

◆ Chapter 2

Look Up and Stop the Steal!: What *Los últimos de Filipinas* Can Teach Us about Fighting the Dis-Info Ops of Vox España

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Deservingly or not, the American movie *Don't Look Up* (dir. Adam McKay, 2021) is one of the most watched Netflix movies of all time. It is also one of the streaming service's most divisive original offerings. Provocative, increasingly frantic, and full of comedic moments, the movie is a pointed portrayal of the dysfunctional state of contemporary America. Its apocalyptic narrative denounces the severity of the climate crisis and the disturbing effect of disinformation campaigns and scientific disbelief, with the consequent erosion of our ability to react in time. The story focuses on two low-level astronomers (Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence) who discover an asteroid hurtling toward Earth that threatens total annihilation; they are faced with incredulity, apathy, and political maneuvering at every turn. A cartoonish collection of politicians, military officials, celebrities, and tech executives, played by an all-star cast (Meryl Streep, Timothée Chalamet, and Cate Blanchett, among others), are truly detestable villains. When NASA discovers a solution, the richest man in the world bypasses humanity's only option for existence to accumulate more wealth. Disinformation spreads like wildfire, leading to a total denial of the comet's existence. When the asteroid becomes visible in the sky, the scientists launch a campaign titled "Just Look Up," but the President follows with a campaign of her own, "Don't Look Up," urging her followers to deny the crisis. The satire of today's America is quite clear: a country bombarded by sensational media and conspiracy theories, stupefied with consumerism, and paralyzed by the interests of big tech marches blindfolded off a cliff. As for the movie's representation of ordinary citizens, celebrity social-media gossip and conspiracy theories occupy far more public attention than their imminent doom—the joke is also on us.

McKay lampoons the state of our sociopolitical institutions to warn about the real-life threats posed by climate change, fake news, a myopic political

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ecosystem, and a media where profits reign. The movie's dystopian depiction of reality is, in fact, not so distant from the chaotic situation generated in the last few years by the too-well-known lies about the COVID pandemic and voter fraud. Thus, *Don't Look Up* is insightful and undeniably urgent. It shows what happens if we lose sight of the truth and fail to act. However, it is so focused on looking up or down that it fails to look beyond, that is, it misses out on delivering moral reasoning, without which we are indeed condemned to despair, nihilism, and, most importantly, failure. The only occasion in which the movie comes close to such reasoning is reduced to emotional validation: after an emotional outburst on national TV, young scientist Kate (Lawrence) confesses that she cries several times a day and Dr. Mindy (DiCaprio) attempts to console her by telling her "everyone should be panicking right now." Although emotional validation, understanding, and acceptance are vital responses to human suffering, they fall short of really getting to the heart of the matter by *addressing what our responses ought to be*.

If we turn to Spain, it is not easy to find cultural artifacts that focus on the phenomenon of disinformation as clearly as McKay's film does. However, this does not prevent us from rethinking the Spanish cultural tradition as a place in which to find works that may reveal the workings of fake news: we need to *look beyond* traditional hermeneutics to identify cultural artifacts that, even though they were produced before our post-truth era, may illustrate how information operations work. Surely, Hispanism can and should play an important role in the fight against information manipulation. In that sense, this essay is an attempt to provide experts, including Hispanists, with a tool to teach about disinformation. It is my claim that we can use the Spanish-American War of 1898 as a paradigmatic historical example of the creation of hoaxes, and the movies *Los últimos de Filipinas* (The Last in the Philippines)¹ and *1898: Los últimos de Filipinas* (1898: The Last in the Philippines)² as instances of, respectively, a dis-info op and a counter-dis-info op. In broad terms, the comparative textual analysis of these films will show the relationship that exists between disinformation and the learning and unlearning of the historical past. More specifically, it will prove that the 2016 movie functions as a cure for the magical spell cast over the Spanish people by the 1945 original, which submitted them to the Francoist fascist project through the manipulation of colonial national history.

Vox's Manipulative Media and How to Study It

Disinformation, misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, and post-truth are words that, unfortunately, have burst onto the scene of everyday life in an overwhelming way in recent years. This new state of affairs is taking place not

only in the United States but across the globe, as seen with Russian propaganda against Ukraine or the 2022 elections in Brazil between Jair Bolsonaro and Lula da Silva, to provide just a couple of recent examples. As is well-known, in the United States and Spain, the post-truth era is mostly the result of the surge of, respectively, Trumpism and the right wing party Vox. In Spain, disinformation campaigns exploit problems that affect the *comunidades autónomas* at various degrees, therefore mirroring their identity issues. On the East Coast, Andalusia, and the Canary Islands, it is mainly the problem of immigration that causes fear among the citizens, which does not happen to the same extent in the North. In the two Castillas and, in general, the center of Spain, it is usually hunting regulations and Christianity in apocalyptic tones that receive the most attention. In Catalonia, fake news from separatist forums often go viral; the dis-info campaigns about the Catalan separatist referendum in 2017 are considered, together with the surge of Vox, the beginning of the phenomenon of disinformation in Spain. Other topics, such as bullfights and sexism, arouse the same interest throughout the entire national territory.

