

From amnesia to fable: historical memory, pulp fiction and political consensus

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Popular culture and the film industry have changed our perception of the past. But perhaps more relevant is the way they show history to be an area of conflict where meaning is continually negotiated. Among the fictional narratives that deal with the Spanish Civil War, non-realist novels, films, comics and videogames comprise a special category. While some of these aim to recover the memory of the victims of fascist repression, others ignore or conceal the ideological implications of historical fact. The latter may be achieved through the conversion of history into a universal myth or human drama. In this article, I will examine Albert Sánchez-Piñol's science-fiction story "El bosc" (2001) and its film adaptation by Óscar Aibar (2012), Sebastià Alzamora's noir gothic novel *Crim de sang* (2012), and Rafael Jiménez and José A. Sollero's superhero comic *1936: la Batalla de Madrid* (2014). These narratives implicitly transform the Civil War into a legendary origin for the new democratic nation, a fratricidal struggle that resulted in a productive period of peace and that is apparently disconnected from the present. In this respect, they conform to the principles of post-Francoist Spanish democracy's culture of consensus, which regards ideology-laden discussion of the past as a threat to national cohesion.

Keywords: Spanish Civil War; historical memory; culture of consensus; pulp fiction; myth

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
(T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton")

The Spanish Civil War, the entertainment industry and the rewriting of history

Literature and cinema are cultural arenas where debates on the Spanish Civil War and Francoism have been vigorous and abundant, especially since the mid-1990s.¹ The interest in locating and exhuming Republican victims of the war and of the repression of the defeated during the dictatorship's early years led to the creation in 2000 of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (ARMH), which is organized in different regional branches throughout Spain. The same interest favored a parallel process of recovering the stories of Republican victims in what López (27) calls "discourses of memory": exhibitions, television programs, films, news features, novels, historical studies, memoirs, conferences and tribute concerts. These heterogeneous collective memories contest hegemonic, uniform accounts of history. They also show culture to be a space of symbolic negotiation. This intense activity reached its peak in 2007, when the Law of Historical Memory was passed by progressive president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. Taken as a whole, these interventions can be understood as an attempt to reclaim knowledge of the past after a period of trauma and consequent amnesia, enforced by the fascist government and subsequently perpetuated by the failure to address the past during the transition to democracy, compounded by the *desencanto* that the transition provoked in anti-Francoist sectors that had hoped for genuine political change.

In this delicate and contentious process of renegotiating the meaning of the past, some popular cultural works have been attacked because of the impact of their lack of historical accuracy on collective memory; the argument is that the culture industry's commercial interests tend to

trivialize, regulate and neutralize the meaning of the past.² Helena López further argues that memory discourses produced by the culture industry run the risk of becoming rhetorical, spectacular and nostalgic. She suggests that the emphasis on victims, on whichever side, produces a “sentimentalización transhistórica del sufrimiento” that does not address the question of responsibility for their plight (López 378). Related to historical revisionism – based in turn on moral relativism – this dramatization of collective suffering, by ignoring the victims’ political alignment and the causes of the war, leads to the conclusion that both winners and losers made democratic culture possible by producing a generalized desire to avoid such suffering in the future. The revision of history, particularly evident under conservative president José María Aznar from 1996 to 2004, sparked many reactions from scholars and creative writers and filmmakers, as shown by the considerable amount of novels and movies on the topic of historical memory published in that period. In this process, collective memory and historical consciousness have increasingly become shaped by media images. This raises crucial questions about the legitimacy of the culture industry as a mediator in the construction of public perceptions of history (Raer Mieses 1999: 114).

As regards cinema in particular, José Colmeiro has noted the conventional style of many movies that simply use a realist mode to tell an unproblematic story. On the other hand, certain wistful and glamorous costume dramas depict the past as a far-off age, detached from current social and political matters. The Oscar-winning film *Belle Époque* (Fernando Trueba, 1993) or the popular soap opera *Amar en tiempos revueltos* (TVE, 2005-2012) serve as good examples of this political neutralization: “these sanitized representations of the past dangerously follow the officially sanctioned discourse of reconciliation without apologies or reparations, and the erasure of potentially destabilizing counter-discourses” (Colmeiro 29). Nonetheless, not all scholars consider that the visible depoliticization of films, novels or memoirs, in which historical memory is replaced by nostalgia, completely erases their affective or ideological potential. This divergence of critical views is illustrated in studies of gothic films on the Spanish Civil War: Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* (2001), Guillermo del Toro’s *El espinazo del diablo* (2001) and *El laberinto del fauno* (2006), as well as Juan A. Bayona’s *El orfanato* (2007).

Following Jacques Derrida’s concept of *hauntology*, these studies have explored the presence of ghosts in such films and novels as a persistent return of the repressed past, silenced in standard historical accounts of both the Franco and post-Franco period (Labanyi, Acevedo-Muñoz, Lázaro-Reboll, Rábade, Gómez-Castellano). There are two distinct approaches to hauntology in these academic discussions: while most critics contend that such fictional narratives have a kind of cathartic function – helping the victims of fascist repression to find release from trauma – Antonio Lázaro-Reboll (47) argues that they serve the opposite function of promoting reconciliation, compromise, and national consensus. In Lázaro-Reboll’s view, these works do not promote justice but on the contrary amnesia, thereby contributing to the so-called “pacto del olvido” agreed by the main leaders of the transition to democracy. Lázaro-Reboll’s understanding of haunting is consistent with Luisa E. Delgado’s assumptions about the Spanish “democratic culture of consensus”. Drawing upon the theoretical writings of Jacques Rancière and Roberto Esposito, Delgado (40) observes that Spain’s recent history has been dominated by political clichés about “cohesion”, “normality” and “stability”. As an ideological fantasy arising in the transition period, the “culture of consensus” has been assumed by the main political parties. It dismisses diversity as a threat to national unity, as well as conceiving of cultural creation as the production of convergence, preserving the status quo rather than triggering debate. For the culture of consensus, then, conflict means divisiveness; accordingly the war and postwar era have to be represented as a dramatic moment bereft of any impact on the present.

