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Visualizing Valencia in Film: Memory, Fantasy and Migration of Images

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In his short essay 'Extraterritorial', George Steiner questions the Romantic notion that identifies language with the Volkgeist, or inner history, of a nation and goes on to argue that for the writer, the most preeminent attribute is that of living 'in the language' (1976: 4). Indeed, rather than belonging to a community or social group, it is this *living in the language* that characterizes the act of writing. Steiner turns his attention to the particular case of writers who, at a given moment, adopted a language other than their native tongue. He defines this peculiar case of creativity as the result of 'extraterritoriality,' which necessarily depends on the *distance*, the estrangement, the feeling of alienation from the space, the territory, where the writer used to live. This alienation from one's intimate home makes it possible to look at oneself from a different perspective. Thus, the essential features of the individual, the transmission of intimate experiences, the construction of memory, are seen from the outside, from the other language, according to which the speaker is, in essence, another. However, in addition to the symbolic dimension of literary language, the imaginary forms another layer of experience, memory and identity. In this sense, we would argue that whereas writers use language to key into the symbolic; painters, sculptors and even filmmakers use iconography to key into the imaginary.

Whereas the imaginary level is an individually construed experience, it is also a crystallization of a vision of the world shared by a social group. In other words, the creation of imagined communities depends not only on the way they are conformed linguistically, but also on how they are configured through images. As Peter Burke (2005: 239) notes from the perspective of cultural history, images express the condensation of a worldview—the anxieties and the signs through which a social group finds an identification as such. And like any historical process, the crystallization is not immutable, it

transmutes over the course of time, echoing changes in society, customs and mentalities. The iconic references through which a community finds an identity are in continual transformation, in the same sense that language is also in permanent transformation. When the creation of cultural iconography is seen from a distance, from the 'extraterritoriality', its crystallization into a reference shared by a community can be more clearly comprehended.

I am interested in looking at three examples of the visual construction of Valencia that relates this idea of distance and extraterritoriality. The three films I will talk about today are imaginary constructions 'from the outside', that is, there existed a spatial or temporal distance from Valencia, while they mobilize emotions and fantasies that we can relate to personal and social uses of a displaced memory.

My first example looks at a sublimated reconstruction of Valencia in a classical Hollywood film. Very briefly, between 1900 and 1925, Valencia had a certain repercussion in the United States primarily for three reasons: firstly, the huge success of Joaquin Sorolla's exhibitions in New York (1909) and at the Art Institute of Chicago (1911). Secondly, although it might sound anecdotal, because of a musical hit from those years: the pasodoble by José Padilla *Valencia*, which had become an instant success in 1925 (from the 'zarzuela' *La bien amada*, 1924) in Paris (and certainly made his composer a millionaire.) The song was adopted by Mistinguett, the famous Moulin Rouge star, then translated into several languages, and ultimately made its way into American homes as a popular musical score for piano. There were even two theaters (one in Baltimore and one in New York) named 'Valencia' after the song. 1922 was the year when the young singer from Valencia, Conchita Piquer, successfully debuted in New York.

And thirdly, of course, by the arrival of Vicente Blasco Ibañez to Hollywood in 1919 and the huge accomplishment achieved by the adaptation of his novels in the Mecca of cinema.

Of Blasco Ibañez's films in Hollywood, the one that stands out as a recreation of the specific topics of Valencia is the version of *Entre naranjos* directed by Monta Bell and Mauritz Stiller in 1926 under the title *The Torrent*. In fact Blasco was so popular in the

United States at the time the film was released that the title originally included his last name: 'Ibanez' The Torrent' in posters and advertising. The film was the first vehicle for Greta Garbo, newly arrived from Sweden with Mauritz Stiller, and launched her as an international star. Blasco's novel was originally published in 1900. The narrative was set in Alzira during the historical period known in Spain as the Restoration (from the late 1870s to the early 1920s). The story focuses on Rafael Brull, the village *cacique's* ('political boss') son, destined for a brilliant political career in Madrid that is threatened by the arrival in Alzira of La Bruna, a mundane and melancholic opera singer. The novel combines features of melodrama or sentimental feuilleton with a critical description of the society and politics of the times. By the way, as far as I know, *Entre naranjos* was the first novel of Peninsular literature to use the term 'cinematographic' in the description of landscape (in this case, a line of orange trees), and also describing how the main character feels overwhelmed by memories and emotions.