Vox, founded in 2012 and the third most powerful party in Spain today, stems from an ultra-conservative ideology that feeds into hoaxes relentlessly through interminable posts. Repeatedly denounced by press associations for violating freedom of information, Vox has built a media bubble in which there is no room for criticism or uncomfortable questions, its leaders arrogating for themselves the right to decide which journalists can access their press conferences. One of Vox's hallmarks is indeed its hostility toward the traditional press. Its president, Santiago Abascal, imitating Trump, treats what he calls the "prensa lacaya" (lackey press) with contempt: "Nos da igual no salir en los medios. ¿Para qué si ya estamos en las redes sociales?" (We don't care if we don't appear in the media. Why would we, if we are already on social media?).³ His accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram exceed 500,000, 700,000 and 800,000 followers respectively, even though the big tech companies have repeatedly suspended them for inciting hate. Trying to reach an even wider audience, Vox has built its own media apparatus, which serves as a megaphone for its own discourse. Among the communication channels controlled by the party are 7NN, a digital channel that had an initial capital investment of €2.5 million; the television channel El Toro TV, whose sets have helped Vox politicians gain experience in this medium; Decisión Radio, a radio channel in defense of "la unidad de España y de los valores cristianos" (Spain's unity and Christian values); and the online platform Estado de Alarma (EDA TV).⁴ The fact that the conservative media flirts on occasion with Vox also needs to be considered.

As Castillo and Egginton have eloquently argued in *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media*, we need analytical tools and actionable

strategies to promote “reality literacy.”⁵ This is most urgent given the still recent assault on Congress and the anti-democratic drift of the Republican Party in the United States, as well as the rise of the ultra-right in Europe and in many parts of the world. European far-right parties are enjoying their highest popularity in the last four decades. After their recent successes in France, Sweden, Italy, and Hungary, extreme right formations account for 17 percent of the vote, that is, one in six ballots, while in the eighties these radical forces did not get more than 4 percent of the vote.⁶ The improved results of the populist ultra-right reflect, among other causes, the dissatisfaction of broad sectors of society, nostalgia for a past that is perceived as more prosperous, and desire for greater national autonomy. These results are also due to the normalization of these political parties as a voting option and as part of coalition governments, as well as to the erosion of traditional social democratic and neoliberal parties, with the subsequent increase of, like the two sides of the same coin, abstentionism and vote radicalization. This makes media and reality literacy all the most urgent.

With this ongoing increase in authoritarian politics and the weakening of democratic institutions in many countries over the past several years, scholarly attention to disinformation has exponentially grown, as have initiatives toward finding solutions. The growing discipline of Disinformation Studies, an interdisciplinary field of study that brings together historians, social scientists, computer experts, humanists, journalists, etc., tries to shed light upon topics such as, just to name a few, Trumpism, technologies of disinformation spread, the historical background of fake news, pedagogical approaches to the teaching of misinformation and disinformation, hoaxes in national contexts other than the United States, the psychological mechanisms of post-truth, the role of journalism in fake news, and the relationship between post-truth, capitalism, and democracy. In the field of Hispanism in the United States, there are (to my knowledge) only two books published on the subject, David Castillo’s *Un-Deceptions: Cervantine Strategies for the Disinformation Age* and *What Would Cervantes Do?: Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature*, co-authored with William Egginton.⁷ In these groundbreaking books, the authors use Spanish Golden Age literary classics to shed light upon the workings of disinformation. Publications in Spain are equally scarce, but a couple of volumes stand out: the introductory book *Fake News: La verdad de las noticias falsas* by Marc Amorós García and *En la era de la posverdad*, edited by Jordi Ibáñez Fanés.⁸

There is, however, a good number of volumes already published on the subject in the United States, along with the aforementioned books. I will briefly comment on a few of them. In *Post-Truth*, Lee McIntyre traces the development of the post-truth phenomenon (science denial, the rise of fake news, our psychological blind spots, and the public’s retreat into information silos)

through the analysis of recent examples, such as the false claims about Trump's inauguration crowd.⁹ In *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, respected UK political journalist Matthew d'Ancona investigates, among other historical events, the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's victory, explaining the public's response to politician's mendacity under the light of the ability of new technologies and social media to manipulate and polarize public opinion.¹⁰ James Ball, whose reporting has won several awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, traces in *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* the story of "bullshit" since the dawn of the post-truth era in 2016—what is being spread, who is spreading it, and why it works.¹¹ Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* explores the world of Big Data and its fast-growing and scary control over almost every aspect of our lives, focusing on the ways mathematical models (algorithms) increase inequality in the United States.¹² Richard Stengel, who served as undersecretary of state during the Obama administration and on the front lines of the new global information wars, tells in *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation and What We Can Do about It* how ISIS sought to make Islam great again, Putin tried to make Russia great again, and all the same about Trump.¹³ *Hate Inc.: Why Today's Media Makes Us Despise One Another*, by Matt Taibbi, provides an insider's guide to the variety of ways mainstream media has mastered the art of monetizing anger, paranoia, and distrust in the internet age, telling us just lies.¹⁴ In *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*, Tim Wu offers a most informative account of the mass capture of public attention for resale to advertisers, proving that this is not simply the byproduct of recent technological inventions but the result of more than a century's growth in the industries that feed on human attention.¹⁵ Finally, *Literacy and Pedagogy in an Age of Misinformation and Disinformation*, edited by Tara Lockhart, Brenda Glascott, Chris Warnick, Juli Parrish, and Justin Lewis, joins ongoing engagements with the topic of post-truth rhetoric and its impact on education, opening spaces for literacy pedagogies for our current moment.¹⁶ All these authors passionately share the idea that we can fight post-truth, and the first step is to understand it.

