

THE TRAJECTORY OF THE INVISIBLE VOICES: THE VOICEOVER IN SPANISH FICTION FILMS*

The notable presence of voiceovers in Spanish fiction films of the period after the Civil War reflects a practice which had also been used at that time in other countries and which needs to be placed in relation with its use in documentaries and newsreels, to avoid tracing it all the way back to precedents like the figure of the explicator in silent films. In general terms, the evolution of its use would move from an initially extradiegetic location, exercising from this privileged position a full command over everything that occurs on screen, to the progressive adoption of an enunciative complexity that would have the voice alerting the spectators to what they are going to see or are already seeing, speaking directly to them as if expecting an immediate answer, or attempting to provoke their emotional involvement. This complexity would ultimately result in the insertion of narrators into the story, embodying the voice in the figure of a particular character, which may or may not be the protagonist. Whatever mode is

adopted, the intervention of the narrator positions us clearly in the terrain of a kind of fiction that is conscious of its condition as such, with a centre of reflexivity and thought removed from what the images are showing us, which, whether through nostalgia, melancholy or humour, impregnates a remarkable number of the most unique titles of the early Francoist period.

I will now explore, at least briefly, how from the theoretical point of view the insertion of a voiceover as a prominent element that configures the textual framework raises essential questions of filmic enunciation. First of all, the kind of relationship established between that voice and the subject-spectator, out of which arises other equally important issues concerning the organisation of the story, such as the extent of the knowledge of the facts that the spectator should be given or the doses of information that the spectator receives. All of this ultimately feeds into the particular way in which the narrative point of view is articulated, from which we

might in turn discern who is showing us what we see, who sees it at the same time as the spectator, and who narrates it and from what position in the story, and on the basis of these questions we may attempt to outline the figure of a “maker of the images”. Literary studies have attempted to answer some of the questions raised here, chiefly through the analytical explorations of Gerard Genette, and film studies have drawn from these and, more specifically, have used the concept of focalisation, on which the narratological propositions of Tom Gunning, André Gaudreault, and François Jost are based, as well as the approaches to film narration made by another important author, Seymour Chatman, who opened up the field of study with his affirmation that “[f]ilms [...] are always presented – mostly and often exclusively shown, but sometimes partially told – by a narrator or narrators.” (CHATMAN, 1990: 133). In considering the intervention of this narrator and his or her degree of involvement in the narrative material, it will be important to keep in mind Gerard Genette’s affirmation that “[a]bsence is absolute, but presence has degrees” (GENETTE, 1983: 245). The analytical overview offered here of a representative corpus of films that adopt the voiceover as a key element of the story will focus on establishing this degree of intervention, the particular focalisation that operates on the narrative material and, in short, the method of organising our access to the knowledge of the events narrated and, consequently, to their meaning. This overview will also be adopted from a historical perspective that takes into account the evolution that the voiceover underwent in the period.

Any reconstruction of the trajectory followed by the voiceover up to its appearance in major Spanish films of the

1940s must first consider its presence in film newsreels and the didactic, persuasive and politicised documentaries of the 1930s. And attention will also have to be given to its presence in the newsreels and documentaries of the Spanish Civil War, which made use of voiceover commentary to give the *collage* of images typical of these documentary corpora their characteristic tone between

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informative and propagandistic. The subsequent onset of the Second World War would only lead to a notable relapse of analogous use of such voiceover commentary in film. And in terms of consumer habits, it is also important to mention the acousmatic voices of the radio, which prepared the ground for the future sound film spectator and, more specifically, for the spectator of films that included these incorporeal voices, as noted by various theorists who have either addressed the use of voiceover commentary in the classical documentary or studied the introduction of sound. It would also be useful, with respect to the particular relationship that can be established with the subject-spectator, to give at least a little attention here to certain intertitles used in silent films. Bernard P.E. Bentley, for example, pointed out that in *El golfo* (José de Togores, 1917) the intertitles guide the spectator’s response and that those appearing in *La Casa de la Troya*

(Manuel Noriega and Alejandro Pérez Lugín, 1925) are notable for their markedly humorous and ironic tone (BENTLEY, 2008: 32). With respect to newsreels and documentaries, Sarah Kosloff notes, citing Lewis Jacobs, that narration appeared in these filmic forms before it became a common resource in fiction films, but its use in fiction films was not widespread prior to 1939, probably because in the early years of sound film audiences would have felt cheated by anything other than synchronous speech, and the voiceover was thus only fully established in fiction films once the novelty of synchronicity had worn off (KOSLOFF, 1988: 33).

