

# IMAGES OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR IN AMERICAN CINEMA:

1936-1939

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The Spanish civil conflict was the first war in which the lenses of photographers and filmmakers captured images in the front lines. In addition, it is a historical media event in as much as images of civilian pain circulated internationally for the first time, causing, as a consequence, a great impact that did not have any clear precedent up to this point in time.

Undoubtedly, the camera's mechanical apparatus is able to register a myriad of details that often escape the human eye. Moreover, the documentary image held a powerful epistemological status as an indexical record of the real, far beyond the heated debates in relation to the use of cinema as propaganda that were in vogue in the 1930s. What is more, this ruthless war was happening in a European territory, ever present through the press and cinematic images distributed daily, and was perceived as a prelude to a worldwide conflict the neighboring democratic states were bound to encounter.

In this sense, the social impact of the Spanish civil war was paramount and unleashed a great deal of international solidarity from countries such as France, Great Britain and the majority of Latin America. In the United States, the civilian movement (despite the non-intervention official policy of the state) was remarkable, and, functioned as a powerful point of reference that bound cohesively a series of emergent political movements that had come to existence in the first years of the 1930s.

Multiple stories that, one way or another, mythologized, and, consequently, legitimized a variety of political practices around the significance of the SCW and the international solidarity in relation to the *República* have become an essential part of the Spanish civil war as a discursive construct within the United States. More than the struggle to support a social and political cause, what was at stake was the need to define a series of U.S. symbols and national values.

From this angle, my dissertation attempts to analyze images of the Spanish civil war

in U.S. filmmaking. Cinema, as a mass media, is particularly suitable for my object of study for two reasons. On the one hand, it is the very medium in which the 1930s milieu's modes of representation and social problematics crystallize. In this respect, I have not chosen the list of films that compose my object of study following aesthetic criteria. Instead, each of them reveals a specific set of key issues in relation to the socio-cultural discourses at work in this time period. My goal is to re-construct the "epoch's eye" (following Baxandall's term) and trace a series of connections between these films and the tradition from which they spring in order to understand the historical conditions that enabled their emergence in U.S. society. I will address the use of images in relation to a series of diverse processes of historical reflection: the embedded contradictions of the documentary film, the possibility of using images as documents and, finally, the close relationship between cinema and history.

On the other hand, cinema, as a discursive apparatus (that produces stories), is endowed with a significant capability to create cultural models in as much as it feeds diverse communities of spectators with a series of stereotypes, cultural prejudices and representations. From this point of view, it is important to study the ways in which cinema produces meaning, and, ultimately, the variety of manners in which these representations intervene in the social field.

I take as a point of departure the understanding of films as cultural objects (analyzing the production history of each of them). In addition, I will pay close attention to their formal characteristics, and, from these detailed studies, I will attempt to reach a conclusion that sums up all my historical, cultural and cinematic analyses.

I have organized the study of films in two sections, one dealing with New York produced films and the other with Hollywood. This distinction is based on the fact that, as it is known, each of these industries works with different criteria, marking their films with a characteristic imprint, whether they are independent features or not.

Thus, the first part of my work deals with the study of images of the Spanish civil war in New York-based filmmaking. I will pay close attention to films such as *Spain in Flames* (Helen Van Dongen, 1937), *Heart of Spain* (Herbert Kline, 1937) and *Return to Life* (Henri-Cartier Bresson, 1938) as long as to other independent documentaries about the war in Spain.

For my purposes, it is fundamental to address the formation of a public sphere in relation to the war and the political debate regarding the U.S. non-intervention policy in order to analyze the films from the perspective I have outlined above. Consequently, I will emphasize the role of writers and journalists that took part in the Spanish war as a way to trace their influence in the creation of this political forum within the United States. The Francoist repression in Badajoz, the Gernika tragedy or the systematic Madrid bombings from the very beginning of the war are key events that deserve close examination.

Likewise, I intend to consider the work of graphic journalists such as Robert Capa, David Seymour or Henri Cartier-Bresson in terms of the dissemination of images of the war and their relationship with the cinematic ones. Then I will proceed to scrutinize the ways in which these images became an emblem for the Spanish civil war, contributing to the myth making that surrounds it throughout the 1930s and nowadays.

Through a close analysis of *The Spanish Earth* (Joris Ivens, 1937), I will demonstrate the issues outlined in this first section. I will study its production history and its circulation as well as the different mechanisms of symbolization at work in the film.

The second half of my dissertation focuses on Hollywood-produced films dealing with the Spanish civil war. I will analyze *Last Train from Madrid* (James Hogan, 1937), *Love under fire* (George Marshall, 1937), and also *Blockade* (William Dieterle, 1938), a film independently produced by Walter Wanger.

The detailed study of the latter film will allow me to address the politicization of the film world in the beginning of the 1930s as a direct consequence of the Great Depression, the arrival to Hollywood of European *émigrés* fleeing Fascism and Nazism, and the partial migration of the New York intellectual class – Dorothy Parker, Lillian Hellman, Dashiell Hammett or Ernest Hemingway – to work in Hollywood motion picture business.

Through the study of *The Spanish Earth* and *Blockade*, I will try to identify a series of elements that allowed the discursive construction of Spain and the Spanish people in the United States during the New Deal. Ultimately, I would like to trace the nature of the discursive practices that exist between a country in war that has been constructed as a secular space for myth-making and legend for U.S. intellectuals and travelers and, later the mass media, and a nation living a historical time in crisis, such as the United States in the era of the Great Depression, which was in the midst of re-negotiating its own identity as a country.