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The Black Sun of Anarchy: From Historical Memory to Sinister Imagination (A meditation on the film *El honor de Las Injurias* by Carlos García-Alix)

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For my father

To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up
a picture.

- Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Spain's post-Civil War period is an inexhaustible storehouse of anecdotes, each more macabre and bizarre than the one before it. However, few of these stories are as well known, and remain so disconcerting, as the one about the man whose relatives went so far as to deny his death, while hiding his cadaver in a hole, so his living relatives could make use of his ration book. The anecdote illustrates a popular saying—*a hole for the dead and a roll for the living*—which at that time would have been a shibboleth for the resistance to hunger and destitution, but which, in a climate of pressure to remember, honor and exhume the dead like the one that predominates in Spain today, is, at the very least, disturbing. Strangely, what the dead man's relatives would have cited during the postwar period as an accommodating means of survival (legitimate, of course, for nearly everyone), during spells of relative social well-being those same relatives could, conversely, remember such behavior as an act of disloyalty and shame.

The following pages will deal with the embarrassment aroused by some memories, not only of the postwar period, but of the Civil War and even

Armed Resistance: Cultural Representations of the Anti-Francoist *Guerrilla*
Hispanic Issues On Line (2012)

before the Second Republic, in the hopes of overcoming, or at least of questioning, a certain pride that, in some sectors of Spanish thought and contemporary culture, seems to affect so-called historic revisionism.

Left-Wing Melancholy

It was not until the completion of the political transition in the early 1990s that the first studies appeared that were openly critical of the memory and, above all, of the oblivion into which the Civil War and Francoism had seemingly faded. The most radical criticisms of the way in which Spanish society had “consigned to oblivion” its traumatic past of strife and military dictatorship in the interest of modernization were primarily inspired by two paradigmatic works of twentieth century revolutionary thinking: Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, written at the end of the Civil War and of the German thinker’s own life in 1940; and *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993), the controversial essay by Jacques Derrida on the revival that Marxist critical theory underwent, ironically, after the fall of the Berlin wall.

If *Specters* provided Hispanists such as Jo Labanyi or Joan Ramón Resina with modes of analysis they could wield to take apart the pacts made during the transition, thus dismantling the memory imposed by the Franco regime and beginning to “lodge” the ghosts of the past, the *ad hoc* adaptation of Benjamin’s theses by philosopher Manuel Reyes Mate rekindled a notion of commitment that was disquieting in that context of modernization, insofar as he stressed “the debt that the present has with the *victims*, not the *victors*, of history” (Ferrán 16). From these critical readings of Spain’s Civil War and postwar history, a whole generation of Hispanists learned not to be afraid of talking with ghosts, to acknowledge that the defeated were right to some degree, and, ultimately, to broaden the ethical horizon with which to evaluate historical experience.

Today, however, nearly forty years after Franco’s death, the release of essays, memoirs, novels, films and media programs dealing with victims of the Franco regime and the war has grown spectacularly. Since the start of the new millennium, this onus to rehabilitate those victims and to cultivate the so-called historical memory has taken on a special notoriety, predictably in what is perhaps the most spectacular of all forms: the cinema—specifically in documentary and historical films such as *Butterfly* (José Luis Cuerda 2000), *Broken Silence* (Montxo Armendáriz 2001), *Soldiers of Salamina* (David Trueba 2003), *So That You Won’t Forget Me* (Patricia Ferreira 2005), or *13 Roses* (Emilio Martínez Lazar 2007), among many others.

In light of this remarkable protagonism acquired by the victims of the war and dictatorship while Spain's controversial Historical Memory Act (2007) was finally passed, that revolutionary approach to history has not only lost its theoretically alternative place, but has gone down the path toward becoming what Benjamin himself called (scornfully and with scarcely any explanation) a "left-wing melancholy." That is, as Wendy Brown interprets this notion: "to love more our left passions and reasons, our left analysis and convictions, than to the existing world that we presumably seek to alter with these terms" (170). It is at this sort of *left-wing melancholy* that Antonio Gómez López-Quñones seems to take aim in his criticism of a number of films on the Civil War which, since the 1990s, have offered a "cozy, soothing revision of the past" (281). Josetxo Cerdán shows the same concern when he points to the tendency of contemporary Spanish documentary films to show the history of the twentieth century as a "sealed past" (33). Ángel Loureiro takes an even more critical stance when he compares the films *Land and Freedom* (Ken Loach 1995) and *Libertarias* (Vicente Aranda 1996) with more recent documentaries such as *Les fosses del silenci* (2003), and argues that the contemporary representations of those who lost the war have transformed the painful political defeat of the left into a dangerous triumph for those affected: "the objective" of the latter film, Loureiro writes, "lies in winning over the audience by using a rhetoric of pathos" ("Argumentos Patéticos" 24).

Far from a critical—to say nothing of *revolutionary*—treatment of history, the current of films called "leftist melancholy" cinema here present two major contraindications to be taken into account when laying claim to the "defeated generations," which is what Benjamin originally wrote about: the *defeated* rather than *victims* (Thesis #12), and which, after the Civil War, were claimed by the anti-Franco guerrillas, who in turn became defeated, "silenced" and "outlawed" people of the so-called "clandestine memory" (Secundino Serrano 13). First, such films can lapse into "realism with a testimonial bias," and even into a "tyranny of the topical" and of the "documentary" (Biosca 313), with the imposition of the understanding that fiction and myths are "insufficient" to account for history and that "having lived—that is, having suffered" (331) is the only requirement to be able to tell it and guarantee its veracity. Secondly, such confusion of historical truth with individual testimony can also lead to what Sánchez Biosca terms the "banality of good"; that is, that rehabilitating the defeated lacks "any moral challenge whatsoever" because that rehabilitation is anchored in a memory of "noble, perhaps ethical origin of men who were sacrificed by the ruthless memory of the victors" (315). Both comments on such historical films as *The Guerrilla of Memory* or *Broken Silence* are in fact very serious contraindications of Benjamin's *Theses* because they end up transforming his messianic concept of history, "which takes the work of liberation in the name of defeated generations to the end" (Thesis #12), into another "new

concept of history as outrage,” which is how Loureiro sums up this tendency to remember the past affectionately, sentimentally or *pathetically* (“Los afectos” 129).