Once this habit of use and reception had been established, the transfer of the voiceover to fiction occurred as a natural progression. Already in the 1930s we can find it in a few Hollywood films, as documented by Sarah Kozloff (1988: 31), who mentions titles such as *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935), which incorporates the voiceover to recycle footage taken from the original *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), which also already featured a presenter-character who, appearing from behind the theatre curtain, warned the audience, with a cautionary gaze at the camera as if he were directly addressing the people seated in the theatre, that the story that they were about to see may be upsetting. An earlier film, *Forgotten Commandments* (Louis J. Gasnier, William Schorr, 1932), also uses a voiceover, in this case belonging to the character of a priest who, in a similar manner, comments on some scenes taken from *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. de Mille, 1923). The fact that both cases involve a particular practice of appropriation points to a key question in any analysis of the voiceover: reflexivity. At the same time, as will be

explored in detail below, the voiceover is always suggestive of the enunciative distance intrinsic to thought and memory

This same enunciative distance, which distorts the established transparency of the narrative, is characteristic of the parodic register which, in the case of Spain, is already observable in the film series that Eduardo García Maroto made in the 1930s: *Una de fieras* (1934), *Una de miedo* (1935), and *...Y ahora... una de ladrones* (1935). This series also offers an early case of the use of a narrating voiceover, except in the last title in the trilogy. This mark of reflexivity is taken to its fullest extent here through the adoption of the form of clear enunciative self-consciousness in a thought-provoking metacinematic strategy that constantly seeks the spectator's complicity.

At the opposite extreme from humour and parody, the omnipresent voiceover of newsreels and documentaries on the war, with its powerful command over the visuals, over which it maintains a clearly tutelary, orientational and persuasive position, would later be transferred, as suggested above, to fiction, as evidenced in numerous films of the post-war period. It would be in a period of transition, in the moments immediately after the end of the conflict, when it would appear in that hybrid product represented by Edgar Neville's short film *Vivan los hombres libres* (1939). Here, the visual document of a now occupied Barcelona is mixed with brief insertions offering a dramatised recreation of the terror and torture in the prisons. The highly marked propagandistic intention is thus supported not only by the probative nature of the images that characterises the canonical practice of the expository documentary, but also by a certain emotional dimension evoked by the narrating voiceover's reading of the desperate letters of the prisoners.

Bearing in mind that my period of study covers the years of the Second World War and immediately thereafter, it is worth highlighting Sarah Kosloff's

observation that in the early 1940s there was a veritable avalanche of Hollywood films that used the voiceover (1988: 34), which was present in war films, semi-documentaries, film noir and, finally, in literary adaptations, where it no doubt represented a logical transfer from novel to film. Two acclaimed films from this period, *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *To Be or Not To Be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942) make use of an initial voiceover, as an extradiegetic narrator who, from a position outside the story narrated, fills the need to explain, contextualise and frame the story in specific spatio-temporal coordinates which of course relate to the Second World War, in the same way as such voiceover was being used in newsreels and documentaries reporting on the conflict. Curtiz's film, incidentally, also makes use of the well-worn device of animated maps.