Lázaro-Reboll also suggests that the depoliticization of historical memory in horror films on the Spanish Civil War and postwar is reinforced by the “transnational reach” of much popular culture, as in the Spanish-Mexican coproductions *The Devil’s Backbone* and *Pan’s Labyrinth*: “Although both films are rooted in local history, their respective plot, story and characterization contribute to a transnational comprehension of the historical background for audiences, and lend themselves to allegorical textual interpretations” (Lázaro-Reboll 259). Such transnational films provide familiar narrative structures for worldwide audiences (strike dramas or populist westerns, for example), as well as universal themes, archetypes and imagery. The resulting allegory can be interpreted both locally and globally. Lázaro-Reboll’s views are echoed in Joaquim Espinós’s study of Catalan novels on the Spanish Civil War written in the last twenty years. Espinós distinguishes three literary models: first, traditional narratives conceived as a personal document or testimony which often depict how the defeated lost their illusions; second, stories in which a presentday narrator recalls an episode from the past, creating a dual temporality that places memory at the center of current ideological debate; third, imaginative novels – in the genres of science fiction, gothic and thriller genres – which are particularly obvious products of the memory industry since creativity prevails over ideology, turning these texts into escapist literature.

The risk of depoliticizing the past as a result of the “culture of consensus” and the conversion of local history into a transnational story is evident. However, popular culture cannot be straightforwardly equated with manipulation and debasement. I agree with Stuart Hall that the recipients of popular narratives should not be regarded as simply a community of “cultural dopes” who consume their messages passively. Tensions with dominant culture are fundamental to the definition of popular culture, producing a coexistence of antagonistic and unstable meanings in all cultural forms (Hall 449). Gonzalo Abril also undermines the Manichean distinction between domination and resistance, high and popular culture: “Ni toda aceptación de lo hegemónico es sumisión, ni todo rechazo es resistencia. Hay más lógicas que la de la dominación, y además esas lógicas se entremezclan” (150). Thus culture is never a space of definitive agreement; on the contrary, it is characterized by heterogeneity, conflict and fragmentation. Abril (189-190) advocates a reticulated rather than hierarchical model of culture. Today, the traditional distinctions between popular, mass and high culture are no longer relevant since they are grounded solely in class difference, ignoring other factors such as gender, ethnicity, generation, religion, sexuality, or rural versus urban environment. These differences cannot be described in terms of a hierarchical model; they correspond rather to the model of a network of intersecting relationships.

The critical bibliography on how cinema and particularly popular culture can be a space for control or resistance as regards historical memory has focused particularly on the films of Guillermo del Toro and José A. Bayona. I would like to broaden the discussion by examining how Delgado’s concept of “culture of consensus”, Lázaro-Reboll’s thesis of “the transnational reach”, and other popular narrative strategies function in three very different works: Sebastià Alzamora’s novel *Crim de sang* (*Blood Crime*, 2012); Albert Sánchez-Piñol’s short story “El bosc” (“The Wood”, 2001) which was brought to the screen by Óscar Aibar in 2012 with some interesting changes; and lastly, Rafael Jiménez and José Antonio Sollero’s innovative comic *1936: la Batalla de Madrid* (2014). First, I will analyze these cultural productions as examples of what science fiction scholars call alternative history, considering the ideological implications of the genre. Second, I will analyze how the authors rewrite the war as a moral tale about human nature and the never-ending fight between good and evil – one of the most basic popular fiction storylines. Third, I will argue that the exclusion of ideology is connected to the postmodern collapse of metanarratives. In the final section, I will explore how these works implicitly create a mythical

origin for the post-Francoist nation by eliminating, ridiculing or ignoring ideology in their retelling of the past.

Crim de sang is a Catalan noir gothic novel that illustrates the context of anticlerical violence in the first months of the Spanish Civil War, when anarchist gunmen killed members of the Catholic religious, as well as burning churches and looting monasteries and convents in Barcelona.³ It is partially narrated by a vampire, who tells how he has slain a priest and a child in Barcelona, a case that police detective Muñoz has to investigate together with Doctor Pellicer and Judge Carbonissa. At the same time, a community of Capuchin nuns are held hostage alongside the bishop of Barcelona, who is rumored to have been executed by anarchists. A third plot revolves around Hadaly, a cyborg horse made of human and animal waste, created by the judge.⁴ All the storylines converge in a western-style ending, when Brother Darder storms like a blood avenger into the convent courtyard mounted on Hadaly and kills the anarchist leaders while the squad of militiamen flee in terror. As in a typical whodunit, a final narrative twist reveals the identity of the vampire, who has adopted the guise of the bishop.