In any case, Blasco Ibáñez's novel responds to his program as a socially committed writer. His description of the structures of local corruption and despotism, based on the ignorance of the farmers, defines the thesis of the novel. To mete out his social message in appropriate doses, and to appeal to the emotions of his readers, Blasco develops a romantic storyline that combines doomed passion with the standard subtle fin-de-siècle eroticism. Obviously, Hollywood was not very interested in the political side of the novel (Still 1).



Therefore, the film focuses on the melodrama connected to the romantic storyline (Still 2).



Its main goal was to create a vehicle to exploit the photogenic beauty of Greta Garbo. Consequently, the imaginary construction of Valencia corresponds to the demand for melodrama and romance. It recreates a world of fantasy that fits with the visual and iconic construction of the characters and the story. The first images of the film are quite eloquent in this regard. As we can see, to conveniently adorn the romantic story, the film's opening scene presents a 'fantastic' Valencia (Stills 3 and 4).





It shows an alpine landscape that corresponds vaguely to the romantic visions of Spain, popularized through engravings and illustrations during the nineteenth century: the dramatic depth of the landscape, winding roads that dissolve in the slopes of high mountains, white houses with balconies, a dreamy atmosphere... all these conventions connect Valencia with exotic images that bring to mind a vague place somewhere near La Mancha, Asturias or Despeñaperros. The second image brings us a bucolic, Arcadian scene of a peasant with his family by a lake in a dramatic frame, echoing the picturesque effect that Mauritz Stiller mastered brilliantly in his Swedish films of the early twenties, many of them dramas set in a rural environment.

The distance and fantasy were intended, in this case, to remove the original description of the Mediterranean landscapes of Blasco's novel. Instead, they create an imagery that, from the early twenties to *Gone with the Wind*, Hollywood related to romance. We might call this type of imagery 'the vulgar sublime.' It was originated when, as art historian Hugh Honour (1981: 115) points out, romantic landscape conventions met massive means of reproduction, which made it possible to print them on porcelain china, posters or other inexpensive materials destined to decorate the homes of the urban masses. The other term that has been occasionally employed in this context, which also has a long tradition in aesthetic theory, is 'kitsch.' The configuration of kitsch is the main push behind these images of Valencia presented by the film. And this fantasy is definitively effective in creating the appropriate atmosphere for the story, regardless its verisimilitude.

A second example I would like to discuss also concerns a film adaptation of a novel by Blasco Ibáñez, in this case *La Barraca*, directed by Roberto Gavaldón in Mexico in 1945. The film is interesting for many reasons, but the one I want to stress is that it was made by Spanish exiles, notably from Valencia, living in Mexico after the Civil War. One of the places these exiles gathered was the Regional House of Valencia in Mexico (they published the magazines *Senyera*, and *Mediterrani*, the first issue was published in 1944). Again, the distance produces a process of reconstruction through personal memory. And again the images have a picturesque consistency not all that different from the ‘vulgar sublime.’ This case clearly brings to mind the Valencia imagined by the Renaixença poets, writers and musicians like Teodoro Llorente, Maestro José Serrano and celebrations like the Regional Fair of 1909. The references were well known: the Arcadian fertility of the orchards, the fragrance of the orange blossoms, the brilliant light of the Mediterranean, the joie de vivre of its people and the beauty of its women. As we can see, this stream of images associated with the ‘Levante feliz’ is present not only in the discourse of the conservative regionalist, but also in the heart of the mainly progressive Republican exile. Several of them founded the Casa Regional Valenciana (Valencian House) in Mexico City and in 1944 began publishing the magazines *Senyera* and *Mediterrani*, often reproducing articles that reminisced about the old country. Here is one such excerpt (Caudet, 1995:72):