Trajectory of the voiceover through Spanish cinema

In the above-mentioned films by Curtiz and Lubitsch the war appears as a primary reference which underpins the story and which, in turn, is explained through the intervention of a voiceover that anchors the images and assigns them their meanings. In Spain, the indelible mark left by the painful experience of the Civil War could be fittingly evoked by this narrating voiceover which, having accompanied so many films during the war itself, was transferred to numerous fiction films of the 1940s and continued to be used, also with significant variations, in the decades that followed. An initial approach to this idea can be found in the research of Castro de Paz, who notes that the voiceover appears to have seen

an "early but painful" shift to fiction from the wartime newsreels. Castro de Paz discusses this in his analysis of *El hombre que se quiso matar* (Rafael Gil, 1942, shot in 1941): "narrated as a fable by a voiceover external to the diegesis. [...] This striking and aurally demiurgical position of the calm and didactic extradiegetic narrator shrouds and cushions a discourse of veritable critical ferocity." (CASTRO DE PAZ, 2013: 103). As it does not assume incontrovertible realities of the cinema of the era (military, religious, historical), the film requires a different kind of complicity from the subject-spectator, seeking his/her comprehension of its balanced doses of melancholy and black humour. And it must, in turn, manage the treatment of the issue on which the whole fate of the protagonist turns, his decision to commit suicide; a treatment which, if not banal, is certainly stripped of the serious drama that it would be expected to have, and which itself reflects a kind of mixture of embittered and good-natured criticism that is so typical of Fernández Flórez, the adapted author. The voiceover is thus the element that leads the grey and mediocre reality of the post-war era into the realm of fable, towards a certain degree of unreality and atemporality that will soften what ultimately cannot be concealed: the precarious lives of the people, their

Figure 1. *El hombre que se quiso matar* (Rafael Gil, 1942)



struggle for subsistence in a harsh and hostile environment, and also the possibility of realising dreams of salvation like climbing the social ladder through marriage.

And speaking of fable, understood here in literary terms as a “narrative-didactic genre with an illustrative purpose” (PLATAS, 2004: 305), the voiceover would also have another role to fulfil in the specific case of the historical cinema of the Francoist era: “a self-serving, manipulative didacticism that exploits the general public’s ignorance of history, to which end there is a use and abuse of the voiceover at the beginning and end of films” (MONTERDE, 2007: 93).

Its demiurgical and omniscient nature, the finality of its affirmations and the control it exercises over the characters and their fates are some of the main attributes of this voiceover, which presides over what is shown on screen, chiefly at the beginning of the story. A common styleme in numerous films of the early Francoist era, it not only appears to serve the obvious function of locating and introducing the story, but also shows signs of a certain task of containment, of control and subjection, in an effort to cushion the harsh reality of its time which, whether intentionally or not, and in spite of the reassuring discourse underpinning the words of the narrator, will ultimately evoke and expose the scars left by the war experience.

Any analysis that begins with a consideration of the voiceover as an element of continuity between the newsreels that had been fully established by the post-war era and fiction films must necessarily make mention of the long shadow cast by the NO-DO newsreel series. Its uninterrupted presence for

so many years in Spain’s film theatres seemed to contaminate certain fiction films whose use of the voiceover imitates, reproduces or recreates that of the official newsreel, thereby associating them with a “tendency towards

ditional family values that shaped the Francoist period.

On the other hand, the use of voiceovers also denotes an interest in staging a story that is self-conscious, vesting the agents involved in the filmic communication with an

eloquent presence, so that the reflexivity is transferred to the subject-spectator, who is invited more or less explicitly to participate in everything that will be shown and narrated. And as everything is a question of degree, following Genette’s assertion quoted above, this self-consciousness would evolve towards greater levels of engagement with the story and with the story’s audience. And this evolution, in the case of