Albert Sánchez-Piñol's "El bosc" is included in his short-story collection entitled *Les edats d'or* (*Golden Ages*, 2001). Sánchez-Piñol also wrote the script of the 2012 movie version. His contribution to the literary and cinematic mix of history and the marvelous is an ironic science-fiction story: to escape from the anarchists' clutches, Pere, a smallholder and a conservative "by instinct", is impelled when the war breaks out to abandon his home in a remote rural area of Aragon. Leaving his wife in charge of the house and the land, he vanishes into a glimmering cloud that magically appears every six months in the middle of a circle of trees of the nearby pine forest. Although traditionally regarded as a curse, the strange light will become his salvation and refuge, a gateway to a peaceful world: "Més m'estimo lo dimoni que los rojos" (I prefer the devil to the reds), he exclaims. In that supernatural land, a family of fishlike aliens takes him in. He returns home periodically to visit his wife, until the war's end. Shortly after, "el senyor Granota" (Mr. Frog), Pere's alien friend, slips through the gateway from the other side to seek asylum because war has now broken out in his world.⁵

1936: la Batalla de Madrid creates another original symbiosis of history and fantasy. The first part of an ongoing saga based on battles of the Spanish Civil War, the comic recounts the attack on Madrid carried out by the rebel army in November 1936. The story starts with the German saturation bombing of the city, conceived as a rehearsal for World War II by Franco's Nazi allies. After that, it evokes the death of the legendary anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti, followed by a massive execution of fascist prisoners – a clear reference to the massacres of Nationalist prisoners that took place at Paracuellos. The government then quits the capital leaving General Miaja in charge, assisted by a brave soldier, Saeta, charged with the mission of protecting the city from fascist attack. Supernatural heroes lead both armies. The Nationalist battalion crosses the River Manzanares and reaches Madrid, where the troops wage a bloody battle. Unable to take the city, the fascists withdraw.⁶

Alternative histories of the war

Alzamora, Sánchez-Piñol and, to some extent, Jiménez and Sollero are not concerned with telling a plausible story. Their works are clear examples of alternative history, also called *alternate universe*, *allohistory* or *uchronia*, which "revolve around the basic premise that some event in the past did not occur as we know it did, and thus the present has changed" (Hellekson 248). As well as altering historical events to create a different version, alternative history fills the gaps in historical narration. The term also encompasses those "histories that approach their subject from a

nonstandard position”; for instance, that of a woman or a slave (Hellekson 249). The works I shall analyze can be seen as examples of the “genetic story”, a subgenre which speculates about the origin, cause and unfolding of an event.

Alternative history has a different meaning in each of the texts discussed here. In *Crim de sang*, Alzamora distorts the facts to exact poetic revenge on the terrible real-life slaughter of a religious community of Marists in Barcelona in 1936, by extension avenging all the innocent victims of the war; like “El bosc”, this novel is concerned with trauma. The vampire embodies the evil side of human nature, while the avenging cyborg horse Hadaly epitomizes the brave mechanical hero of the future who redeems men from their depravity. The author reinterprets history very freely; for example, Escorza, the real-life anarchist leader, was obviously not killed by a cyborg but went to exile in Chile, where he died peacefully some years after the Civil War. In his book review, Bernat Puigtobella remarks that “quedava per fer la versió Tarantino de la Guerra Civil, sense didactisme moral ni apriorismes ideològics” (the Tarantino version of the Civil War has still to be made, without moral preaching or pre-existing ideological assumptions), highlighting the connection to the American filmmaker’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) on the anti-Nazi resistance: a stark example of alternative history. The reviewer insists on the novel’s lack of any ideological agenda: “Alzamora tampoc es proposa de fer pedagogia ni apostolat de la memòria històrica” (Alzamora doesn’t purport to teach or advocate historical memory). The author himself substantiates this idea with the argument that “Javier Cercas dijo que la Guerra Civil es nuestro western, y estoy de acuerdo” (Foguet). However, the rewriting of history has implications for historical memory and for those who are concerned with its preservation. The author’s comments, far from showing a concern with historical memory, shut down debate on the past as a closed era, a settled issue with no links to Spain’s current political situation or to the living memory of victims and their families. This contention is close to conservative assumptions about the need to start from scratch, look ahead and leave the past behind to avoid stirring up old ghosts – that is, the need to avoid confrontation.

For its part, *1936: la Batalla de Madrid* fills a gap in history by proposing a hypothesis to explain the still disputed facts about the death of the anarchist leader Durruti, who in the comic is murdered by a supernatural hero and not by Nationalist gunfire as in the most widely accepted versions. Consequently, the story exonerates the Nationalists. The comic’s authors make a noticeable attempt to pre-empt awkward criticism for trivializing and misrepresenting history by turning the war into a battle of superheroes. In addition to denying that they are questioning historiographical or philosophical concerns, they demonstrate a commitment to factual accuracy by inserting (fake) front pages of Republican and Francoist newspapers at the beginning of each chapter, as well as an epilogue clarifying the changes they have introduced in their narration of the Battle of Madrid, in particular to the circumstances of Durruti’s death. This attention to history reveals their eagerness to keep fact and fiction apart, thereby preventing accusations of revisionism or partisanship in a story that is meant to be a fabulous epic remake. Notwithstanding their efforts, some contradictions can be noted. For instance, they depict the Republicans and the Nationalists as equally cruel warriors, but they ignore the responsibility of the insurgents, who attacked the democratic system and promoted civil war. In addition, they talk of the “resistencia numantina de Madrid”, ignoring the individual ideological motives of Madrid’s citizens, who are portrayed as an undistinguished mass under Nationalist attack. In conclusion, the comic deals with ideology in a contradictory fashion. Ideology does not matter: it is just the necessary ingredient needed to depict the confrontation between two enemy factions.