To revolutionize this order of things, to turn that left-wing melancholy against itself and to take the concept of “history as outrage” to its ultimate consequences, a film appropriately titled *El honor de Las Injurias* (*The Honor of Outrages*, 2007) was released. Made by Carlos García-Alix (born in León, 1957) using archival material for eighty percent of its content, this false documentary film, or *docudrama* (since the remaining twenty percent is comprised of footage shot with actors), foregrounds these issues through one of its most singular characters: Felipe Sandoval. In the purest of realistic styles, *El honor* revises the history of the revolutionary left (beginning approximately one decade before the proclamation of the Second Republic and continuing through the end of the War) by focusing on the life of that historic figure from his birth in one of the slums of Madrid until, after two decades of political activity in the armed struggle of the CNT (the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores*), he was brutally tortured in a Francoist jail and committed suicide on July 4, 1939.

What appears from the outset to be just another title to add to that index of left-wing melancholy films is in fact a complex “intervention”—as Cerdán (34) correctly claims—in the learning of history through films, in the political history of the Left and, ultimately, in how, in the context of Hispanism, we currently interpret all cultural products. The oxymoronic title phrase of the film also presents the ironic, almost sarcastic attitude that *El honor de Las Injurias* will assume with respect to at least three premises of what I have identified as left-wing melancholy films.

In the first place, the film is primarily intended to be a documentary, probably the most representative form today of that “testimonial realism” that Sánchez Biosca criticizes. However, in order to document Sandoval’s life, his biographical documents and the political history of his time are as indispensable as all the premodern and then categorically modern mythology of rogues, bandits, delinquents, gangsters and other fiction or *movie* heroes. Secondly, while *El honor* recovers one of the Leftist defeats that has been most studied, dramatized and recalled by nearly all types of audiences (that is, the revolution in response to Franco’s military coup), it does so from a point of view that none of the ideological discourses of the past and today legitimize: the “obscure line of contact,” in the words of historian Antonio Elorza, “between anarchistic groups and terrorist action groups” (93). And thirdly, both historical research and journalistic reporting coexist in *El honor* with biography, a genre that seems to be fully in keeping with an emotional, subjective conception of history, and with the “solid school of autobiographies and memories” (Rama 212) of anarchism. Nevertheless, here this biographical approach will not produce so much a hagiography that will succeed in *moving* the members of the audience as an inconsolable

confession that will make *known* “the truth [of Sandoval’s] own conscience,” as Mikhail Bakhtin would say of Dostoyevsky’s men from the underground (83); that is: the grotesque irony that results when one of the *outlaws* who was most wanted by all sorts of powers—to include the Republican government and, of course, the Francoist regime—confesses that he ended up serving the legitimate government of the Republic as an executioner and policeman.

With the purpose of delving more deeply into these dark ironies and discussing their links and tensions with the “nostalgia of metaphysical dimensions” (Sánchez Biosca 304) and, to a certain extent, with the prim sentimentalism that Spanish society and culture seem to affect today when looking back, I will anchor my argumentation in a minute analysis of the movie while occasionally using as an additional resource book that supplements it, *El honor de Las Injurias* (2007), as well as certain literature on the history of ideas and the philosophy of affects.

Documentary or Bona Fide Feature Film?

“Felipe Sandoval, Doctor Muñiz, the most dangerous bank robber and gunman, a murderer and a gangster, who will soon get his just deserts.”

With this voice-over narration of the police blotter description of Sandoval illuminated nervously by a spotlight, García-Alix presents the protagonist of *El honor*. This presentation is the corollary of a long introduction during which the audience is briefed regarding the arrest warrant for Sandoval issued by “*the victors*” as the same narrator’s voice proclaims, echoing the dispatch of April 1st that announced the end of the Civil War.

Shot in black and white with 16-millimeter cameras (Carlos Tejeda) and sinister soundtrack music, the film begins with the appearance of an actor who scours aisles full of archives until he pulls a box off a shelf containing photographs of Sandoval. This is immediately followed by shots taken with cameras also dating from “the 1950s” (Rosa) showing another actor playing an investigator who narrates, in the first person with illustrations comprising archival images of Madrid at the end of the War, the escape attempt and subsequent arrest of Sandoval as part of the so-called Expedition of the 101. Finally, another sequence similar to the previous ones presents a policeman typing the report of Sandoval’s arrest with the relevant identification of the arrested man and the order to draft a report on his “activities during the War until the end.” The introduction is brought to a close with a big close-up of the fist of another policeman, a shot implying that the interrogation will not exclude torture.

The report that Sandoval begins to write henceforth provides, as Iván Véllez correctly points out, the “plot line of the documentary”: a

documentary that, in view of the suspense created by the descent into the historical archives, the intimate voice of the investigator and the spectacular persecution, arrest and accusation of the protagonist, promises to be as much a *documentary* as “a bona fide feature film,” as García-Alix said to Martín Freixas during an interview. In fact, shots of the interrogation of Sandoval, played by Manuel Domínguez, will be inserted from the beginning of the film to the end, thus giving the story the “unity of plot” that the director says he wanted to achieve throughout the film.