The Spanish-American War as Paradigmatic Example of Historical Dis-Info Ops

The 1898 Spanish-American War is an excellent example of how disinformation has influenced, on more than one occasion, the course of history. If we go back to the years surrounding this war, it is easy to remember that newspapers were the most important means of communication. In this context, two great press

magnates were fighting to establish themselves as the masters of the so-called Fourth Estate in the United States: Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Pulitzer, whose name is best known for the Pulitzer Prizes, was the owner of newspapers such as the *St. Louis-Globe*, the *Post-Dispatch*, and the *World*, which he turned into the leading voice of the Democratic party. In his newspapers, Pulitzer combined exposés of political corruption and crusading investigative reporting with publicity stunts, blatant self-advertising, and sensationalistic journalism. Hearst, for his part, built a powerful business empire with which he amassed an immense fortune. By the mid-1920s, he had a nationwide string of twenty-eight newspapers, among them the *Los Angeles Examiner*, the *Boston American*, the *Atlanta Georgian*, the *Chicago Examiner*, the *Detroit Times*, the *Washington Times*, the *Washington Herald*, and his flagship, the *San Francisco Examiner*. He won over readers in a similar fashion with sensationalism, sex, crime, and graphic horrors. Orson Wells's *Citizen Kane* (1941) is loosely based on Hearst's life. The wide appeal of Pulitzer's and Hearst's journals opened the way to newspapers with mass circulation that depended on advertising revenue rather than their cover price or political party subsidies, appealing to readers with multiple forms of news, gossip, entertainment, and advertising.

For Pulitzer and Hearst, the Cuban-Spanish conflict was a gold mine to increase the sales of their newspapers. For decades, Cuban patriots had waged guerrilla warfare against Spanish rule. The revolutionaries tried to disrupt the island's economy by burning sugarcane plantations, but the Spaniards retaliated harshly, executing suspected rebels and herding peasants into camps. Pulitzer's *New York World* was involved in a fierce competition with Hearst's *New York Morning Journal*. In fact, the blatant sensationalism that both newspapers resorted to in espousing the Spanish-American War led to the coining of the term "yellow journalism." In Hearst's newspapers most particularly, the chronicles spoke of bitter fighting and concentration camps in which Spanish troops starved Cuban insurgents to death. They were chronicles rich in morbid curiosity that even included falsified images to give credibility to the news.

Determined to take advantage of the conflict in Cuba, Hearst sent one of his journalists, Frederic Remington, to Havana to illustrate the confrontations in detail. Perhaps the best-known myth in American journalism is the claim that the illustrator cabled Hearst to tell him all was quiet in Cuba, asking for permission to come home. Hearst is said to have responded, "Please remain. You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war." Although the details of the story have been disputed by historians, the fundamental fact remains—Hearst fabricated a war between the United States and Spain that turned out to be real and led to Cuban independence, and he did it with fake news by emphasizing sensationalism over facts, accentuating the harshness of Spanish rule and the nobility of the revolutionaries, falsifying images, and

printing rousing stories that proved to be false. Marc Amorós García has proposed that the Spanish-American War is a clear example of the making of fake news in the historical past.¹⁷

Hearst's most blatant false news blamed Spain for the explosion of the American battleship *Maine* in the port of Havana. It was not true, and all the investigations pointed to a fire in the ship's coal bunkers as the cause of the explosion. But Hearst headlined the *Morning Journal*, "Destruction of the war ship [sic] *Maine* was the work of an enemy" (February 17, 1898), and offered "a \$50,000 Reward for the Conviction of the Criminals who Sent 258 American Sailors to Their Death."



Fig. 1. *Morning Journal*'s front page (February 17 1898).

The news detailed how the Spaniards had attacked the ship with an underwater mine and the fake illustrations added verisimilitude. Hearst's false news was

republished (what today would be retweeting or sharing on social networks) by numerous media outlets, which blamed Spain for the incident. After the sinking of the *Maine* and United States's entry into the Spanish-American War, the daily circulation of the *Morning Journal* routinely climbed above one million. The Spanish-American war was also called the "Journals' War" due to the paper's influence in provoking American outrage against Spain.

It is important to point out that, while *Morning Journal* and the yellow press did not directly cause America's war with Spain, they inflamed public opinion in New York City to a fever pitch. New York's elites read other papers, such as the *Times* and *Sun*, which were far more restrained. The *Journal* and the *World* were local papers oriented to a largely working-class audience in New York City. They were not among the top ten sources of news in papers in other cities, and their stories did not make a splash outside New York City. Outrage across the country also came from the evidence of the bloodshed, a major influence in Congress's decision to declare war. Newspapers did contribute to public resentment against Spain, but American leaders were also responding to the real, ongoing turmoil in Cuba and understood the war as a chance to advance the United States's global interests. At the same time, the extent to which war was declared by Congress because leaders like President William McKinley realized that Spain had lost control of Cuba, or because of the melodramas of the press, is still the object of debate. Arguably, however, these stories must have also weighed on the President's mind.

The war lasted three months and ended in August of that same year. It had a quick and predictable outcome due to the American military might, and it was the beginning of Spain's loss of its last colonies, that is, Cuba, Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. The Treaty of Paris, signed on December 10, 1898, by Spain and the United States, put an end to the war. By this treaty, Spain abandoned its claims in Cuba, which declared its independence under American guidance. The Treaty of Paris is considered the endpoint of the Spanish Empire and the beginning of the period of colonial power of the United States. In fact, most American possessions outside the continent were obtained through this treaty. In the negotiations, the United States proposed, after the end of the talks on Cuban affairs, that Spain also hand over Puerto Rico and Guam. Negotiations stalled over the issue of the Philippines, with the Spanish delegation naively hoping to cede only Mindanao and the Sulu Islands. The American delegation offered twenty million dollars on November 21 and demanded a response within forty-eight hours. Queen Regent María Cristina accepted and signed the treaty, and these territories became sovereign American properties.