Finally, contrary to the usual fictional trend, in Sánchez-Piñol's short story monsters represent the good other side of humankind. The text is an allegory of the main consequences of human conflict and of the trauma caused by social disintegration – people being disappeared, family breakdown, and hatred between relatives, friends and neighbors. It does not in this instance provide an alternative retelling of history, but simply inserts fantasy to create a symbolic representation of how human foolishness can cause terrible pain. “El bosc” is not based on a specific historical episode; on the contrary, it focuses on everyday events in order to speculate about the lives of ordinary people in a remote region. Nevertheless, as we shall see, in both the story and the movie Sánchez-Piñol ironically sees the war as the result of stupid hostilities between neighbors, and not of ideology. Or to put it another way, ideology is sheer nonsense; in this regard, the author trivializes history. Both the text and its film adaptation portray Spaniards as a kind of wild tribe who are always fighting without any logical explanation. Indeed, the story evokes the commonplace idea of Spain as a backward country engaged in never-ending brutish quarrels and incapable of achieving the necessary cohesion to launch a national project that brings prosperity to its members. Pere, the main character, is described as a “conservador instintiu” (conservative by instinct), that is to say, his conservatism is not a consequence of reflection, family tradition, his personal reading, labor conditions or other influences, but a natural fact. The attribution of the cruelty of the war to irrationality can be observed in the comments of most of the characters in *Crim de sang* as well. Hence both authors suggest that enmity is the result of a mindless human nature, not the product of ideological struggle. Overall, however hard the authors try to obliterate ideology from their stories so as to provide a non-partisan – marvelous – account, in practice they do not fully succeed. Indeed neutrality is itself an ideological stance; it means that everybody was responsible for terrible crimes, that there were victims and murderers on every side; however this argument ignores who raised arms against the democratic government in 1936, undermining the foundations of civilized coexistence in Spain. The operation of eliminating ideology from fiction entails writing a moral tale about human nature and reducing ideological complexity to the classic universal theme of the fight between good and evil. This exclusion of ideology can be related to the postmodern collapse of metanarratives as well as to Barthes' concept of myth, as we shall show.

The fantastic war of pulp fiction

Influenced by the thriller and western genres, films about the Spanish Civil War have usually depicted the Republicans as victims and the Nationalists as perpetrators, that is, goodies and baddies. By using narrative clichés such as fratricidal confrontation or the eternal struggle between good and evil, the works explored here turn the war into a human drama, a collective mishap in which ideology comes over as an absurd, annoying issue (“El bosc”), a matter of dark passions or primitive instincts (*Crim de sang*), or just a rhetorical device (*1936: la Batalla de Madrid*). The dichotomy good/evil is an example of what Abril calls “symbolizing oppositions” (157), which nourish the popular cultural imaginary; other dualities would be noble/vulgar, modern/traditional, rural/urban or masculine/feminine. Umberto Eco (175) stresses the Manichean contrast in Ian Fleming's spy novels represented by the Cold War system of political blocs, though he explains that this should be understood as a rhetorical strategy rather than as firm conviction. In practice, the manipulation is sometimes so disproportionate that it simply becomes implausible. A skillful genre writer, Fleming's novels allow multiple readings because they satisfy both those readers who agree with the underlying ideological discourse and those who are able to observe the irony and ambiguity in the far-fetched explanation of events. Eco (176) argues that identical

oversimplified narrative patterns are found in folk tales and myths, which convey a basic knowledge of the world that is lacking in contradictions; in short, pulp fiction and popular culture are formulaic (Storey 9). In turn, Abril points out that popular culture or what he calls “massmediatización” (155) – which includes strategies such as dramatization, mythologization or heroification – is a reaction to fears and hopes that neither rationalism nor progress have been able to allay or satisfy, producing feelings of political powerlessness and social anonymity.⁷

If we accept these assumptions, attempts to understand the ideological pull of the works discussed in this essay become a complex task, because they require us to take into account divergent attitudes to historical memory on the part of authors and readers. In reality, *Crim de sang* and “El bosc” invert the typical plotline found in most novels and films: in the former, the anarchists murder the innocent friars; in the latter, the conservative smallholder is hounded by his leftwing neighbors. By contrast, the story told in *1936: la Batalla de Madrid* seems a more unbiased account of facts since it focuses primarily on warfare and both factions are similarly violent. If we agree, following Eco, that these texts manipulate history by narrating the war as a polarized fight between goodies and baddies, they could be labeled as revisionist.⁸ On the other hand, if we consider the fantastic approach to the conflict as too exaggerated and hence implausible, the authors run the risk of trivializing historical events. Finally, if we consider the psychological effects of popular culture, these works appear to aim to relieve everybody from collective trauma, regardless of their particular ideology. Wickedness defines both factions and, ultimately, everyone is depicted as a victim of irrationality. The conclusion drawn from such a hypothesis is that we must turn the page on the past and resolutely face the future of the new democratic nation – an approach entirely consistent with the “culture of consensus”.