Instead of a conventional documentary put together with many interviews with experts, with a “voice-of-God” voice-over narrative and an analytical plot, García-Alix aims to reconstruct Sandoval’s entire handwritten report with the same subjectivity and realism while maintaining his distance as if he were making a crime film: that is, a movie about bank robbers, gunmen and gangsters of the 1940s, shot with 16-millimeter cameras in the urban environment of Madrid at the end of the Civil War. In a reappropriation of this type, undertaken by the documentary film of the criminal genre, the director found a productive space for maneuvering, as it enabled him to recover with great realism all the criminal history of Spain during that period while further providing him artistic license when dealing with the emotional load (the feelings of rancor, shame, guilt, etc.) that inevitably arises even in today’s Spanish society when that violence of the War and the military dictatorship are recalled. The procedure has a clear referent in American history, as Félix de Azúa has perceptively pointed out in his blog. During the years of the Great Depression, gangster film classics such as *The Racket* (1928), *Little Caesar* (1930) and *Scarface* (1932) reflected the history and structure of organized crime in the United States in an extraordinarily realistic way—“almost documentary” in the words of John McCarty (18). A few decades later, more contemporary versions of gangster cinema, such as *The Godfather* (1972) by Francis Ford Coppola or *Scarface* (1983) by Brian de Palma, became, also according to McCarty, *romans à clef* dealing with that same historical violence and reappropriations of the classics that took the “banality of evil” to which American society had arrived at that time to a “brutal, bloody, shocking, scary and funny” extreme (226). On this occasion, *El honor* accomplishes both of these objectives simultaneously with the armed struggle of anarcho-syndicalism: through its rigorous realistic documentation and reappropriation of the gangster film genre. This achievement enabled García-Alix to document that no less violent Spanish historic past with the same degree of parody, sinister attitude, and cynicism with which Vito Corleone’s descendants, to name an example, ended up viewing crime: “It’s not personal, just business.”

The criminal proceeding against Felipe Sandoval, however, has its testimonial correlate, on one hand, in the book *Nosotros, los asesinos* (1976) by the anarchist journalist Eduardo de Guzmán not only because it tells the story of the brutal torture that Sandoval suffered at the hands of Franco’s

police, but also for the string of incriminations to which he was subjected due to the “lack of moral education” denounced by his own companions: “He’s no more than a common criminal” according to other anarchist prisoners (Guzmán 84). It was precisely reading this book that awakened García-Alix’s interest in the life of Sandoval, above all because, in the opinion of this expert on the revolutionary Left, the portrait of Sandoval offered by Guzmán was too “partial” (Martín Freixas).

On the other hand, the Sandoval trial also has its historical correlate in another document that is no less partial: the Report (known as the *Causa General*) prepared in 1940 by Franco’s Ministry of Justice regarding “the offenses committed in Spain during the red domination” (25). In fact, the archives panned by the camera and the box that is extracted from them belong to (or simulate belonging to) the National Historic Archive. One of the two boxes (1530.1 and 1530.2) stored in that Madrid institution contains the nearly seventy pages of the confession Sandoval wrote by hand during his 1939 interrogation.

In contrast, however, to the Public Prosecutor’s Office, according to which the statute of limitations had run out on “criminal activities” allegedly occurring since the start of the War, the investigator, first-person narrator and, in turn, García-Alix’s alter ego in *El honor* considers events occurring much earlier: even earlier than that “delinquent” life history for which, according to Guzmán’s testimony, Sandoval’s own comrades reproached him when they heard that he was informing on them. If we judge by the flashback following the big close-up of the fist, the pressure to dig into the past that García-Alix feels leads him to recover Felipe Sandoval’s life *melancholically*—“my curiosity became an obsession, I was trapped,” the investigator says—from that summer of 1939 when Sandoval committed suicide until May 26, 1886: the date of his birth certificate, and the accused man’s most remote, primitive origins.

What Are We Speaking of When We Speak of Melancholy?

Sandoval’s origins, however, are neither the center nor the enclave of anything clear, but rather the margin, the periphery, the Madrid slum that, at the end of the nineteenth century, was *Las Injurias*, the neighborhood where he was born. This neighborhood (and its people) are illustrated by archival photographs showing tatty groups of charmless children and haggard women among shanties. The squalor of the images shown in those photographs, taken from the Spanish government’s General Archive, is only comparable to the testimony offered by Pío Baroja regarding the “Las Injurias neighborhood” in *Mala hierba* (1904): “What that foul neighborhood spewed out was human garbage . . . all the stigmas of illness and misery”

(208). According to what is then shown in animated images of undernourished kids waiting in line in some settlement house, only the compassion of the nuns who gave him “a bowl of soup” and “his first letters” seemed to offer the young Sandoval some inkling of escape from all the degradation of Las Injurias.

But there was another escape route out of that poverty-stricken underworld. “Pickpockets, sneak thieves, moles,” says García-Alix, underlining each one of these crimes while filming an old photograph of three adolescent petty thieves. Although they are anonymous, these three other vulgar elements appear in the following frames as individuals; that is, each one of their faces is first framed in a close-up. Because of the way these shots are framed and the expression on their tough faces looking straight into the camera, these individualized portraits refer us, on one hand, to the police portrait of Sandoval that appears under the spotlight at the beginning of the film. On the other hand, they lead us to another scene which, introduced by the narrator’s sentence (“*they* showed him the world”), offers a clear contrast to the entire previous series of photographs. The melancholy soundtrack that has accompanied all the images thus far suddenly takes on a livelier, even frenetic air. To the beat of this new music, photographs of various places in Madrid show us “the world” (the one outside Las Injurias) that Sandoval will discover during his thieving expeditions. While the photographs taken in Las Injurias generally showed their subjects’s full figures and were accompanied by depressing music, these other photos, although just as old, are long shots or city panoramas and are accompanied by markedly enthusiastic music. As a result of the editing of the two sequences, the feeling of desolation, suffocation and mercy conveyed by the photographs of Las Injurias seems to find, in the subsequent shots of Madrid, its liberating, comforting and even encouraging counterpart. The editing of the two series of photos creates a certain dynamic between them of *outrage and empowerment*, whose *raison d’être* or anchoring point is the group of three petty thieves: the heroes of the slum.