The loss of the last colonies had a demoralizing effect in Spain, especially among the educated and the political and cultural elites. Among the latter was the group of writers that would become known under the name of the

Generation of 98. Three decades later, one of the fundamental motives triggering the Nationalist uprising in 1936 against the legitimately elected government of the Second Republic was military resentment at the loss of the Empire. Although the Spanish-American War was not caused solely by a circulation battle among New York newspapers, the story of yellow journalism's distortions and interventions in Cuba remains a cautionary tale about the power of the media to shape public opinion and create a fever that government agents can use for their own good.

***Los últimos de Filipinas* (dir. Antonio Román, 1945)**

Los últimos de Filipinas tells the true story of the last stand against the Filipino besiegers of an isolated military post, which had not heard that Spain had surrendered the Philippines to the United States almost a year before. Directed by Antonio Román, the movie counted on the help of a military advisor and a religious advisor, but not a historical one, as the opening credits show.¹⁸ Far from anecdotal, this fact encapsulates the production context of the film: the cinema of the first years of Francoism as a propaganda vehicle for a dictatorship that desperately sought to impose its legitimacy. The circumstances of its premiere in 1945 are most illuminating. The Franco regime, internationally isolated after the defeat of the Axis, needed to remain cohesive while trying to break the harsh international autarky imposed by the Allies, who attempted to destabilize the regime through an international blockade. Hence the convenience of producing a film that would exalt the will of the Spaniards to endure the enemy's siege, much like in the historical episodes of Numantia and Sagunto. In their fight, the brave Spaniards are assisted by the Cross and the Sword, that is, by the emblematic virtues of National-Catholicism that replaced Fascism as official state ideology in the mid-forties. The movie was awarded the top *Interés Nacional* (National Interest) distinction, and its massive success undoubtedly contributed to ensuring its representation of the historical episode of Baler remained engraved in the collective national memory.¹⁹ It is my claim that *Los últimos de Filipinas* is an emblematic example of disinformation but, even more, that all the *cine de cruzada* (crusade cinema) of the 1940s can be understood as a very effective dis-info op. Nuria Triana-Toribio has studied the importance that this film production had for the construction of Spain's national identity for decades: "the *cine de cruzada* is undoubtedly emblematic in the construction of a national cinema and a national identity after the Civil War. Moreover, it is principally these films which built a historical memory which persists for the film-going and filmmaking generations of the 1960s and 1980s, and many new discourses of

national identity were created in reaction to these genres.”²⁰

Los últimos de Filipinas has been analyzed by various critics, who have highlighted the movie’s relationship with a Francoist nationalism that clings to colonial nostalgia for lost empire,²¹ the isolationist mentality of Francoist Spain and the related allegory of the siege as a response to the political boycott imposed by the United Nations,²² the representation of heroism,²³ the resemblance between *Los últimos de Filipinas* and Hollywood movies made during the Second World War,²⁴ and how the discourse of empire is intimately bound up with the discourse of patriarchy.²⁵ To complement these insightful studies, I am going to focus my analysis solely on the issue of disinformation. The film begins with a voice-over narrator, typical of Francoist cinema as the figure of authority, who presents the Spanish soldiers stationed in the village of Baler as the embodiment of the “virtudes españolas” (Spanish virtues). He also introduces the courier who, heroically dodging the numerous shots fired by the Filipino “insurgents,” manages to reach the village. The fact that the first sequence depicts the excitement that the mail creates among the soldiers in the tavern reminds us of the important *function of transmitting information* that *traditional media* (letters) had for centuries. After a close-up of the letter that Captain Las Morenas (José Nieto) writes to his son, which he will never be able to send, and the nostalgic references to faraway Spain, the innkeeper, who is one of the Filipino insurgents, looks at some pamphlets inciting the natives to revolt, which introduces the subject of political propaganda. In the next scene, Captain Las Morenas and Lieutenant Martín Cerezo (Armando Calvo), anticipating the serious situation that is fast approaching, decide that “no debemos confiarnos demasiado, nadie nos avisará cara a cara” (we shouldn’t be too confident, nobody will tell us face to face). These words signal the initial moment of separation of the two officials from the traditional mechanisms of information transmission. The Lieutenant’s remark “Dios lo hará, mi Capitán, y nosotros le ayudaremos” (God will do it, my Captain, and we will help Him) sets the ideological (religious) justification for his decisions later.

In the distance, the bonfires used by the Filipino men to transmit information among themselves acquire a threatening meaning for the Spaniards, who feel vulnerable to a means of communication that they do not control. The Captain decides that they should take refuge in the church. The siege temporarily interrupts the romance between the beautiful native Tala and soldier Juan, which perpetuates both traditional gender roles and a dehumanizing representation of the other. Filipino women (Tala) are exoticized, while all Filipino men are demonized as wicked traitors to the Spaniards. Once the fifty soldiers fortify themselves in the church, the Spanish flag that flies in the bell tower, shot with a low-angle camera several times throughout the movie, functions as an appeal

to patriotism that feeds off National-Catholicism as the only *truth*. Inside the church, Doctor Vigil (Guillermo Marín), a botany lover who represents scientific knowledge, is covertly looked at with sarcasm by the Captain and the Lieutenant. In our current context, this sarcastic gesture can be interpreted as a reminder that contempt for science often leads to *science denialism*. Foreseeing what is to come, the Captain warns that “lo esencial es acatar y cumplir estrictamente las órdenes y no excederse en las propias atribuciones” (the most important thing is to follow and strictly comply with orders and not exceed one’s own authority), and the Lieutenant responds, “es una observación que tendré muy en cuenta” (it’s an observation that I will very much take into account), an exchange that will have crucial consequences.