In the specific case of *1936: la Batalla de Madrid*, the authors stress their impartiality by declaring that they did not want to “santificar” or “demonizar” any faction since there were villains as well as courageous soldiers on both sides who killed and were killed in equal proportion. Thus the comic depicts, on the one hand, the German air raids on Madrid as a blueprint for World War II; on the other, the execution of political prisoners by Republicans. What is more, the war seems to be a fight between evil foreigners (the Nazis who bombed Madrid), magical creatures (superheroes) or specific historical characters (generals Mola and Miaja, Durruti), whilst Spanish common people play a secondary role as casualties. So the war comes over a matter unconnected to civilians, who are the real victims of violence. To prove to what extent they are pledged to neutrality, in respect not only of the Republicans and Nationalists but also of other nationalities within Spain, the comic includes a Galician and a Catalan among the Republican soldiers. The authors place emphasis on heroic acts – fighting at the barricades – and the soldiers’ courage and feelings – happiness, fear, despair. In effect, the cartoon does not always allow readers to distinguish between common soldiers from one faction and the other; their confusing graphic representation – thanks to similar military uniforms – highlights the general refusal to take sides ideologically in order to avoid offending sensibilities. As Delgado points out, neutrality means the absence of politics, which in turn results in the death of democracy:

El énfasis en el consenso como único procedimiento válido en la democracia se rige, de hecho, por una lógica policial al interpretar el litigio siempre como problema que hay que eliminar, apelando al retorno deseado a una normalidad que implica, en efecto, la no existencia de la política (52).⁸

For its part, *Crim de sang* was quickly branded as revisionist because anarchists are depicted as cruel assassins while there is barely any reference to fascist violence. The author replied that he

was not interested in writing historical fiction that conforms to standard accounts, nor in supporting a specific ideology, preferring instead to talk about human dramas: violence, brutal murders, people who engage in shady business dealings at the expense of others' misfortunes, abandoned children, urban destruction, crises of religious faith and the loss of moral principles. In this regard, Alzamora's story can be linked to others such as Javier Cercas's highly acclaimed novel *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) which implies that Spain should overcome the Republican/Nationalist divide.⁹ Cercas published his novel in the context of the movement to recover historical memory, at a moment when certain revisionist writers were affirming the cultural legacy of Francoism; his novel can be seen as a way of promoting national cohesion and putting an end to Spain's struggle with its recent past. Delgado (126) regards this operation as an attempt to continue in the present the Francoist understanding of culture as a depoliticized field standing outside of historical and social reality. Notwithstanding Alzamora's aforementioned statements, in practice his novel contradicts his alleged impartiality by reminding readers of the atrocities committed against the religious community as a whole. The writer wants to provide an alternative account to the usual plot in most films and novels by depicting the victims of Republican violence: ordinary people and above all a group of friars. If any members of the religious are to be blamed, it is the upper echelons of the Church, complicit with Francoism and symptomatically epitomized by a depraved vampire bishop.

Finally, in his wry short story, Sánchez-Piñol proposes football as an emblem of democratic harmony, as seen in the episode when the grandchildren of the leftist alien Mr. Frog play peacefully with the grandchildren of the conservative Pere at his country home. Football symbolically resolves tensions, although conversely it can also stage them. It is a ritual that materializes, in addition to national myths, the *jouissance* that philosopher Slavoj Žižek regards as the factor that gives cohesion to the nation (Delgado 208). By strengthening collective affective bonds, football – and sports in general – patches up the fractures in national identity, reinforcing the unproblematicizing parameters of consensus democracy (Delgado 211). The de-ideologization of history is even more palpable in the film adaptation of “El bosc”. One review of the film stresses its impartiality in that it takes no sides – “no toma partido” – and “es una película sobre el amor y la supervivencia” (Bonet). By dwelling on the moral frame of wartime violence, both author and reviewer evade the political causes that gave rise to the conflict, the most important of which was the fascist coup d'état.

Postmodernism and the revision of history

The revision of history is not something generated merely by specific national circumstances, but it can also be linked to the postmodern refocusing of historicity. From a postmodern perspective, the past can be accessed only as a series of texts. Linda Hutcheon claims that the discursive condition of history has been highlighted by racial and gender approaches concerned to rescue the silenced marginal voices of the past. This means that history is not constituted by transparent, self-evident facts, but that, on the contrary, historiography tends toward myth and illusion-making (Hutcheon 16), as Barthes also insists. This is highly evident in the three works discussed here, which retell history in the form of a superhero comic adventure, science fiction, and a thriller or horror story. The blend of history and fiction marks the “paradoxical doubleness of both continuity and change, both authority and transgression” (Hutcheon 35). As discussed above, even though an author like Alzamora denies it and although Rafael Jiménez and José A. Sollero take special care not to hurt sensibilities, their works inescapably engage in the ideological debates about how the Spanish Civil War should be interpreted and how (or whether) it should affect the present. They do so by providing a different take on the usual accounts of the war and postwar found in many

films and novels, by depicting Republican reprisals. They additionally avoid or explicitly denigrate ideology, seen by them as one of those totalizing systematic discourses that Jean-François Lyotard calls master metanarratives.

Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism fits *Crim de sang* perfectly, with its emphasis on minor historical figures – a policeman, a boy, a friar, a novice, a doctor, a judge – and the need to call received versions of history into question. The adoption of a pulp fiction style strongly highlights the discursive or fictional nature of history, that is, the semiotic transmission of historical knowledge. The stereotyping typical of pulp fiction and popular culture in general exemplifies the constructed character of events. On the one hand, the novel introduces archetypal gothic and noir characters such as a rough detective, a naïve vulnerable maid haunted by a vampire, or a wicked villain who slays a whole community of monks; on the other, it is told as a gruesome thriller with a philosophical or rather moral undertone that culminates in a final *deus ex machina* when an all-powerful cyborg horse slaughters the evil-minded anarchists *en masse*. All in all, history is turned into a drama overloaded with symbolism (Alexander 90).