From the outset, the way in which García-Alix recovers Sandoval’s origins here seems to repeat the clichés that Sánchez Biosca identified in other historical research films such as *The Guerilla of Memory*: “An intimate voice in the first person” (the voice of García-Alix himself); “An allusion to memory” (here, the memory of Sandoval as a child and of Madrid at the end of the nineteenth century); and, above all, “a story of defeated people” (315), the story of the people of Las Injurias and, in particular, the story of three petty thieves probably photographed by the police officers themselves after arresting them. However, neither the photographs of the Madrid slum, nor even less the photo of the thieves, necessarily seem pathetic and banal as Sánchez Biosca rightly observes in reference to the “victims” claimed, in his assessment, as “passive, suffering individuals” (315) by those other documentaries. Instead of being anchored in a “noble, perhaps ethical

origin”—such as the vindication of “Manuel the maquis” in *Broken Silence*, or of the “venerable teacher” in *Butterflies*, or of other “pre/over-determined” characters, in the words of Gómez López-Quiñones (269)—the vindication here of Sandoval’s first “masters” (as the narrator refers to them) seems more anchored in *thievery*, that is, in the lowest form of delinquency.

As opposed to the Freudian pathological concept of melancholy as *identification with loss*, which seems to be exploited by the directors of those films about “suffering victims,” in the scene in question melancholy is conceived as an invitation to the viewer to *identify with perdition*, or with the picaresque; that is, not so much with “lost, passive, suffering objects” as with individuals who, like the petty thieves in García-Alix’s film, are a part of the underworld, the rabble, and have (as Spaniards customarily put it) “fallen from the hand of God.” Each individualized portrait of the petty thieves presents us, in point of fact, with the slum hero as “defeated” (in Benjamin’s words), an arrested or even oppressed person, but not necessarily as a “suffering victim,” and much less as a “passive individual.” In this realm, the vindication made by *El honor* of Sandoval’s picaresque origins is deeply compromising and disconcerting because, as I see it, it transforms the outrage [*injuria*] or the *physical wound* of the slum into a social problem (delinquency) and, more significantly, into an ethical dilemma: as perverse as it may seem, what this police portrait identifies as proscribed by the law—i.e. Sandoval’s thieving ways—is precisely the only thing that enables the boy of Las Injurias to compensate for the miseries of his neighborhood.

As Max Pensky argues in *Melancholy Dialectics*, Benjamin would anchor the “poor messianic strength” of *melancholy* (Thesis #2) in opposition to the “tortured stupidity” of left-wing melancholy in this “dialectic of illness and empowerment” (Pensky 21). Benjamin did not elaborate much on his definition of “left-wing melancholy” except when he stated that it represented “the end of two millennia of metamorphosis of melancholy” (“Left-Wing” 31). Without objecting to the interpretations engendered by a problem that is truly so old and abstruse as melancholy, I choose here to understand that identification with the picaresque as a *sinister subjectivity*—which is how Bruno Bosteels interprets melancholy in Mexico regarding the movements of 1968 (77). And in an even broader sense, following Luigi Pirandello and Simon Critchley, as a clear exercise in *black humor* in both senses of the expression: emotionally, as Hippocratic *melancholia*, i.e. depression, identification with the depressed or, in short, segregation of black bile; and, esthetically, as *sinister irony* or “comedy of desperation” (O’Neill). For to judge by the entire petty thief sequence, García-Alix aims to “delight” the viewer (to use Josefina Ludmer’s words) with “delinquency”; or perhaps it would be better to say that he wants the viewer literally to *see* empowerment in the wretchedness of Las Injurias,

liberation from the slum underworld in the craftiness of those rogues, and a certain notion of justice in their defiant expressions.

In a certain spirit of fun, this sequence involving the thieves advances a clear progressive political intention that is also, however, quite dark, even contradictory: the position adopted by several intellectual writers (such as Azorín, Unamuno and Valle-Inclán) in response to the new effects of progress, of Europeanization and, in general, of the modernization of Madrid at the close of the nineteenth century. Their posture led to the crystallization of notions related to melancholy such as ataraxia, abulia or decadentism, as well as a complete social psychology focused on so-called urban melancholy and a Lombrosian literature of melancholy, with a specific focus on the delinquent. This slum literature enabled writers to denounce the *obscure line of contact* between Madrid and the countryside, between present and past, as well as to articulate the no less obscure and contradictory political thinking (paradigmatic of that *fin-de-siècle* Spain) between Europeanism and Spanish nationalism, Spanish nationalism and Spain's regionalisms, the public or social or democratic, on one hand, and the intimate, the individual and even the anarchic, on the other.

García-Alix reconstructs Sandoval's childhood and adolescence, rigorously documented in the film by his birth certificate, through the archival photographs of Las Injurias or the records from Madrid's settlement houses, as if he were dealing with a slum legend. This is how he lays down the foundations of two critical norms for viewers of *El honor*: first, that the imagination can confess and denounce the ideological contradictions put forward in the story with somewhat more subjectivity and distancing than the political discourses. By *imagination* I understand, in this context, the strange *black humor* that oozes out of the photo of the three petty thieves in the Las Injurias sequence. The second norm is that such a reappropriation of the criminal imaginary by the documentary genre enables the so-called historical memory to be recovered, in this case the memory of Sandoval as a child, without necessarily slipping into pathos nor into the "banality of good" cited above that are so typical of representations of the victims of the Franco dictatorship.

"One of Our Own"

The dialectic of outrage and compensation is activated again with the recovery of Sandoval's other criminal act: the swindle he commits against his fiancée while they are both working as servants in Paris. On this occasion, the melancholy or sinister image will not be a photograph simulating the son of Las Injurias (like the earlier photo of the petty thieves), but a real portrait of Felipe Sandoval. Dated 1915, the portrait introduces

this youthful criminal episode with the following description made by the investigator: “There is nothing about him that betrays the son of Las Injurias; we see a thin and not very handsome young man, but with a well groomed look and wearing a stylish hat.”

With the objective of reconstructing this young man’s attempts to abandon his childhood petty thievery by working as an errand boy, García-Alix now brings in reshot footage from *À propos de Nice* (1930) by Jean Vigo. The ample light, the luxury of the people filmed and the images that recreate the daily life of French high society offer a brutal contrast with the preceding images, in particular with the shot that closed the Las Injurias sequence: the close-up of a rickety cat on a storm sewer drain. This shot was extracted from the same silent film and, in contrast with the following images, gives an account of what, according to Vigo himself, his *city symphony film* was intended to denounce: “The last gasps of a society so lost in its escapism that it sickens you and makes you sympathetic to a revolutionary solution” (qtd. in de Cain 13). (This comment seems to take its inspiration from the libertarian ideology of Vigo’s father, known for his irreverent pseudonym Miguel Almereyda because, as François Truffaut recalled, “although *Almereyda* sounds grandiloquent, in French it is an anagram of *y’a la merde*” [there is shit] [25]).

