidation of Franco's regime until 1971, was that of cooperating with whoever was in charge and facilitating social control. However, the metaphor is extremely telling. The people, Spanish society, cannot forget what has happened in its «uncomfortable past» (García Márquez, 2010: 143) and keeps the flame of its memory burning so as not to lose sight of those who, directly or indirectly, were responsible for the death of Paco and many others.

Without a doubt, this attitude is not a result of a directly experienced or historically-researched reality, but rather an act of rejection and dissent featured in Sender's novel. The people were highly aware of the barbaric events and openly condemned them.

Continuing with the film, the young altar boy heads toward the place where the church-bell rope is placed. Belonging to a different generation, this adolescent is not aware of the seriousness of the recent events which have heralded the evolution of the local area. This is because he has not lived through anything similar before, despite having learnt a song about this tragic sequence of events; this song allows us to assess how such events came to be expressed by people from many towns, such that we should never forget what happened. This can be appreciated when we hear him singing as he rings the bell:

There goes Paco, him from the Mill  
Who has already been sentenced,  
and who weeps for his life  
on his way to the sacred burial ground  
and as he comes before the wall  
the centurion stops him up,  
they're already taking them, they're already taking them  
their arms bound to each other.

At the end of the song, a new flashback is introduced. It is winter, we are transported back to Paco's infancy and we are shown the town square covered in snow; where a group of small, noisy children walk beside a mother and her son, Paco, whom she is carrying in her arms and is going to be baptized in the

church. In a certain sense, the song becomes the collective social memory of a town which is accustomed to remembering events in this way – events in which the town is immersed. As Fentress and Wickham explain «Not even the individual memory is simply personal (...) this story is as much a product of social memory as a source of it» (2003: 12). Therefore, this social memory is integrated into the democratic and collective memory of which we are all part. Necessary and useful for understanding the past and shape an accurate future perspective. In other words, learning from past events and integrating divided memories (Aguilar, 2008; Cuesta, 2008; Bernecker & Brinkmann, 2009; Prada Rodríguez, 2023).

In the film, a man tosses candy to the children, which pick them up with great joy. The children are singing a song but stop when they enter the church.

Once again, after having learnt about the journey to the church to have Paco baptized, the film takes us back to the moment in which Mosén is waiting in the still-empty church for someone to arrive so that he might begin the requiem for Paco. Paco's white horse passes through a deserted town square. Mosén remains in his chair with his head resting on his hand, as if grieving. The silence of this image in the half-light of the room, punctuated only by the sound of horseshoes against the ground, reveals a quiet, withheld sadness; this, once again, whisks us off to another memory of the young Paco who, still a child, is mulling over his experience in the caves where he sees how many of his neighbours live. Thus, this visual rendering of memory «represents the past and the present as if they were interconnected and mutually compatible» (Fentree and Wickham, 2003: 44). And, likewise, they configure an imaginary that invites reflection and debate. In short, a reminder that exhorts society to confront its own collective memory (Sánchez-Biosca, 2005; Sánchez-Biosca, 2006; Aguilar, 2008; Cuesta, 2008; Álvarez Junco, 2022; Prada Rodríguez, 2023)

Mosén Millán, still sitting in the chair, awaits still for someone to show up to Paco's burial. The altar boy approaches to tell him, once again: «There's still no one here». Mosén Millán comments: «How very strange! Everyone loved Paco; everyone except...». A man enters the church: Don Valeriano. He crosses himself with holy water and heads for the sacristy, where the crestfallen priest can be

found. He bows before the altar and his sonorous footsteps reverberate in the ceiling of a deserted church.

Don Valeriano: «Here you have me Mosén Millán. On Sunday in the pulpit, you said that we must forget. Forgetting isn't easy; but here I am, the first one to arrive. Away with all those bad feelings! In this sense, I'm just like my dead father. As far as mass is concerned, I shall pay for it, save better judgement. Tell me: how much is it?

Mosén Millán looks at him without saying a word. His eyes are bloodshot. He is being consumed by pain. It hurts him. We anticipate a tragic story. He closes his eyes and the memories come flooding back.

Once more, after remembering the events surrounding the wedding of Paco and Águeda, the film returns to where Mosén Millán and his visitor wait for another person to show up for the requiem. Another man knocks on the door.

Mosén Millán: «Has anyone else come? »

Gumersindo: «No, Father. I haven't seen, as it were, a soul in the church. Here, Mosén, five *duros*<sup>6</sup> for today's mass – he hands him the bill, but the priest's stony look persuades him to put it back in his wallet»

Valeriano: «I've made the same offer»

After recounting the chapter on unjustified repression in the village, Mosén Millán continues to pray with his head on his hand, until Cástulo appears –the last of the conspirators who urged them to give away Paco's whereabouts. Upon hearing him, he looks up and, brusquely, observes the arrival of the last of the men who have come to pray for Paco.

Cástulo: Good morning, gentlemen. With all due respect, I would like to pay for Paco's mass.

Mosén Millán: The same offer has been made by your friends – looking at him bitterly. – Save it for yourself. I'll pay for the mass.

Altar boy: «There is a horse in the church. Yes, a horse!