In the apocalyptic context of war depicted in Alzamora's *Crim de sang*, a new breed of cyborgs seems to redeem humankind from their depravity, whereas the vampire connotes religious corruption as a dark side of Christianity. Vampire and cyborg epitomize two distinct versions of "the dark other": whilst the former is bound to the past, the latter points to the future. The past, namely the Civil War and the postwar period, implying political human subjects, are vampire-like, abject and deranged. By contrast, the future is reserved for a new kind of powerful artificial intelligence that will finally bring about progress; in other words, an apolitical post-human subject. While Sánchez-Piñol's stance on the war and its causes turns out to be quite ironical in his short story "El bosc", the dense and grave moral dissertations of some characters in *Crim de sang* convey a more complex message. The novel effectively questions religion and anarchism as presumed liberationist ideologies – metanarratives – that promise prosperity and happiness to helpless, wretched people. The vampire's pessimism brings to the fore the horror of existence and the aberration that is humankind, blurring the line between human and monster.¹⁰ He claims a moral high ground and physical superiority over humankind, which he describes as "an ancient and extraordinarily populous line of murderers" (Alzamora 20). However, in practice he is totally driven by his sadistic urge to quench his thirst for blood. He is, quite remarkably, the bishop of Barcelona, a historical character who publicly disagreed with the Second Republic against which Franco rose up in arms in 1936.¹¹ In general, monstrosity characterizes the upper echelons of the Church and the anarchists, the fanaticism of both of which is seen as having sparked off the war.

Alzamora not only discredits religion and anarchism, but also science; however, being a standard trope of science fiction, Judge Carbonissa's post-humanist discourse is really quite stereotyped. He thinks nature is just a rough draft drawn up by God and humankind must improve it by raising a new race of cyborgs made of human and animal flesh. Even though it may seem a monstrosity, recycling useless corpses to breathe life into them is precisely what glorifies the project. Carbonissa believes in facts that are beyond rational understanding and accepts the existence of the soul. His heterodox thoughts, close to gnostic heresy, move away from Inspector Muñoz's deep incredulity and Doctor Pellicer's plain scientism. Like the vampire, who holds a jaundiced, pessimistic view of life, the judge considers that evil does not lie in the cyborg but in humans who slay each other. The creation of a cyborg hints at an alliance between technology and humankind, science and spirituality in order to establish a post-human – post-ideological – world. As previously noted, this is a rather trite argument that trivializes the complex historical causes of the war, thereby bringing *Crim de sang* close to commercial pulp fiction. Even the inspector, a

rational, skeptical character who distrusts fantasy, religion and ideology, epitomizes the archetypal incredulous, rough detective of noir. All these characters are efficient professionals struggling to eradicate depravity from the streets of Barcelona. Significantly they are agents of three social institutions: the police, the law and medicine; in other words, it is their responsibility to create order out of chaos. Interestingly, the novel makes no allusion to their political alignment: as public servants, they just fulfill their duties and adopt a professional and moral, rather than political, stance toward the war. There is no doubt that the novel privileges their ideological neutrality. Yet their behavior is characterized by moral ambiguity, because they are impelled to violence in one way or another. For instance, in the final scene, Inspector Muñoz turns his gun on the anarchist commander Fernández, but the Mother Superior of the convent deters him from firing. Moreover, the young Marist Brother Darder is haunted not only by anarchists but also by his own hesitations, feeling that he has become a criminal after killing his prison guard. He has been suffering a crisis of faith and doubts the existence of “that stupid, mean God” who tolerates so much brutality.

By contrast, as suggested above, the metanarrative of war is called into question by irony in the comic and particularly in “El bosc” – less so in its film adaptation. The continual scathing remarks on ideology and the war provide a metafictional dimension to the text, repeating the clichés found in so much contemporary literature and cinema on the Spanish Civil War and postwar dictatorship, as when Sánchez-Piñol writes: “El dia següent els homes van marxar, a continuar perdent guerres romàntiques o a continuar fent romàntiques les guerres perdudes, com es prefereixi” (The following day the men departed, continuing to lose romantic wars or to make lost wars romantic, depending how you look at it) (77). To begin with, the conflict is depicted as extremely polarized, since all the villagers are Republicans, except for the priest, the police, and the protagonist; but most importantly, the narrator continually comments on the stupid behavior of human beings, who persist in murdering and blaming each other for the murders; wars are presented as absurd conflicts that unexpectedly come to an end and were originated for unknown reasons. Civil wars have thus become a sort of tradition and every generation has its own. Additionally, ideology is undermined through wry character depiction: Pere holds that “El mal provenia dels ismes” (evil is due to – isms) (Sánchez-Piñol 67), meaning socialism, communism, syndicalism, and avant-gardism, while his elder brother became a socialist or national-socialist since that was a “tendència procliu entre els pintors fracassats” (a broad tendency among unsuccessful artists) (Sánchez-Piñol 66). Finally, the alien homeland is an allegory of the human world, immersed in similar ideological battles and wars. In this respect, Sánchez-Piñol expresses some remarkable ideas. First, the inhabitants of the alien world are now old, time has passed and it is not worth arguing: “Envellir era una forma d’abdicar” (growing older is a way of giving up), Pere claims (Sánchez-Piñol 82). Second, no one can be blamed, let alone Mr. Frog, whose countrymen are not able to leave their differences behind, even though their war broke out fifty years ago (we assume the country is under the control of a dictator). Third, personal values are above political beliefs: Mr. Frog is a good, moderate, kind domino player. Even so, the reactionary smallholder Pere still has certain reservations: why did his beloved friend have to be a leftist minister? Irony apart, human silliness is not a sound explanation for the war and thirty-six years of dictatorial repression. “El bosc”, both short story and film, offers an interesting version of the conflict in portraying the political opponent (in this case, the left) as an alien, a prime example of “the other” in horror and science fiction. However, like *Crim de sang* or *1936: la Batalla de Madrid*, “El bosc” advocates a resolution of the conflict that regards politics and ideology as ridiculous, irritating matters that Spaniards should put behind them so as to promote harmonious coexistence.