As it turns out, according to what transpires on screen after the reshot footage from *À propos de Nice*, the decision made to swindle his fiancée with his lover Marianne Chitz takes on signs that are, if not as “revolutionary” as Jean Vigo intended, at least as irreverent as *Almereyda* strove to be. Without offering any clear answers as to what led him to abandon his job, empty his fiancée’s savings account and run off with his lover, what Sandoval does in some way is to rebel against the entire bourgeois establishment by sending it *à la merde*: including his promise to marry and thus possibly to enter that same society with his future wife.

Visually, the sequence gives clear proof of this impetuous compensation by Sandoval. While the shots that simulated Sandoval serving in the house of General Desille were photographs of interiors, with the General’s entire family comfortably ensconced around a table served by numerous servants, the following shots intended to stage Sandoval’s swindle show a rich collage of images that refer the viewer to the story of Bonnie and Clyde as Fritz Lang imagined it in *You Only Live Once* (1937).

At this point, as a consequence of this other editing of the two sequences, the escapism of the Desille family, the servility of Sandoval and the rest of the employees and, in general, a whole series of circumstances that (in Jean Vigo’s words again) “sicken you,” all end up finding a liberating counterpart in the frenetic sequence of the swindle and flight, reactivating that “dialectic of illness and empowerment” (Pensky) that we had found earlier among the petty thieves. In the wake of other, much more modern “masters” who are no less controversial than the slum heroes, such

as the gangsters who would take part in *Regeneration* (1915) by Raoul Walsh, the protagonist of *El honor* seems to conform to the availability of the gofer, and to respond to the predictions of a domestic life as well as the call to revolution of *À propos de Nice* with the attitude that is emblematic of the gangster morality: “There’s got to be a better, easier way to make dough than this.”

Between home and street, servility and banditry, marriage and perdition, Sandoval now represents a no less dark ideological positioning than the one represented before by the “masters” of Las Injurias. And if then the film showed us in picaresque craftiness the resistance to the wretchedness of the slum, now *El honor* shows us literally, in the gangster pose, the liberation from domestic order; in banditry, the cancellation of vassalage; and in the frenetic fit of passion, a rigorous sense of justice, all clearly headed by that shot of Sandoval wearing his stylish hat.

During the entire first half of the movie, García-Alix reconfigures the conventional treatment of the *Bildungsroman*, a treatment generally used in crime films: “the prototype of every boy-to-man/rags-to-riches/redeemed-or-destroyed gangster movie” (McCarty 26). From *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman 1931) to *Once Upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone 1984) or *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese 2002), these films show their characters’s growth, from their beginnings as adolescent thieves until they become recognized criminals, after some years of being torn between good behavior and the road to perdition. Together with the slum imaginary, García-Alix introduces in the Paris sequence what McCarty calls “the grammar of the gangster film,” with all the ingredients of crime, vengeance, sex and corruption, as well as the gangster’s predictable complicity with his needy origins and with an accursed destiny (8, 19, 45).

In anticipation of Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, from its origins in 1912 with *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, this “gangster film grammar” was built on filming in “authentic locales—the crime-ridden streets” according to McCarty—rather than in studios, thus providing those gangster film classics with “a stark, almost documentary ‘this-is-happening-before-your-eyes’ sense of realistic truth” (17–18). However, this “feeling of realism” undergoes another turn of the screw in the sequence describing Sandoval’s swindle. By documenting the entire Paris episode according to the “grammar of gangster films,” the feeling of realism that is already called forth by the real portrait of Sandoval or his detailed arrest report is now confounded with the feeling of finding ourselves before a “bona fide feature film” about gangsters. This gives the viewer the ambiguous feeling not only that ‘this-is-happening-before-his/her-eyes,’ but also that that biographical episode from Sandoval’s life is also taking place in classic gangster cinema. As a result of this sort of confusion, that “gangster” portrayed in 1915 seems simultaneously to captivate and resist the viewer because of the *simulated* aspect of his portrayal, for in this sequence, following Gilles Deleuze,

Sandoval's *simulacrum* "harbors a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction" (262).

It is thus neither biographical documentation nor film recreation. Rather, what García-Alix seems to offer is a *simulacrum of Sandoval's life*. Continuing with the Bosteels's interpretation of the specters of 1968, this equally spectral recovery of Sandoval's life is, in fact, *sinister* in both senses of that adjective: "The sinister lying in wait," Bosteels argues, playing on the double meaning of the term *sinister* (related to the *left* and with the notion of *Unheimlich*), "must be added to the notorious tendency toward melancholy in political thought today" (76). In light of the discourse with a progressive intention that *A propos de Nice* began to introduce, Sandoval's specter is indeed aligned here with leftist political thinking. In fact, that novel of paradigmatic education found in crime films is immediately reoriented in an explicitly leftist direction with the reconstruction of the following episode from Sandoval's life: the one that tells of his membership in the CNT.

After Sandoval's disappearance "in the folds of a continent at war," his trail reappears in 1919 in Barcelona's Modelo prison. "La Modelo" was the destination of hundreds of convicted anarchists and labor union members, and is indeed where Sandoval adopts in earnest the anarchist doctrine, finding in the revolutionaries's "direct action" methods a path to compensating the long list of abuses and outrages that he had suffered from his days in the slum.

This encounter between Sandoval's criminal contingency and the history of the anarchist ideology follows the postulates of Bakunin—"the bandit is always the hero, the defender, the avenger of the people" (qtd. in Hobsbawm 28)—and also those of Lily Litvak, who draws the conclusion from her research into turn-of-the-century anarchism that "the libertarian hero is always drawn from the rabble" (64).