Today –more than ever- we feel so close to our country, I know that we all feel sad for being so far away. Remembering those days, the air shattered by the sound of firecrackers and the mascletà blowing up. This same air thick for the steam of bunyols being deep-fried in amber oil! It is so painful not being able to breathe it again! We have to find the strength from this pain to conquer again what we have lost. (Francesc Alcalá Llorente, ‘Pensant i somniant’, *Mediterrani*, 2)

Along with commonplaces of the Renaixença and the *völkisch* imagination, the fragment contains an essential aspect linked to the experience of exile: the pain of alienation is experienced as a loss. But out of that pain comes renewed strength to regain what has been lost, a

sense of hope that has to do with the return home. We will come back to that point a bit later, but first let's think a little more about the iconographic issues, the re-imagining of the Valencia orchards in the Mexican tropical latitudes.

La Barraca is the story of a small town in the huerta. In the village there is a piece of land with a cursed barraca that has not been occupied since his former tenant killed the moneylender who had brought about his demise. After years of being abandoned, the house is inhabited by a family of strangers. This arouses the hatred of the rest of the people of the village, who show contempt and animosity toward their new neighbors. The feeling of hatred will be imposed not only by the superstition attached to the house, but also because the latent violence that symbolizes the abandoned cabin produces fear in the landowners, so they don't raise the tenants' taxes. The villagers feel that if they accept the newcomers, the landowners will see it as a sign of weakness. For this reason, the new family has to be expelled. The novel culminates with the inevitable murder in self-defense of one of the villagers by the stranger. Afterwards, someone sets fire to the cursed barraca, nearly killing the entire family. In the end, they have to leave the place for good, as poor as they were when they arrived.

The staging is particularly stringent in the reconstruction of the landscape and the lifestyle of la huerta (Still 5).



In the imagery of the film we find the picturesque style, very close to the ‘vulgar sublime’ we mentioned earlier. Its bucolic atmosphere contrasts, of course, with the brutality of human and social relations that arise therein. But I think there is also something deeper that emerges from this representation of the huerta. Something that goes beyond the decorative kitsch we saw in *The Torrent*. These images contain a different feeling, nostalgia, related to the experience of their exile. It recreates the memory of Valencia for people that cannot return to their land. Some of these scenes correspond to situations described in the novel, such as the trial at the Tribunal de las Aguas (The water tribunal) (Still 6).



The reconstruction of the procedure, the clothing, the pose of the judges (Still 7) and, in part, the architecture of the Apostles Gate of the Cathedral of Valencia, leads to the identification of highly cherished and distant places.



Nostalgia is also brought out in a scene that does not correspond to the text of Blasco Ibáñez, but condenses a culminating dramatic point of the film and creates a moving scene of Valencian music and dancing.

This film, like the novel by Blasco, does have a political agenda as well. Indeed, the nostalgic feeling does not stop at the mere enjoyment of memory. There is also a sense of commitment and responsibility with the reality of exile. While the iconography of the film recreates the lost land, the imaginary return to this space does not manifest itself as, to put it in Freudian terms, paralyzing melancholy. Rather, it is related to the idea of mourning, in this case mourning the lost land (and the lost war), and the consequence is learning to live with the lost object. Through this elaboration of image(s)-fetish the loss can be processed and overcome and thus makes it possible to plan new projects for the future. Maybe that's why the film's final claim is more ambiguous than the novel by Blasco. Defeated by their neighbors' hatred, the family is exiled from the land that had been their home. They have lost everything. But their departure seems to herald a new beginning. The musical emphasis of the closure and especially the figure of the young boyfriend of the daughter who joins the family as they leave, gives a more optimistic slant to the completely negative and hopeless ending of the novel.

In support of this view of exile as reflected in the film we might cite a certain legend related to its production, although I have not found any solid evidence confirming it. According to Román Gubern (1976: 15) and other historians, copies of the film were made with the soundtrack in the Valencian language. Apparently, at that time in 1945, the people involved in the production thought that the end of the Franco Regime was close, since the allied armies had just defeated the other fascist Regimes in Europe and Asia. A possible return home was foreshadowed. The Spanish exiles in Mexico were hoping that the democratic western powers would reinstate a democratic government in Spain. Consequently, it would be possible to release the film in Valencia in the vernacular language. However, this idea does not seem very plausible, and there is no evidence to support it.