This prompts all the men, following on Mosén's steps, to move toward the church; Mosén has reacted first and says: «Paco's colt». Finally, they open the door and set him loose. The horse, once again free, begins to trot.

For Antonio Llorens and Alessandra Amitrano, the figure of the horse, «even though reminiscent of *¡Viva Zapata!* by Kazan (in turn inspired by John Steinbeck), acquires the rather peculiar status of symbolism for Paco's awkward

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<sup>6</sup> One *duro* was a coin or bill equivalent to five pesetas.

personality» (Llorens and Amitrano, 1999: 156). Further developing this viewpoint, the vision of Paco's white colt – a symbol of purity and freedom, running free through the village and ending up inside the church itself – represents the memory of a forever-lost Republic, embodied by Paco. Indeed, «the results of Civil War cut short the hopes of an agrarian reform occasioning a generalized feeling of resignation» (Richards, 2006: 190). This is also how Casanova, quite rightly, interprets things: «Paco, the peasant, victim of the Church's betrayal and Fascist violence, represents all Republican victims» (2001: 124). This is the forcefulness and conviction in which images can uncover a reality.

Arguing from another perspective altogether, Cervera states that, in the film: «War is presented as the culmination of the confrontation between the ever-powerful and the underprivileged, in the context of rural Spain» (2008: 929). The role played by the Church is assessed as being negative. However, it is worth clarifying that, once again, in the film the importance of the Republican regime in awakening aspirations within the Spanish peasantry is omitted.

It also forms an imaginary in which it seems that only «priests, Falangists and landowners instigated murders» (Bernecker and Brinkmann, 2009: 118), yet this was not always the case. Also, there are examples of priests who were involved in defending and safeguarding lives and not every Falangist committed terrible acts (F4). In this case, Mosén Millán represents the impotence of preventing the drama in front of the supporters on duty.



F4. Paco resisting the Falangists (*Réquiem*, 1985)

Those responsible for the executions were the ones who drafted blacklists and those names could only be given by local residents: not knowing who the accuser might have been «allowed people to point the finger at competitors for work, love rivals, or no-longer-loved partners» (Ledesma, 2010: 179).

Let us speak about these accusers: such are the secondary characters Gumersindo and Valeriano, from whom we can best gauge the responsibility of every player in the drama. Valeriano is portrayed as a very superstitious person who misunderstands religion and is unable to understand Paco's complaints. Therefore, it is shocking to hear him state his belief that after Paco's colt stunt the Church will have to be reconsecrated. This is something that did not even occur to Mosén Millán. Valeriano's attitudes, however, did not prevent him from justifying the murder of another human being. And when Paco manages to occupy the Duke's land, they eventually have to leave town. This, in a way, sums up his old-fashioned mentality, typical of an era characterized by highly rigid social and moral hierarchies.

Gumersindo, on the other hand, embodies a conservative and distrustful spirit. This, coupled with his fabrications and false accusations, marks him out as a conservative and suspicious soul. In any case, their attitudes – fearful and childlike right throughout the film – establish them as distrusting and non-progressive characters. Although they have used religion to justify the way they go about things, we are given to understand that their actions have, above all, been driven by another, weightier, factor: the fear of social change.

In the final images of the film, Mosén Millán very regretful - involved in his unfortunate end -, after recalling the shooting of Paco, has already prepared everything to hold the requiem. He looks at the handkerchief containing Paco's watch, which he has kept and not returned to the family since the evening of the funeral. In the same drawer is the old wooden gun that Paco, as a child, so naively tried to hide from the priest. This «becomes a symbol of death along with his personal memories» (Faro Fortaleza, 2006: 149).

Mosén Millán finally closes the drawer, takes the chalice with the consecrated communion bread, and heads for the church after the altar boy. Leaving the chalice on the altar, he begins Mass. A wide shot reveals the three men who wanted to pay for Mass kneeling in an empty church. Nobody else has attended



the ceremony. Nobody else will. Nobody in the town can attend a ceremony commemorating the tragic life of a man who, without committing any crime greater than distributing land among the very neediest, was murdered – just like other innocents besides him-. The absence of the entire town is significant; it demonstrates a public condemnation of what has happened; rather than because of fear, because of dread of being confronted by their «shame» (Bernecker and Brinkmann, 2009: 242).

The factor of crucial importance in this scene is the exposition, for the first time and in ever such an illustrative way, of «the loneliness of the *Francoist* victors» (Faro Fortaleza, 2006: 150). The image of an empty church is, above all else, the result of cinematographic (and novelistic) imagination; it is a reminder of a bitter silence and the covert social protest over contemporary events. Without a doubt, it creates a useful filmic effect in recovering the symbolic value of a part of history wherein the *Francoist* repression was deemed unacceptable. As pointed out by José María García, «when the killing was complete, a curious phenomenon was noted: those who had bragged and boasted about it immediately began to forget what had happened and to erase the terrible episode from their memories» (2010: 138). Of course, the film come to indicate that the townspeople are the ones who do not forget about these events.