The mythical origin of the nation

In *Crim de sang*, Alzamora elaborates a gruesome myth of great cruelty and extreme violence, depicting a totally degraded humanity – a myth that is apparently beyond ideology and historical accuracy. It is certainly a bleak portrayal of the human race, a moral tale of good and evil. To adapt Barthes's words, Alzamora transforms history into an essential type, that is to say, a myth. According to Barthes, the ideological function of myth is to naturalize that which is culture, that is, to make dominant cultural and historical values, beliefs and attitudes seem natural, normal, self-evident, timeless common sense:

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes 143).

Myth is a form of communication or speech charged with ideologically-loaded meaning. As distinct from denotation, it is a sort of second-degree signification constructed through cultural associations. Myths are always political thanks to the specific power structures operating in any given society. They dehistoricize and depoliticize meanings that are always historical and political: “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made” (Barthes 142). Myths do not conceal but misrepresent. By denying their historicity, myths impose a unique meaning on things so that they can be understood in just one sense. Foundational myths, a common language, and devastating events that have affected a community shape the identity of nations (Erikson 186). Patriotic rhetoric regards war as a foundational moment of the nation (Soltysik Monnet 8). In other words, the nation is given a mythical origin which is normally a tale of how peace is achieved after chaos: war often entails the rebirth of a revitalized nation. By retelling the seminal violence that gives birth to the nation as a magical tale, power struggles are masked and the national community is presented as a natural fact and not as an ideological construct.

Alzamora holds that the Spanish Civil War is distant enough from our time to be seen merely as a “viver de narracions, de fabulacions” (source of stories) (Bonada 68), and to become part of “la nostra mitologia” (our mythology), “amb un potencial literari immens” (with huge potential for literary production) (Nopca). As stated above, *Crim de sang* claims to be a tale about rage, callousness and death motivated by human perversity with no allusion to ideology – without which wars cannot be understood as, fundamentally, political violence. In the novel, Brother Darder, Doctor Pellicer, Judge Carbonissa and Inspector Muñoz embody the spirit of democratic consent. They act as heroes who save and avenge the innocent victims of wartime brutality – the male and female religious communities, together with anonymous casualties. Inspector Muñoz, as the archetype of the skeptical, rude detective of noir fiction, argues that common crime and warfare result similarly from abjection. When it veers towards pure sadism, violence debases revolutionary ideals. In *1936: la Batalla de Madrid*, the comic superheroes illustrate the spirit of consensus also as impartial soldiers who fight to restore peace, while politicians grab opportunities in the aftermath of the conflict.

Thanks to their tendency toward dramatization and mythologization, pulp fiction and popular culture – horror, science fiction, western, noir – can be used to foster a universal understanding of war beyond specific historical events, thus neutralizing the political subtext. Events are not linked

to a context of social relations and conflicts, but are personalized in individual stories that present characters as heroes, with their passions, successes and misfortunes (Abril 153). Referring to the film adaptation of “El bosc”, Daniel Jiménez states: “El fantástico es la excusa perfecta para tejer un discurso que habla sobre el sinsentido de una guerra fratricida, la necesidad de comprensión y la condena a la autodestrucción propia de nuestra sociedad, en la que quizás no son tantas las diferencias que nos separan los unos de los otros.” These magical stories are, in fact, far from impartial accounts; they overstress their naivety, making their ideological assumptions all the more apparent. Daniel Jiménez censures the usual simplistic cinematic account of good Republicans and bad Nationalists, turning ideological struggle into sentimental drama by arguing that the interest of the film version of “El bosc” rests upon the emotional, not political, tension between the characters. Here he is referring to the rivalry between the reactionary smallholder and the anarchist Coixo (Catalan for “lame”) who is in love with his wife. War is thus used to settle personal disputes, not to fight for or against democracy. The movie thereby manipulates not only history but also the original literary source from which this romantic plotline is absent, in order to show how absurdly and unfairly a war can destroy people’s lives irrespective of their political beliefs.¹³ Politics, once again, is the source of evil: it creates division, violence and death; in consequence, it has to be expelled from the consensual nation.

Conclusion: a post-ideological nation

My analysis can be situated within broader debates on the role of cultural artifacts in the construction of national identity. A key factor in identity formation, history is a complex and contested domain, with the Civil War and Franco dictatorship being the most contentious issues in Spain today. The works I have examined fit definitions of contemporary Spain’s culture of consensus by rewriting the Civil War as a moral tale about a bankrupt human race of assassins who endlessly kill each other over the centuries (*Crim de sang*), a stupid quarrel between neighbors or relatives (“El bosc”), or an epic battle (*1936: la Batalla de Madrid*). They transform the war into a myth that jettisons the frequent narrative of good Republicans and evil Nationalists. Monsters, aliens and superheroes offer moral parallels to humans (in their courage, wickedness or silliness), in the process universalizing the myth to fit a post-ideological context, thereby distorting and eliminating all historical, cultural or political references. Local history thus becomes a global fiction, as well as being rendered unproblematic, for the nation is no longer an ideological construct but an unquestionable natural fact. This depoliticization process is not new: as Vilarós suggests (76), it was spurred by capitalist take-off in the dictatorship’s last years. A controversial past is thought to be a hindrance for “la marca España” in the international market. Apparently, what is at stake is not so much national identity as economic competitiveness. All in all, as David Becerra argues, the Spanish Civil War has become a harmless literary fashion.