Who would have been more likely, in the twentieth century, to be identified by Bakunin as candidates for anarchists than gangster prototypes like Sandoval, much more urban and to some extent more modern than the crooks and bandits of the nineteenth century, to become *one of our own* and to execute that "school of hatred and will to sacrifice" that must avenge all the "enslaved predecessors" (Benjamin)?

The Black Sun of Anarchy

Despite their specific differentiating characteristics, the gangster, the crook and other forerunners, as well as a certain type of *picaro*, have two things in common: first, in line with this analysis, all of them seem to be under the melancholy "sign of Saturn," in the words of Susan Sontag (116), inasmuch as they are always getting lost between the limits of space, the peripheral

areas of cities, and the borders of countries, and second, all are found in E.J. Hobsbawm's history of *primitive rebels*. That is how this Marxist historian classifies those individuals who "aspire to adapt" to "modern conditions," but lack "an articulated discourse to express" those aspirations, so that their solutions result in "pre-political" actions straddling justice and violence, reason and spontaneity, a progressive and a reactionary way of thinking ("*Primitive Rebels*" 2–12). Both things—melancholy and primitive rebellion—are intimately related, however. For in each one of the primitive rebels, the saturnine sign of melancholy has found different ways of articulating itself throughout history.

Within this history of primitive rebels, the anarchist is nonetheless the *least* primitive of all. For centuries, movements have existed with a "millenarian essence," (to use Hobsbawm's expression), that have aspired to a "complete and radical change in the world" ("*Primitive Rebels*" 57). That said, if we follow the genealogy of rebelliousness, this millenarian sort does not systematically appear until the French Revolution. Therefore, inside that other history of primitive rebelliousness in Spain which evolves from the *pícaro* and the petty thief to the criminal and finally to the gangster, the anarchists would have been rather *modern* primitive rebels, insofar as "they rise not only against their condition, but against all of creation" (Camus 35). This is borne out in the film by the allusion to the mortal attacks made by the CNT against the structural pillars of power in Spain during those years: the Chairman of the Council of Ministers Eduardo Dato (murdered in 1921), Lieutenant Colonel José Regueral (1923) and Cardinal Juan Soldevila (1923).

Under his specialty as bank robber, Sandoval began to practice what was called "revolutionary gymnastics," delivering the booty from his holdups to the cause. As just another among *els homes d'acció* (the men of action), which was the title given to such anarcho-syndicalists as Durruti, Oliver and Ascaso, Sandoval began to be active in the anarchist struggle, embodying a kind of revolutionary passion that recalls Ramón J. Sender's claim that "passions infected the air" during this period of Spanish history (34)—in fact, the anarchist press referred to them as "martyrs for the cause" (Núñez Florencio 144).

As a consequence, of all the figures who, throughout *El honor*, produced the "dialectic of illness and empowerment" (petty thieves, crooks and gangsters), the figure of the *anarcho-syndicalist* seemed to become not only the most modern, but the most melancholy and sinister of all as well. Because of "the vengeful hatred" that he bears inside; because of his "will to sacrifice"; and, in short, because of his inconsolable dissatisfaction with the course of all of history, Sandoval was converted in the film into one of Benjamin's melancholy figures par excellence.

It was hardly by chance during those years that the anarchists gave rise to a substantial Lombrosian bibliography that began to raise the question, in

the purest Hippocratic style of understanding melancholy, of whether “wine and Africa had gone to the anarchists’s heads” (Galera Gómez 114). This sort of melancholy is captured in a specific scene that reconstructs Sandoval’s room after he has fled following a holdup. What the police find, which appears on screen, are simply his bricklayer’s tools. The shot is reminiscent of a classic Dürer engraving in which the tools of the Angel of Melancholy lie abandoned at his feet.

The reconstruction of Sandoval’s activism in the CNT exudes as much black humor (if not more) as we found oozing out of the portraits of the petty thieves and the gangster. García-Alix focuses at this point on documenting the armed struggle of those “kings of the working class pistol”—which is how Juan A. Oliver referred to the anarcho-syndicalists in a filming of the burial of Durruti. In *El honor*, however, this eulogy (in fact atrabilious) of the life and miracles of that anarchist leader takes on an even more sinister, *blacker* character than the earlier vindication of the other primitive rebels. Not only did those CNT gunmen do as the slum heroes had done—who saw their tricks as a way to escape from Las Injurias—or as the crook had done—who saw his swindling as a kind of liberation from the bourgeois order—the “men of action” were also closely affiliated with a doctrine that led them to see annihilation as complete regeneration.

With the same sordidness as earlier, *El honor* again appropriates the grammar of the gangster films to represent the anarcho-syndicalists’s struggle. Together with the re-filmed sequences taken from the Latin American film noir of the 1930s and 1940s—and above all from the films of the Mexican director Juan Orol—holdups, assassinations and settlements of scores between the Free Labor Unions and the CNT are simulated. Among the figures of the fictional criminal and the movie gangster, the film presents the anarcho-syndicalists as if they were gunmen or, more precisely stated, *outlaws*. In fact, the Madrid press actually referred to Sandoval as “*public enemy number one*,” as documented by close-ups featured in articles printed in *Mundo Gráfico* and *ABC* in 1932, which reported one of the CNT-perpetrated robberies.

The climactic moment in this long history of robberies, crimes and vendettas comes, of course, with the revolution of 1936. *El honor* focuses first on one of the events that would head this revolution: the capture of the Montaña barracks where Madrid’s arms were stored. The taking of the barracks is illustrated by re-filmed archival images of citizens who, although anonymous, are individualized in close-ups shooting at the soldiers sheltered there. The narrator then emphasizes the attackers’s trades—“*bricklayers, streetcar company employees, metal workers*”—to the rhythm of exactly the same frenetic music that sounded when Sandoval lost himself in the folds of a continent at war after committing the fraud, and even before, when he discovered Madrid with the aid of his “masters” from the slum. The relationship among these three sequences is obvious, and it marks the path

that the sign of Saturn and the black humor of melancholy have taken up to this point. Now, the viewer not only sees petty crime as a form of liberation from Las Injurias, fraud as a servant's compensation, and the murders of Dato, Regueral and Soldevila as political regeneration; the sequence also explicitly shows him or her the anarchist slogan of the time in action: *in war, revolution*.