Four months have passed, but the soldiers are contented because they are doing their duty despite the violent harassment by the Filipino insurgents, the pressing lack of food, and the appearance of an epidemic due to malnutrition. The Captain, very sick, believes in his delusion that his son is going to be killed, in a nod to the famous story of Colonel Moscardó in the Alcázar of Toledo. The reference to the siege of the Alcázar, one of the greatest myths of the Spanish Civil War, reinforces the central role that the siege metaphor plays in the history of *Los últimos de Filipinas* and other contemporary movies, such as *Sin novedad en el Alcázar* (dir. Augusto Genina, 1940).²⁶ The Captain dies 145 days after the beginning of the siege and the Lieutenant *falsifies the truth* in the official report, writing that the Captain died of plague instead of malnutrition. Politicians also *lie*, as seen in the following scene, which recreates the Signing of the Treaty of Paris: an image of political leaders signing the Treaty and another of a newspaper reporting the news are superimposed on the same shot. The voice-over narrator says that the Spaniards in Baler “no se enteraron, ni quisieron enterarse” (they did not find out, nor did they want to find out) about *reality*. When a Filipino parliamentarian comes to announce that Spain “ha renunciado a las Filipinas” (has renounced the Philippines)—note the use of the verb “renounce” instead of “sell”—the Lieutenant refuses to believe him and decides to keep the soldiers in the church because he has not received explicit orders to capitulate. The Captain’s words advising that officers should not exceed their duties resonates here, turning the parliamentarian’s announcement into a form of *confirmation bias* that makes the Lieutenant *feel good* for not having to make the decision to surrender the church.

A second visit, this time by a Spanish official, renders the same result. Captain Olmedo requests to speak with the Captain on behalf of General Ríos, General-Governor of the Philippines. The Lieutenant hides the fact that Captain Las Morenas has died, and justifies his absence by saying “le han engañado muchas veces y se ha propuesto que no le vuelvan a *engañar*” (he has been deceived many

times and he has decided not to be deceived again) [my italics]. The Lieutenant does not believe in the authenticity of the letter brought by Captain Olmedo, even though it is written on official paper and is signed by General Ríos himself: “yo no dudo por dudar, es que es mi obligación” (I do not doubt for the sake of it, it’s just my duty). His words illustrate how the dictatorship invested greatly in the idea of “deber a la patria” (duty to the homeland), which worked as a primary signifier in a web of values intended for the justification and naturalization of the structure of power. When the courier is sent to Manila to communicate the desperate situation of the garrison and he is captured and told about the *truth*, the possibility opens for the Lieutenant to receive information that he may finally accept as *unbiased* because it comes from one of his own soldiers. However, in Antonio Román’s version, the courier is shot before returning to the church and therefore cannot communicate the news, thus exonerating the Lieutenant for keeping the soldiers inside of the church. In the 2016 film version, the courier does manage to inform the Lieutenant, to no avail as we will see.

Five months have passed since the Philippines are no longer Spanish territory and almost a year since the siege began. Like in a crescendo, a new emissary, Lieutenant Colonel Aguilar, arrives at the church, but the Lieutenant suspects that his credentials “pueden ser falsos” (could be false) because he does not see them as *trusted sources*. The eloquent shrug gesture that answers the Lieutenant Colonel’s question, “¿Pero qué quiere usted para convencerse?” (But what do you want to convince yourself?), makes clear the *futility of any evidence*, as happened with, to give just one example, some patients seriously infected with COVID who refused at the beginning of the pandemic to acknowledge the existence of the disease despite suffering from it. The Lieutenant’s stubbornness in not acknowledging the reality, despite having it in front of his very eyes, creates a true *post-truth* state of affairs because the situation of a leader (we only need to think about Trump) with his own set of facts, who never backs down, creates a feedback loop in which dubious claims raise new facts, which then generate false responses that foster even more lies. Lieutenant Colonel Aguilar, frustrated, hands the Lieutenant some newspapers from Madrid in a final attempt to convince him. Doctor Vigil notices that they do not seem false, which is not surprising given that this character precisely embodies the world of science. The Lieutenant refuses to even look at them, but when the Doctor reads aloud one of the announcements containing information about one of the Lieutenant’s personal friends, he realizes in a revelation that the Filipinos could in no way have that piece of information. The newspapers must be real, and the illusory bubble breaks.

The Lieutenant surrenders the post. A close-up of his face merges by superimposition with a general shot of the bell tower, where the Spanish flag has flown for months because his tenacity in fulfilling his duty makes him the incarnation of the most sacred patriotic values: his face and the flag become the

same thing. Duty to God and the Fatherland, the axis of the National-Catholic ideology, transforms suffering into sacrifice and death into martyrdom: a high-angle view shows the crosses that signal the burial site of more than twenty soldiers, while the extra-diegetic music of a funeral march solemnly plays. In the bombastic final scene in high-key lighting, the soldiers leave the church, proudly parading among the Filipino troops in formation, while Tala runs happily to reunite with Juan, who is thus rewarded for having remained where duty dictated.



Fig. 2. *Raza* by José Luis Sáenz de Heredia

The scene recalls the apotheotic finale of the famous José Luis Sáenz de Heredia's *Raza* (1942), as the montage accumulates a succession of technical resources that are used to report the enthusiastic reception in Spain of the heroes of Baler and the concession of the precious Laureate Cross to Lieutenant Martín Cerezo.

The disinformation operation carried out by this film, and by extension crusade cinema, is very common in war contexts. In *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*, Tim Wu studies the systematic approach to government propaganda that translated into a mass-recruiting campaign in Britain in 1914 to raise an army, which inaugurated one of the traits of twentieth-century politics: to succeed, propaganda must be total. For the author, war and post-war propaganda are nothing more than manipulation of information to get the attention, and the will, of the citizenry. *Los últimos de Filipinas* is a great example of this.