This evident trend in certain cultural products toward the de-ideologization of history stands in stark contrast to the opposite process evidenced in the efforts of the Catalan administration to re-ideologize the Spanish War of Succession of 1707- 1714. This war resulted in the loss of Catalonia’s laws and institutions, as well as the banning of the Catalan language in the public sphere. It has therefore been taken up by contemporary Catalan nationalism as a key symbolic marker of Spanish nationalism’s protracted repressive policies. Looking at the past is tolerable so long as it is not linked to political demands in the present. Spanish nationalism and certain popular culture narratives turn history into an innocent, glamorous or dramatic entertainment that does not impinge on the present, while Catalan nationalism re-ideologizes the past by stressing its connections with the present. This repoliticization of the Spanish War of Succession is not always

understood, even by historians, but is seen as a way of “reopening old wounds”, a cliché we often hear as an argument in favor of reconciliation – a fundamental term in the discourse of consensus.

We cannot overlook the psychological and social implications of such debates on our past. The stories I have explored adopt a postmodernist stance toward the past. The current loss of national, family, and individual identity, along with the absence of a sense of moral, rational responsibility, facilitates pessimistic accounts of history (Botting 292). The skepticism and loss of hope generated by the social and cultural context leads to a common perception that ideology, religion and science have failed to set the world to rights. The fear of staying trapped in the past is not unique to discussion of the Spanish Civil War; it illustrates the more general dilemma of whether we should forget or confront our past.

By presenting a cyborg as the neutral savior of humankind, *Crim de sang* suggests a post-human future. Indeed, science fiction “is the story of the end of ‘Man’ as the unique human(ist) subject” (Hollinger 270). Haraway’s well-known concept of the cyborg merges obsolete binaries such as natural/cultural, organic/theological, and authentic/artificial. As a synthesis of opposites, Hadaly the cyborg horse is a post-human creature, neither animal, human nor machine, with no marks of biology, gender, ethnicity, or ideology, which have been invoked to inflict so much pain on the world. In Alzamora’s novel the cyborg horse arguably embodies the new post-ideological Spanish subject.

Biographical note

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Notes

1. Historical memory – which is never harmonious despite its homogenizing efforts – had in fact been a site of active ideological struggle since the restoration of democracy.
2. For example, *Sombras de guerra* (2007) is a videogame based on the confrontation of Republicans and fascists in the Spanish Civil War. While it was censored by some newspapers such as *Le Figaro*, the president of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica saw no harm in its content and purpose, which are identical to those of videogames based on World War II, although he argues that it could have had a more educational function (Diez).
3. The novel is based on Miquel Mir’s *El preu de la traïció* (*The Price of Treason*, 2010), which investigates the execution of 172 Marist religious by anarchists in 1936. Mir explains how the friars were subjected to extortion by anarchists, and finally assassinated in breach of the agreement that they would be evacuated to France. The novel also draws on Mir’s subsequent investigation of the alleged disappearance and killing of the bishop of Barcelona, Manuel Irurita, well known for his anti-Republican views: *El misteri de l’assassinat del bisbe de Barcelona* (*The Mystery of the Murder of the Bishop of Barcelona*, 2012). The bishop’s murder remains unresolved.
4. Hadaly is the name of a gynoid built by Thomas Edison in August Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s novel *The Future Eve* (1886), regarded as a key novel of decadentism as well as of nineteenth-century science fiction.
5. The story is considered as the antecedent to Sánchez Piñol’s 2002 *La pell freda* (*Cold Skin*, 2002), a science fiction novel about a remote island populated by amphibians which the humans call “big frogs”.
6. The comic has changed the chronology of events: the Republican government left for Valencia in the evening of 6 November 1936, leaving Miaja in charge. The Paracuellos massacres took place from 7 November to 3 December. Durruti was killed on 20 November. These dates are taken from Paul Preston’s *The Spanish Holocaust*, but they can be found in many sources.
7. This is what Storey (9) calls the “benign version” of mass culture; that is, mass/popular culture conceived as a “public fantasy”, “a collective dream world” that “articulate[s], in a disguised form, collective (but repressed) wishes and desires”.

8. This polarization is less evident in literature. Delgado (169) notes that not all novels oversimplify blame and the moral obligation to accept it; for instance, in Jaume Cabré's *Les veus del Pamano* (*Voices from the Pamano*, 2004) and *Jo confesso* (*I Confess*, 2011), characters assume responsibility for events, irrespective of their ideology.

9. According to Delgado, this novel can be regarded as an “ejemplo de la superación de las polarizaciones ideológicas a la hora de escribir sobre la Guerra Civil y sus protagonistas ... representa el texto de sutura que necesitaba la democracia del consenso ... capaz de complacer afectivamente a los simpatizantes de uno u otro bando, quizá porque su énfasis en la ambigüedad de la historia y de las historias lima las asperezas que podrían suponer argumentos más obviamente posicionados” (100).

10. Hugues observes that the “decadence of humanity is also a frequent – and explicit – theme in late twentieth-century vampire-narrated fiction” (152).

11. The bishop, depicted as a deranged vampire, remains a highly rhetorical trope. Encouraged by the rise of national debates on patriotism and Protestantism in the eighteenth century, anti-Catholicism is of the most conventional themes in gothic fiction (Wright 81). Catholic priests usually epitomize despotic villains as representatives of an unforgiving religion.

12. The original short story focuses strictly on the relationship between the landowner, his wife and the aliens. However, the story is set in Matarranya, a remote rural area of Aragon; in such small communities, open hostility was frequent between local inhabitants.

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