If the previous shot of Sandoval's abandoned bricklaying tools illustrated his mysticism, in this later collective scene all the people of Madrid seem to abandon the tools of their trades, replacing them with weapons in order to reconstruct the "great day of revenge" (Foxá 215) and underscore the extreme to which those "passions" that Sender had described in 1930 surged in the summer of 1936.

The "enslaved predecessors" (in Benjamin's words), from the workers who fired on the barracks to the "shabby people" of Las Injurias and including each one of the servants, "*office boys, waiters, kitchen porters*" that Sandoval had been, were finally avenged. In contrast with the uprisings of the nineteenth century—"primitive provincial revolutions," in Raymond Carr's opinion—"that never managed to jell into revolutions" (qtd. in Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* 72—74); this revolution of 1936 threatened to break radically with all the old burdens. With the revolution, moreover, the "shadow army" of the CNT came out into the light, and with it so did Sandoval, who was immediately freed and who again placed himself at the service of the CNT.

García-Alix films the interrogation of Sandoval by the Francoist police while reconstructing everything that Sandoval confesses in that report on his "activities during the War." In the besieged Madrid of that time, Sandoval proclaims that he has become a rearguard watchman. While the militiamen defend the city at the front, he and other comrades of the CNT cover their backs by fighting the Fifth Column inside Madrid. However, while all these militia members and anarchists remain in Madrid, the seat of the Republic is moved to Valencia. Further, the comrades who do not leave and who remain most closely linked to the doctrine of social revolution occupy the ministerial posts in the government. Also, while those same companions now in the government take the political credit for the resistance to the military coup, Sandoval and his group are the ones who are responsible for doing the dirty work.

As the reconstruction of this dirty work advances, that victorious sun of anarchy (which truly shines in Madrid since the outbreak of the revolution) begins to be completely eclipsed, however, by all the acts confessed by Sandoval in his report. In one of the most charismatically saturnine gestures of the political history of the left, the revolution of 1936 also ends by devouring its own children, and in particular this "son of Las Injurias" in whom Litvak would say that the libertarian doctrine had originally been nurtured. Thus, if the "revolutionary duty" that Sandoval claimed was (again

quoting Benjamin) “to take the work of liberation to the end,” it seems that the revolution obliges him rather to carry out the work of the Great Inquisitor. The film shows how Sandoval and his delegation take increasingly extreme measures to execute their orders, including burning the Modelo prison in Madrid with all the ordinary and political prisoners of both sides inside. And, as if that were not enough, Sandoval goes as far as to create a Tribunal of Death where, very much in the manner of the Emperor Elagabalus, he tosses a coin to decide the fate of the arrested people.

The whim could not be more sinister: the son of Las Injurias, the dispossessed hero of the slum, the greatest outlaw in the modern history of Spain and public enemy number one of all the governments, recognizes that he has become a policeman, an executioner—in short, an avenging vigilante. Simultaneously a libertarian and policeman, rebel and vigilante, gunman and labor union member, García-Alix’s Sandoval seems to embody the following aporia: either he is a policeman of the revolution, and thus betrays his entire previous career as a rebel outlaw, or he is rebelling against his “revolutionary duty” and thus slips into political heresy. However we may judge him, the view of the revolution that García-Alix projects through Sandoval’s report leads to what (shortly after Sandoval’s suicide, when all the forms of totalitarianism—to include the red variety—have crystallized in Europe) Camus will emphasize in *The Rebel*: that “rebelliousness and revolution result in the same dilemma: either police or madness” (288).

From the slummy melancholy of the petty thieves of Madrid, to the impetuous revenge of the valet in Paris, and then to the millenarist anarchism all over Spain, Sandoval’s “actions” during the Civil War produce the most gangster-ish, dismal, sinister whim of all. Even more sinister than the one that comes at the end of *Scarface* when the leading character is shot down beneath a sign that says, ironically: THE WORLD IS YOURS. The day of the great revenge announced in the title and then consumed with the outbreak of the revolution is now transformed into a deep disappointment, into a recognition of defeat, in sum, into the *black sun of anarchy*. This is how, paraphrasing the oft-quoted lines of the poem “El desdichado” by Gérard de Nerval, one can imagine this last whim that confesses the also *desdichado*—miserably unhappy—protagonist of *El honor*.

The Sinister Imagination

By the light and in the shadow of that black sun of anarchy, we can now see not only the “truth of the conscience” (Bakhtin) of the libertarian guerrilla, but also the truth about how we see and remember his political struggle today. “It is time definitively to abandon the excessive piety that continues to be applied to leaders such as Durruti” Julián Casanova wrote in 1997.

Instead, “we should be looking at unraveling the characteristics of the leaders, how they reached positions of power and how this power was exercised” (218). Deciphering the way in which power and resistance pass through the body of Sandoval entails approaching, to use Gonzalo García Pino’s Conradian metaphor, the “heart of darkness” (Carlos Tejeda); that is, examining Sandoval and the resulting anti-Francoist guerrillas beyond their image as executioners or victims.

Faced with the brutal torture inflicted on him, on one hand, by the Francoist police, and confronting, on the other hand, the “moral recrimination” of his own comrades in political activism for having informed on them, Sandoval finally chooses to commit suicide: “He was his own judge and executioner,” the investigator concludes. This “last word regarding his person and his world” (Bakhtin 72) brings to a close, more than a hagiography—i.e. a eulogy or explanation of his libertarian activism—an inconsolable confession.