***1898: Los últimos de Filipinas* (dir. Salvador Calvo, 2016)**

Just before the premiere of *1898: The Last of the Philippines* in 2016, a message circulated massively on social networks calling for its boycott, with the intent to publicly repudiate the alleged offense carried by the film against the honor of the nation and its armed forces. Although the boycott did not materialize, it was a clear indication that Salvador Calvo's film quite exasperated a sector of public opinion, which is not surprising because the movie deconstructs Baler's Francoist version of events, which had remained engraved in the nation's imaginary for decades. It is no wonder that the critical studies published on this film to date have drawn a comparison between it and the 1945 original, focusing on their differences.²⁷ These are in fact substantial, even though both films faithfully take many details from Lieutenant Martín Cerezo's diary *El sitio de Baler*, which was published in 1904 and reprinted in 1946 right after the release of Antonio Román's movie. *1898: Los últimos de Filipinas* is an impressive critique of the manipulative function of the Francoist film apparatus in legitimizing the values upon which the dictatorship rested. The movie reveals the function of cinema in propagating ideology while unveiling the key mechanism of the 1945 film, the empty value of "Duty to Homeland" as the keystone that helped hold the Francoist regime together. In a clearly demystifying way, the 2016 film carries out a critical review of the colonial past, which is even more remarkable because these types of remakes are not abundant in Spanish cinema. The film got nine Goya nominations, including Best New Director.²⁸

Headed by the significant date "1898," the title of the film places the spectator from the start within the framework of the national *Desastre* (Disaster) that was the loss of the empire—that is, it presupposes the viewer's knowledge of the circumstances of this historical fact, inviting them to read the film under the light of historical trauma. The narrative point of view is subjectivized, moving from the story told by an omniscient third-person narrator to the personal recollections of the inexperienced twenty-year-old Carlos (Álvaro Cervantes): "Nunca había estado en una guerra y pensaba que para sobrevivir sólo necesitaba un poco de suerte y sentido común. Era joven, era ingenuo" (I had never been at war, and I thought that to survive I just needed a bit of luck and common sense. I was young, I was naïve). The choice of a first-person narrator acknowledges that historical facts need trustworthy testimony to be fully established. Upon disembarking in the northern Philippines, an overhead extreme-long shot presents from the beginning what the recently arrived soldiers really are: tiny dots literally engulfed by a river whose waters cover them up to their chests inside of an immense jungle that will end up swallowing them.

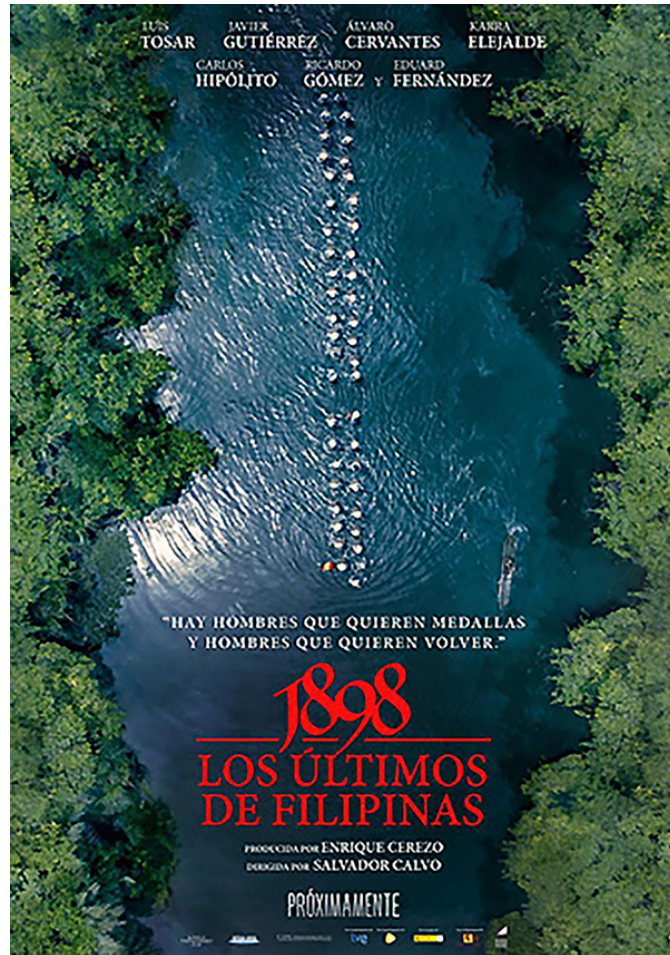


Figure 3. Film poster for *1898: Los últimos de Filipinas* by Salvador Calvo.

The narrative point of view is therefore transferred from the victorious heroes of the homeland to the victims of history, that is, from the heroic Lieutenant who was awarded the Laureate Cross to the untrained youth who were the bulk of the detachment and who, like the vast majority of soldiers at that time, could not avoid serving in the Army because their families did not have the 2,000 *pesetas* that were required in payment. Carlos, who spends his spare time drawing in a small notebook, wants to study Fine Arts at San Fernando Academy, and Don Gabriel, the mayor of his town, has promised to collect money for Carlos's studies if he returns with an exemplary service letter. It

does not take long for the Lieutenant to blurt out the harsh truth: “España está llena de patriotas como Don Gabriel, que mandan a otros mientras ellos comen jamón de bellota” (Spain is full of patriots like Don Gabriel, who send others while they eat acorn-fed ham). Carlos is, ironically, from Extremadura, the birthplace of many of the great conquistadors. The tone of the 2016 film is also dissimilar: the letters brought by the courier, who has arrived badly wounded with two arrows stuck in his back, come loaded with death.