## 6. Reception, awards and film reviews

The film was shot in the villages of Envid and Codees, not far from Calatayud. The extras were among inhabitants of local towns and villages and various theater groups in Zaragoza. Its budget was a hundred million pesetas and the film was funded, in part, by the Spanish Ministry of Culture and the local government in Zaragoza (Rovira, 1985).

The film would be selected to compete in that year's Venice Film Festival. First, however, the Ministry of Culture, through the National Film Institute directed by Pilar Miró, demanded that the original title of the novel be used if the film was to be financed, having been previously changed to *Réquiem por un campesino* through the omission of the word *español* (Ortega, 1985). According to the newspaper *El Correo Catalán* indicates that its reception at the Venice Film Festival was of a «courteous but not enthusiastic» nature (Ordóñez, 1985: 27).

According to Gubern (1986: 172), the film was received unenthusiastically by critics, who considered it as belonging to another era. However, a newspaper called *El Periódico de Catalunya* (31 August 1985: 18) recollects that, in Venice, it was applauded and received with a great deal of excitement; although it also notes that not everyone received it with the same enthusiasm, even branding it as produced for television. Likewise, the director, Francesc Betriu, following some criticism adducing that the film was Manichean because of the characterization of the Falangists engaged in repression, publicly stated that «there can only be a negative judgment regarding the Falangists, as it was them who attacked the Spanish people» (Cenarro, 1997: 42). These reasons help explain why the Falangists are shown as the only group to lead the repression in the film since they do not figure in the novel. Here the importance that the imaginary takes is clearly exhibited; firstly, in emphasizing a singular (sometimes functional) vision removed from typical historical interpretations and the role the creator-director has in it; secondly, in revealing the film to cinema audiences.

The film critic José Luis Guarnier, who was not seduced by the film either, comments that the main problem he has with the film is Sender's literary work, which is not as cinematographic as has been claimed; since it «does not pay much attention to the social plight of the place, which is sketched out in a mere few stereotypes, nor to the outcry against political repression». Hence, «however apt the lighting and ambience might be», he believes that «the main issue is the text itself». In sum, in his opinion, the film «ends up taking on a well-executed yet stiff coldness, to all intents and purposes undesired and undesirable» (1985).

Neither does critic Jesus Ruiz review it well. He sees it as a «flat film» since it «barely alters the narrative rhythm of the book» (Ruiz, 1985). Jorge de Comminges, however, believes that the film lacks warmth, even if he considers it to have «very neat, formally classical» (1985) narrative.

The critic José Enrique Monterde offers the same judgement, who defines it as «an eminently cold and sterile film» (1985: 70), to which he adds: «If we were to write a historical footnote about what really happened, this lack of warmth would seem all the colder for it». In an interview, the director himself affirmed that, despite the cool reception from Spanish critics, foreign newspapers such as *Le Monde*, the *Herald Tribune* and *Variety* were more positive (Llorens and

Amitrano, 1999: 160). In any case, the reception was discreet with 369,019 spectators.

## 7. In conclusion

As has been analysed, Betriu's *Requiem* is a faithful adaptation of Sender's novel. The realization is guided step by step by his words, except for some minor differences. And despite the uneven reception by critics and the public, the crucial thing about the film is that it effectively and realistically reproduces the feelings and thoughts of Spanish rural society in the first third of the century and an important part of the problems that faced them then, such as injustice, misery and poor distribution of the land. Although the theme -the agrarian problem-, was no longer so significant at the time of its premiere, as it had been resolved decades ago, it does recall the origin, causes and consequences of the conflict, with the heartbreaking effect that the repression - a topic little addressed until then -had in Spanish society<sup>7</sup>.

Although it was not the first time that the vengeful nature of the victors had been exposed - there was a precedent, *Tierra de rastros*, by Antonio Gonzalo, 1979 - , Betriu had the courage to bring out a part of that past as was the brutality and sense of guilt -in the figure of Mosén Millán- of a Church that incapable of protecting the most helpless, and which even aligned itself with the traditional powers. Therefore, it should be highlighted, in addition to the elements on display, as a precursor film of what later became known as the phenomenon of the recovery of historical memory, from 2006 -year of historical memory - onwards (Pérez Garzón & Manzano Moreno, 2010; García Colmenares, 2021).

It is true that the film has a cold and soulless tone, which corresponds accurately to a naked and unadorned description of a bitter and traumatic past. Paco, the main character along with the priest, represents the stages of the existence of a Spanish peasant whose desire for change and social justice crystallized during the Second Republic, but which ended in an appalling bloodbath. Thus, the subsequent futile attempt to hide the crimes under the cover of «masses and te

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<sup>7</sup> It should be added that in the 70s, during the late Franco era, the Italian-Spanish film *La cólera del viento / La collera del vento* (Mario Camus, 1970), which addresses the persistent peasant problem in Andalusia, was produced. Although, it is set at the beginning of the 20th century so that it seems like a different time.

deums, in an orgy of crosses, processions and saints» (García Márquez, 2010: 144), by the Franco regime, would not serve to prevent that the Spanish people had knowledge of the truth and would not be able to forget.

*Requiem por un campesino español* is the worthy portrait of an era and a human reflection on the injustice and cruelty still present in Spain

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