Figure 2. *El santuario no se rinde* (Arturo Ruiz Castillo, 1949)

artificiality, to the use of an absolutely vacuous bombastic and pompous tone” (TRANCHE and SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA, 2001: 120). This *colonisation* of certain films by the NO-DO series is observable, for example, in the voiceover at the beginning of *Los últimos de Filipinas* (Antonio Román, 1945), which repeats the oft-heard refrains of those years on military matters (fulfilment of duty, defence of the fatherland, etc.). Of course, such an approach is far from surprising in the case of this film, but it is worth highlighting the projected voice, with its tone of gravity and importance, the strict seriousness the speaker seeks to convey with this particular modulation of his voice, in contrast with the irony, double-entendres or appeals to the spectator’s complicity in other titles that will be analysed below. A similar voice can be heard, for example, in *La señora de Fátima* (Rafael Gil, 1951) or in *La familia Vila* (Ignacio F. Iquino, 1950), with reference in these cases to another semantic universe, of the religiosity and tra-

ditional family values that shaped the Francoist period. On the other hand, the use of voiceovers also denotes an interest in staging a story that is self-conscious, vesting the agents involved in the filmic communication with an eloquent presence, so that the reflexivity is transferred to the subject-spectator, who is invited more or less explicitly to participate in everything that will be shown and narrated. And as everything is a question of degree, following Genette’s assertion quoted above, this self-consciousness would evolve towards greater levels of engagement with the story and with the story’s audience. And this evolution, in the case of Spanish post-war cinema, could in general terms take one of two possible paths: the homodiegetic narrator, a protagonist in the events he narrates (and experiences, and which the filmic text shows), and the heterodiegetic narrator, who, without giving up his position outside the narrative universe, holds the power to intervene directly in the events in the story through the contact he establishes with the world of the story itself, by communicating directly with the characters, or with the world of the audience, by directly addressing the spectator; in short, by his capacity to submit the flow of the images to his will.

As a paradigmatic example of the homodiegetic narrator, and as a landmark work against which to measure what would be done in Spain in these years, it is important to mention *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940). As is obvious, the voiceover, which we attribute to the female protagonist, speaks to us from within the story and has a notable impact on the spectator’s experience in

that she engages the usual mechanisms of identification sustained by the establishment of perceptual subjectivity. Kossloff argues that this voice is so firmly inscribed in the film that it seems generated not only by what she sees, but also by what we, the spectators, are seeing (1988: 45). It would be this establishment of subjectivity that provoked a unique critical controversy over the film's successful première in Spain. According to Fernando González's analysis, it was classified at that time as a "deceitful cinematic suggestion" (2003: 74-93), as the atmosphere created seemed to arise directly from the characters' perception and this was considered, as González himself quotes from an article by Gómez Tello in the magazine *Primer Plano*, heretical and materialist. However, this controversy extended in general to what at that time was considered an excessive use of subjectivity beyond its expression through the voiceover. In opposition to this approach, films like those of Rafael Gil, in close collaboration with cinematographer Alfredo Fraile and set designer Enrique Alarcón, would represent a possible Spanish alternative through films which, in the words of Castro de Paz, "would be meticulous in their visual expression and finely crafted in their lofty concept of atmosphere" (2007: 92). In his opinion, the staging would almost always be demonstrative and omniscient, seeking to introduce the subjectivity of the character without resorting (at least excessively) to the orthodox subjective POV so as not to fall into the realm of "morally reprehensible psychodrama" (CASTRO DE PAZ, 2007: 92). The creation of a particular atmosphere would thus be made to depend on the work on the mise en scène, on the sets, lighting and shadows. This question has also been analysed this way from different perspectives by other authors, including Rubio Munt (2001: 144-145).

The narrative model of *Rebecca* can also be found in *El santuario no se rinde* (Arturo Ruiz Castillo, 1949), as previously noted by Sánchez-Biosca



Figure 3. *Cerca de la ciudad* (Luis Lucía, 1952)

(2006: 160). In both cases, the story begins with a dolly shot giving a POV approaching an old building, a place that holds the memory of death. In both films, the voiceover, positioned inside the story, activates the memory of an event from the past and makes explicit the feelings that this memory provokes. As it is not the filmic expression of a dream, as in the approach to Mander-

that ultimately fosters "a conciliatory perspective determined by the alliance between complex characters who struggle constantly against an invisible enemy in a tragic conflict that nobody seems to comprehend" (GÓMEZ BECEIRO, 2013: 103).