I will finish with a third example. As I said before, the icons through which a social group recognizes itself as such are

transformed, changed over the course of time. The images of the Valencian *Renaixença* tradition –Valencia oranges, la huerta, Mediterranean light, flowers, paella, and the Micalet tower, were popular during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. They survive to this day in specific cultural events such as the Fallas. But the icons have moved on, as the social groups have changed and adapted to new situations. For example, up until about twenty years ago, the few tourists who visited Valencia would find these traditional images on postcards. Nowadays, postcards show the massive futuristic buildings by Santiago Calatrava and other architects of modernity. Luis García Berlanga reflects on this process of displacement in his remarkable *Paris Timbaktu*, (1999) his last long feature film.

In a way, Berlanga is ‘the’ official filmmaker from Valencia. He has made several films in which Valencian customs are satirized in a fictional yet quintessential Valencian town, Calabuch, that consolidates some of the traditional iconography. However, the iconography is so exaggerated that it borders on the grotesque. Curiously, while exploiting his Valencian ancestry when asked about it, Berlanga has lived almost his entire life in Madrid, and he has always contemplated Valencia from a distance. It is precisely this distance that allows him to find a point of view from which to satyrize the Valencian *volkisch* culture, fusing its carnality with the Baroque.

París Timbuctú tells the story of an aged plastic surgeon called Michel des Assantes (Michel Piccoli) trying desperately to find an escape from his pointless life in Paris. The brief prologue to the film gives way to the credits that are superimposed over a map. Here we see the journey the character makes from Paris to Valencia. After the credits, he has become almost a beggar, and wakes up after spending the night on a bench. The foreground reveals where he is: the City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia. A hostess appears and takes him for a different person, a participant at a conference on the surplus of food in the world which is being held at the complex designed by Santiago Calatrava.

It seems significant that the only image that shows the city of Valencia in the film follows this bizarre space that represents the pinnacle of modernity, a futuristic dream, an overwhelming project of science-fiction. I find it particularly accurate to describe this kind of

place with an expression used by the French anthropologist Marc Auge (1992): a *non-place*. More than being a space to hold some social function, be it recreational, cultural or symbolic, it is imposed as a route, a place of transition or passing through. Non-places are, for instance, shopping malls or airports, spaces conceived as containers where people keep moving towards someplace else. Thus, is the perfect kind of place to express the void faced by the main character In Berlanga's film. The new place shows an iconographic transformation related to the visual signs that identify Valencia for the future. Nevertheless, placing the mascletà (firecrackers) within this non-place reveals a sense of continuity between traditional Valencia and the dreamy fantasies for the future (Still 8).



And this continuity will be reflected as the narrative unfolds. After this scene, Michel will continue his journey to Calabuch, where he will finally find the firecrackers, the giant paella, a parade of Moors and Christians (Still 9), carnival and excess.



Thus, the arrival to Calabuch represents a fall in the traditional signs of Valencian culture: a carnal reality that is at the same time chaotic, instinctive and grotesque. However, this place called Calabuch is only a fantasy that cannot erase the discomfoting effect carried on by the previous void. The old man cannot get any comfort from that return to the passions and the body.

At the end of the film, Berlanga expresses his angst by the use of another image with an allegorical intention. We see one of the most famous old icons of Spain: the giant advertising bull that was used along Spanish motorways, mounted by a sexy, gypsy figure in a typical 'Carmen' outfit. We had seen the same sign before, early in the film (Still 10).



But all these icons, assembled together in a pastiche of references and meanings, make no sense any more in the real world. They are old icons, they look shabby, the bull's horn is torn, the whole construction looks abandoned and it is covered with graffiti. The Valencian flag is ripped and lies at the bull's legs (Still 11).



A sentence at the bottom is as eloquent as it is simple: 'I am scared. L.' (Luis García Berlanga). The transformation of signs means displacement for those who cannot adapt to the new context. For Berlanga they are not effective any more. And to replace them, we have an uncomfortable void like the Ciutat de les Ciències pointing to the future, a future where the inevitable outcome of the feeling of 'extraterritoriality' is muteness.

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