Although the story follows a linear path, it is ordered in sequences that show how the worsening of the Spaniards’ living conditions grows in a parallel fashion to the absurdity of their situation. The black extra-diegetic signs announcing how the months go by represent how the passing of time falls like a stone on the Spaniards in confinement and surviving becomes a Herculean task. The first sign, however, does not appear over a black background, but over a series of pencil drawings that, by representing the suffering of the soldiers in an expressionist style, remind us of Francisco de Goya’s famous series of etchings *The Disasters of War*, which are a visual protest against the violence of Napoleon’s invasion of Spain. The drawings, together with Father Carmelo’s (Karra Elejalde) comment that history has always relied on someone to tell it or paint it, add a metafictional note to the film. The Filipino men, instead of devious and treacherous savages, are freedom fighters, and their moral degeneration turns into magnanimity when Commander Luna (Raymond Bagatsing) sends the Spaniards off with an honor guard in recognition of the four centuries of common history. Tala is now Teresa (Alexandra Masangkay), a proud native who constantly arouses the soldiers with her sexual provocations, which cost her life. Captain Las Morenas (Eduard Fernandez) is no longer the brave officer who gives his life for his Homeland, but a man who lives more aware of his little dog than of his men. The out-of-this-world beatitude of Father Carmelo gives way to a reverend who is an opium addict, has a homoerotic relationship with Carlos, talks about the Catholic dogmas in an unorthodox manner, and ends up committing suicide. Other differences are also worth mentioning, as the 2016 movie goes from enthusiastic martial tunes to an ominous soundtrack characteristic of dramatic movies; from heroism to the harsh reality that the (several) deserters have to endure; from obsequiousness toward the United States for sending a ship to rescue the Spaniards to the near omission of this historical fact; from military feats to anti-militarist allegations; from colonialist paternalism to the recognition of the rights to freedom, emancipation, and self-government for the colonized other; from the aggressive imposition of patriarchy to the celebration of a plurality of masculinities.

1898: Los últimos de Filipinas reflects the thin borderline that separates heroism from dehumanization, bestialization, and madness, showing the

unintended consequences of the discourse of duty when pushed to its limit. The Lieutenant (Luis Tosar) is responsible for the paradox of ending up disobeying his superior's orders for wanting to comply with them scrupulously. His near-suicidal behavior is indirectly explained by the Captain when he listens to the Lieutenant talk about his wife's and daughter's deaths of tuberculosis: "¿No habrá venido usted a inmolarsé?" (Couldn't you have come to immolate yourself?). In the 2016 rendition, a new character stands out, Sergeant Jimeno (Javier Gutiérrez), dominated by resentment since his previous detachment to Baler was mercilessly massacred two years earlier. The Sergeant exhumes a hatred toward the Filipino fighters that ends up affecting the soldiers. Carlos suffers on more than one occasion the human degradation that oozes from this context. While he is under the effect of substance abuse because Father Carmelo has encouraged him to smoke opium, Carlos participates in a raid on the village in which he savagely kills a man by stabbing him repeatedly with a knife, sets fire to a hut, and tries to burn down the entire town—madness has taken possession of him. While the Lieutenant carries him back to the church to save him from the Filipino rebels, Carlos sees everything backward: a general shot shows an inverted, upside-down image of reality, as if he has been, like Alice, transported to a land of horrors. In the dungeon where he is locked up for detoxification, lying on the ground completely naked and covered in mud, a clear image of bestialization, Carlos traces with a stone a spiral of concentric circles from which there is no escape.

Although there are differences between the two films in the representation of disinformation, both versions share the same basic ideas. Teresa and other Filipino girls bring oranges to the church as a gift from Commander Luna, together with pamphlets from Manila announcing the end of the Spanish-American War. The Lieutenant orders the Sergeant to break them up and *not say anything to anyone*. After ten months of siege, they receive a visit from Lieutenant Colonel Aguilar y Castañeda, in lieu of General Ríos. Lieutenant Martín Cerezo clings to the idea that the emissary's uniform is obsolete so as not to believe him, in a kind of *confirmation bias* of what the Lieutenant wants to hear so that he does not have to make the decision to hand over the position. The truth begins to make an impression on Doctor Vigil when he sees the newspaper *El Imparcial* and listens to Juan (Patrick Criado), who deserted shortly after arriving at Baler and who keeps yelling that they are all going down in history as "los tontos de Baler, los berracos de Baler" (the fools of Baler, the boars of Baler). But the Lieutenant sticks to his *fictional vision of reality*. Carlos tries to walk to Manila to find out what is really happening but is caught by the Filipino soldiers, and it is Commander Luna himself who informs him of the truth. Juan's bitter words confirming the news sadly reveal the historical relationship that capital, political power, and ideology have

maintained for centuries: “¡Nuestro gobierno le vendió Filipinas! ¡Por veinte millones de dólares! Tanto heroísmo y tanta mierda que nos piden, ¿y qué cuenta? El dinero es lo que cuenta, lo de siempre” (Our government sold the Philippines to the United States! For twenty million dollars! So much heroism and so much shit that they ask of us, and what counts? Money is what counts, as always). Carlos returns to the church and brings more newspapers for the Lieutenant, but the response remains the same: “¿Pero no ves que están llenos de mentiras?” (But don’t you see that they are full of lies?). The *disregard for truth* remains to the end. When the Lieutenant finally signs the act of capitulation and as the soldiers prepare to leave the church, he requests the Doctor to *falsify* the death certificates of the two soldiers he ordered executed for treason while they were in their sleep. The doctor refuses.