This homodiegetic narrator of a significant number of Ruiz Castillo's films takes on more complex forms

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ley, the scene begins with a detail shot of some hands cutting some flowers, which then appear in the foreground when the movement towards the sanctuary begins. This is also a plaintive voice which, while appearing to constitute an apparent affirmation of Catholic-National Francoism, above all expresses the feeling of loss provoked by the memory of the war, which appears here more as a desperate allegory

in titles like *Las inquietudes de Shanti Andía* (1947), where, in the famous final scene, we are shown the person to whom the story was addressed, who is none other than Pio Baroja, author of the novel adapted for the film. The communication with this *other* outside the diegesis where the subject-spectator is located also appears in the first shot when Shanti, with greying hair, looks at the camera and begins telling



Figure 4. *Nadie lo sabrá* (Ramón Torrado, 1953)

his story. The fact that the narrative focus is made to depend on a character has already been noted by Juan Miguel Company in a brief but revealing analysis of Spanish cinema in the 1940s, which proposes “a constant fluctuation between the points of view of the narrative and of the characters participating in it, the articulation of which contains much of the textual richness of

but also by the moral baseness of the illegal trafficking of basic medications. In *Segundo López, aventurero urbano* (Ana Mariscal, 1952), another devastating portrait of post-war Madrid, we also find the listener who subsequently narrates what he has heard: “I accepted the invitation from that stranger. He told me all of this that you have just seen.”

A later film by Ruiz Castillo, *Dos*

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the films” (1997: 10).

This complex enunciation that incorporates the figure of the narratee and thus includes both interlocutors in the diegetic universe, the storyteller and the listener, can be found in another, later film by Ruiz Castillo, *El guardián del paraíso* (1952), a recreation of post-war Madrid that brings together characters, situations and settings typical of the *sainete* style of Spanish cinema and which, in short, offers an authentic picture of a post-war Spain marked not only by material precariousness,

caminos (1954), also makes use of a voiceover that focuses the plot on the main characters of the film, giving way to respective flashbacks to then return to the theme of possible reconciliation, suggested in the values of reformation, redemption or compassion for the vanquished.

Later in the post-war period, a larger degree of intervention in the narration would be proposed through techniques associated with the enunciative strategy, thereby reinforcing what has already been stated through a clearly self-

reflexive representation. Moreover, the inspiration identified above in the documentary and the newsreel is evident in a film like *Cerca de la ciudad* (Luis Lucia, 1952). The first intervention of the voiceover is already powerful: “Our first purpose: to make a documentary about Madrid.” Although the voice is maintained off camera, the presence in the frame of the film crew reaffirms the ironic, parodic and self-conscious nature of filmic discourse. A number of cinematic clichés of the period are lampooned here: the imitation of the voices of the NO-DO newsreels, the composition of Dutch-angle shots to catch the attention of international film competitions, the attention given to the working classes and working-class neighbourhoods with the intention of “reinventing neorealism”, making a film with bulls so that it seems more Spanish, and the fashion of making films about priests. Finally, it is the last of these options that is chosen. The purpose of making a documentary about Madrid is also maintained, although it is to be a Madrid very different from the one that appeared in the NO-DO newsreels. The camera followed the priest through the centre of the capital on his journey to a neighbourhood on the city’s outskirts, to that space of the story situated “*cerca de la ciudad*” (“near the city”), as if a neorealist approach to the social context of this specific space were indeed being attempted, although obviously all the narrative material is organised according to the codes of priest films. The credits mark this boundary between the initial intention to make a documentary of the style of the urban symphonies and a fictitious construction that begins after entering the suburban belt, where widespread social decay, exemplified in juvenile delinquency or parental absence (due to imprisonment) in the harsh post-war reality can only be resolved by the welfare work initiated by the priest. This boundary also marks the abandonment of the voiceover. The character of the priest is established here as an actant-subject who crosses this border, going

from one filmic model (documentary and urban symphony) to the other (priest fiction). Crossing to this other side of the border ultimately entails the abandonment of the strict focalisation explicitly signalled by the voiceover in following what the characters are doing and is accompanied by the reverse shot that shows us the supposed film crew, to give way to a greater liberation of the gaze through an omniscient enunciation.