In contrast with the “morally well trained” men, as are the men who honor Durruti’s funeral, and in contrast, as well, with the “criminals” judged in the *Causa General*, the image of Sandoval that is finally provided by *El honor* is not that of a martyr or a criminal. Neither saint nor villain, victim nor executioner, this docudrama, *mockumentary* or, according to this analysis, this *simulacrum of a documentary* presents an image of Sandoval like the one that, shortly after 1939, in the newspaper *Combat* of November 14, 1946, the periodical’s editor, Albert Camus, proposed as a new subject for rebelliousness: an individual “free of all messianic elements and devoid of any nostalgia for an earthly paradise” (“Neither Victims nor Executioners” 261). Disillusioned by anarchist millenarism, destroyed by the Francoist police torture, shamed by having abandoned being “one of our own,” ill and tormented, finally, by the dirty tricks life has played on him, all Sandoval’s will to revenge and justice seems to withdraw into itself and give rise to another “obscure line of contact” *inside* Sandoval now, transforming him in the viewer’s eyes in a *volonté de chance* [will to chance].

This is what Georges Bataille, in *Le Coupable* (1944) called the subjects who at that time had exhausted the comforting dialectic of outrage and compensation. Instead of a redeeming mythology that seeks a certain explanation and consolation for the outrages of the past in God, in morality or in the Idea, the will to chance, Bataille adduces, follows the oxymoron implied in an exemplary morality that is based, ironically, on *the duty to be godless*: “Whoever speaks of justice is himself justice; he proposes a justice-giver, a father, a guide. I do not propose justice. I bring conspiratorial friendship”; Bataille warns us immediately thereafter: “Do not delude yourself: this morality that I am teaching you, is the most difficult: no promise will be made to you in exchange and no obligation will bind you” (80–107).

Beyond Bataille's eroticism and Jean Paul Sartre's heroism, beyond libertarian nihilism and political realism, Albert Camus demanded *imagination*, specifically novelistic invention, in order to convey this *volonté de chance* that "rejects the world as it is, without accepting escape from it" (Camus, *The Rebel* 303). "Art will take us back to the origins of rebelliousness," Camus wrote, "insofar as it strives to give its form to a value that flees in the perpetual future" (*The Rebel* 301). The proposal is not necessarily that original, nor as restricted to the novelistic genre, as claimed by Camus. Goya's *black paintings* found another way to transmit what Camus called "noonday thinking," midway between reason and superstition, progress and tradition, ideology and violence, according to Ortega and Gasset during the controversial advent of the Enlightenment in Spain; Valle Inclán's theater of the grotesque, as well as other forms of "dehumanized art" went further in this regard: The poet Max Estrella demands that "*an electric guillotine . . . be set up in the Puerta del Sol*" during his conversation with an imprisoned anarchist about social inequalities in Spain. And a similar notion is engendered by the "aesthetics of cruelty" (196), according to the analysis made by Nil Santiáñez of texts such as *Madrid bajo el terror* (1937) by Adelardo Fernández Arias or *Madrid, de corte a checa* (1938) by Agustín de Foxá.

The fact that Albert Camus assigns to novelistic invention the mission of intervening in the modern history of rebelliousness need not stand in the way of our also considering now another form of "noonday thinking," this *sinister imagination* that García-Alix deploys in his film. *L'Armée des Ombres* (Jean-Pierre Melville 1969), *Lacombe, Lucien* (Louis Malle 1974), *Hoffa* (Danny DeVito 1992), and *Flammen & Citronen* (Ole Christian Madsen 2008) have intervened in the political history of resistance of the rest of the western world by inventing fighters of all sorts. The television series, made in 1993 by Francesc Betriu based on the Juan Marsé novel *Un día volveré*, began to intervene in the postwar and post-revolutionary history of Spain by inventing the urban maquis as the complex figure that is not only the man who is "on the run or in hiding or vanished," (Nieto 43), but also the embodiment of the *avenging specter*. No matter how often this specter is annihilated or made to commit suicide or to disappear, as happened, to cite one example, with the anarchist maquis Francisco Sabaté "Quico," this strange, surly, urban, modern figure escapes death and "always reappears" (Nieto 18).

When the director of *El honor* was asked what this film had given him, García-Alix replied, "a knowledge, not only of history, but of something deeper" (Tejeda). At the end of his book, García-Alix insists on explaining this "knowledge" as something that affects him very intimately, above all because a major part of Sandoval's biography presents strange coincidences with his own life story. Besides García-Alix's known sympathy for anarchism, this painter has, since he was an adolescent, frequented the same

movie theater where Sandoval set up his *checa*; he was a member of and still has the library card issued by the library whose director, Ruíz Egea, was murdered by Sandoval; his childhood neighborhood was the same one that served as the setting for much of Madrid's anarcho-syndicalist activity: "If I look back and remember the Cuatro Caminos district that I knew at the end of the 1960s, the Ruíz Egea library, the Europa movie theater," García-Alix confesses, "I see revealed the entire tragedy of this story that I'm pursuing now. It was all there already, at each step I heard the echo of the past of that castigated neighborhood that carried its revolutionary past on its back like a persistent stain" (136).

I do not know whether García-Alix has been cured of the "disease of the past" which, in the opinion of Antonio Muñoz Molina, the director of *El honor*, suffers. What is certain is that, in line with everything written above, his rehabilitation of Sandoval's story and the attachment he feels toward that story intervenes critically in the way we have of regarding the past by denouncing and confessing that "persistent stain" without necessarily slipping into sentimentalism or banality. *El honor de Las Injurias* is an exceptional starting point for plotting a *sentimental education*—greatly needed in Spain—that will enable us to digest all of that segment of our past containing the Civil War, the anarchist revolution, the bloody dictatorship and armed resistance. The film intervenes, moreover, in the political history of the Left by transforming the habitual victimization and martyrology, the nostalgia and the messianism of left-wing ideologies, into a sort of black humor and cinema that are extremely modern, critical and stimulating within current thought and culture. And finally, García-Alix's film intervenes in the historicism with which we commonly interpret today, within Hispanism, cultural and artistic products insofar as it highlights the symbolic effectiveness of myths and, in particular, of works of art, apart from the historical documents, when we are called on to interpret and understand the paradoxes and contradictions that, sooner or later, history always ends up placing before us.¹

Notes

1. I want to thank Juan F. Egea and Juan Pablo Lupi for their priceless feedback on this paper.

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