The Spaniards, prisoners of a siege of their own making, lose everything defending nothing, a non-existent empire, an ideal manipulated by the status quo to achieve its purposes. Throughout the film, Carlos is afraid of losing his right arm and not being able to fulfill his dream of studying Fine Arts, which is reflected in the nightmare where a Filipino man hurts him and in the episode when a dog bites him when they go out to steal food. When he attempts desertion after returning from his unsuccessful, mostly disappointing trip to Manila, the Sergeant brutally cuts off his right hand. During the conversation in which the Lieutenant tells Carlos how he has realized that the newspapers are not forged, sitting face to face, Carlos’s stump on the table stands out. Despite admitting the truth, the Lieutenant refuses to say “Los filipinos tenían la razón. Los periódicos decían la verdad” (The Filipinos were right. The newspapers told the truth), showing the distance that exists between the acknowledgment of facts at the epistemological level and the recognition of an error at the moral level. After all the suffering, the illusory dream ends, and Carlos could not care less about Fatherland. Victims of the state’s repressive power, the soldiers feel that love for their country and God does not mean anything at all, as the brief dialogue between the Sergeant and one of the soldiers illustrates:

—Cuando salgáis ahí fuera, mirad al cielo.

—Así de paso le preguntamos a Dios dónde cojones ha estado todo este tiempo, ¿no?

— . . . ¡A la mierda España!

(—When you go out there, look at the sky.

—That’s how we ask God where the hell he’s been all this time, right?

— . . . Fuck Spain!)

After eleven months of siege, the Spaniards surrender the church.



Fig. 4. 1898: *Los últimos de Filipinas* by Salvador Calvo.

The Lieutenant writes Carlos a letter of good behavior, but Carlos doesn't even look at it, throwing his notebook with all his drawings in the trash. The final extra-diegetic sign remembers the seventeen Spaniards and seven hundred Filipinos who lost their lives there.

The story of the last stand in the Philippines is an example of disinformation that has spanned for centuries. It begins during Queen Regent María Cristina's reign, with the Government selling the last Spanish colonies but receiving gloriously the defeated soldiers to cover the failure and humiliation with national pride. The creation of a heroic deed to mitigate the opprobrium of the loss of the empire continues in the 1940s as a strategy to legitimize the Franco dictatorship. It maintains its force in the 1960s, when Spain was not admitted to the United Nations, and, finally, it exerts its manipulative power for decades because it has never overtly been denied. One of the arts of yesterday's and today's demagogues is the manipulation of the past, which Vox does again and again. The party defines its electoral program as a "plan integral para el conocimiento, difusión y protección de la identidad nacional y de la aportación de España a la civilización y a la historia universal, con especial atención a las gestas y hazañas de nuestros héroes nacionales" (comprehensive plan for the knowledge, dissemination and protection of the national identity and Spain's contribution to civilization and universal history, with special attention to the deeds and exploits of our national heroes).²⁹ All of this makes the comparative study of Antonio Román's *Los últimos de*

Filipinas and Salvador Calvo's *1898: Los últimos de Filipinas* most timely. The textual analysis of the two films proves that they can be understood as examples of dis-info ops and counter-dis-info ops and, consequently, that Spain, with its fascinating history and rich cultural production, can be used as a case study to help us better understand how hoaxes work. We don't need to wait, therefore, for movies like *Don't Look Up* to be produced in Spain. The use of fake news and information operations can be dated back to the rise of the nation-state. It is true that the post-truth phenomenon is characterized by the unusually large reach of today's fake news thanks to the new digital media, and consequently, it cannot be reduced to the study of disinformation in the historical past. However, the study of the manipulation of information in history under the light of disinformation theory can help us develop new discursive models to better understand the pressing issues of yesterday and today, avoiding the danger of decontextualization. As this essay proves, these new hermeneutic practices may ultimately offer illuminating reflections on the clear and present danger that radicalized politics and disinformation pose for democracies in Spain, the United States, and beyond.

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Notes

1. *Los últimos de Filipinas*, dir. Antonio Román (Cea Distribución, 1945).
2. *1898: Los últimos de Filipinas*, dir. Salvador Calvo (13 TV, CIPI Cinematográfica S.A, 2016).
3. “La galaxia mediática de Vox,” *El País*, September 20, 2022, www.elpais.com/espana/2022-09-21/la-galaxia-mediatica-de-vox.html.
4. 7NN is a digital channel owned by two former senior officials of the Francisco Franco Foundation, and whose co-directors are closely related to Vox and the fundamentalist sect El Yunque. El Toro TV is directed by Julio Ariza, who has never hidden his support for the Party. Decisión Radio, now renamed as Radio Ya, which was chaired by Rafael López-Diéguez, son-in-law of Blas Piñar. Estado de Alarma (EDA TV), is chaired by Javier Negre, a former journalist for El Mundo who was convicted of publishing a false interview with a victim of gender-based violence.
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17. Marc Amorós García, *Fake News: La verdad de las noticias falsas* (Barcelona: Plataforma editorial, 2018), 33–35.

18. Antonio Román is one of the most important directors in postwar Spain, together with Sáenz de Heredia and Rafael Gil. He directed numerous films, including *Escuadrilla* (1941) and *La fierecilla domada* (1956).

19. The film was highly acclaimed by the public (29,966 viewers) and the critics (ABC, Arriba, Pueblo), making 452,611 *pesetas* (from 1945) at the box office.

It was considered “nuestra mejor película histórica” (our best historical film) (Rigol and Sebastian).

20. Nuria Triana-Toribio, *Spanish National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 47.

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28. Salvador Calvo was born in 1970 in Madrid. His short film *Maras* (2019) obtained great recognition in festivals around the world. In 2021, he won the Goya Award for Best Director for his drama film *Adú*.

29. “Así piensa Vox hacer la ‘reconquista,’” *El País*, December 3, 2018, www.elpais.com/politica/2018/12/03/actualidad/1543818477_031422.html?rel=lom.

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