In *Nadie lo sabrá* (Ramón Torrado, 1953), there is an analogous break with classical transparency which, without upsetting the natural flow of the story, occurs through the eloquent presence of the enunciative strategy. The film, which is also constructed on the humour and parody provided by the voiceover, begins with recurring wide shots of Madrid, with an aerial angle that allows the camera to bring this omniscient, demiurgical narrator down from on high into the bustle of the capital to seek out the protagonist in the working-class neighbourhoods. And the voice will seek him out by calling to other characters who, by looking to one side of the camera to reply, evading the lens, incorporate this invisible narrator into the story. The narrator here is thus differentiated from the one who speaks to the character played by José Luis López Vázquez in *Se vende un tranvía* (Luis G. Berlanga, 1959), who looks directly at the camera and thus establishes a very different relationship as it employs self-referentiality, thereby developing a story that is conscious of its status as such. In Torrado's film, the narrator's intervention in the development of the plot will be so significant that this voice will even incite the character to commit the theft that will change the course of his life. Ordinary people, working-class neighbourhoods, the daily struggle to get ahead: all of these are social issues

present in another title, *El malvado Carabel* (Fernando Fernán-Gómez, 1956), with which it bears some striking resemblances in the recounting of the protagonist's fate. Also here, the voiceover that introduces and frames the narrative appears to establish an ironic distance from what is, in short, the consideration of theft and fraud as legitimate ways of combating the oppression of everyday life in a mean-spirited and unsupportive society.

The greater degree of intervention in the story occurs in other uses of the

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voiceover, different in each case but sharing the same quality of exposing the enunciative apparatus. This voice which, as I have suggested above, explained, persuaded or exhorted in war films, is maintained in numerous important fiction films of the post-war period, acting on realities that speak to us of impoverishment, of fraud or of speculation. Only a few years before the release of the films discussed above, in *El destino se disculpa* (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1944), the voiceover was fully inserted into the diegetical space, albeit on a different dimension from that of the story itself, taking the form of an old man who is no less than the embodiment of Fate, who, as a kind of inserted *scriptwriter*, guides the lives of the other characters and even allows them to decide freely at a particular moment, as noted by Castro de Paz and Paz Otero, who argue that in this way "Fate symbolically cuts the ties that guide the movements of his fable's protagonist. [...]" (2011: 109).

On the other hand, the narrator in *La ironía del dinero* (Edgar Neville, 1957) is no longer just a voice, but also an actant-subject who, as in *El destino se disculpa*, conducts the flow of communication directly from the place of enunciation to the place of reception, as eloquently expressed through his addressing the spectator to introduce each episode of the film. The irony, already hinted at in the title, is that this figure will add to his role of narrator that of a character when he appears as the victim in the last of the stories.

As a final example of what I have intended here as a significant sample of titles from Spanish post-war cinema underpinned by the presence of a voiceover, I cannot help but conclude with *Bienvenido Mr. Marshall* (Luis García Berlanga, 1953), which, first of all, once again confirms the functional value of the voiceover for the depiction of a

fable or moral tale, again portraying the hopes and illusions of humble people trying to get ahead in the harsh reality of this period of Spanish history. Here, as has been extensively analysed, the voiceover does not merely introduce the story at the beginning, but will also have the ability to manipulate what is shown at whim, for example through freezing the image, or to enter into the dreams of the story's characters and give the spectator access to them.

The significant use of voiceover in Spanish post-war films clearly demonstrates that fiction picked out from newsreels and documentaries an expressive resource which, while in itself alluding in a certain sense to the traumatic experience of the war, at the same time represented a bold new formula for relating to the universe of the story and to the spectator to whom that story was being told. ■

Notes

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