

# Luis García Berlanga and the portrayal of The Spanish Civil War: *La vaquilla* (1985) as cinematic *esperpento*

## *Luis García Berlanga y la representación de La Guerra Civil española: La vaquilla* (1985) como *esperpento* cinematográfico



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### Abstract:

The *esperpento*, beyond the literary conception coined by Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, entails singular aesthetics which can be transferred to other arts, as it is the case of film. The cinematic *esperpento*, even though it assimilates its main characteristics into the audiovisual medium, has not had a historically well-defined path within Spanish film, as it did not quite fit in the common waves of dissident cinema and francoist cinema. As an answer to this problem, the aim of this essay is to analyze *La vaquilla* (Luis García Berlanga, 1985) as a paradigmatic example of the Spanish cinematic *esperpento*, even if it has not been considered like that by other authors or has been generally ignored. Through this analysis, the aesthetic functionality of the genre will be observed and its systematically deforming approach will lead to draw unique conclusions regarding the extremely traumatic event that the Spanish Civil War was, which shaped the historical memory of the nation. In this sense, the narrative possibilities of the cinematic *esperpento* and the necessity to give the genre a historical place of its own will be vindicated.

### Keywords:

Cinematic *esperpento*; Spanish Civil War; Luis García Berlanga; Rafael Azcona; Memory.

### Resumen:

El *esperpento*, más allá de la concepción literaria acuñada por Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, conforma una estética que puede ser transferida a otras artes, como es el caso del cine. El *esperpento* cinematográfico, que asimila sus principales características al medio audiovisual, no ha tenido un recorrido histórico claro dentro de la cinematografía española, condenado a transitar entre las tierras del llamado cine disidente y el cine continuista. Como respuesta a tal problemática, el objetivo de este trabajo es analizar *La vaquilla* (Luis García Berlanga, 1985) como ejemplo paradigmático del *esperpento* cinematográfico español, película que no ha sido considerada como tal por otros autores o incluso se ha ignorado. A través de dicho análisis, se observará la funcionalidad estética del género y se indagará en las singulares conclusiones derivadas de un acercamiento sistemáticamente deformador respecto a un evento tan traumático para la memoria histórica nacional como fue la Guerra Civil española. De este modo, se reivindicarán tanto las posibilidades narrativas del *esperpento* cinematográfico como la necesidad de otorgar un lugar propio al género dentro de la historia del cine español.

### Palabras clave:

*Esperpento* cinematográfico; Guerra Civil española; Luis García Berlanga; Rafael Azcona; Memoria.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Characteristics of the *esperpento*: concept and aesthetics

When speaking of an “*esperpento*,” beyond the common use of the word (practically inscribed in today’s everyday language) or its etymological origin, it is impossible to avoid the allusion to Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, who thus baptized his own literary conception around 1920. The author would grant the *esperpento* the capacity of deforming reality, which managed to accentuate its most grotesque features and, in this way, could be used to answer several questions about the nature of the Spanish situation at the time. In Valle-Inclán’s opinion, the most viable option to explain and denounce the tragic course of the grotesque reality of his country was through the *esperpento*, as he defined it in the seminal work *Luces de bohemia* (1924). There, through the voice of his protagonist, Max Estrella, he establishes that “our tragedy is not tragedy” (Valle-Inclán, 1924: 154) and that, consequently, “the tragic sense of Spanish life can only be given with a systematically deformed aesthetic” (157), for which he would use the example of distorted reflections in concave mirrors.

The genesis of the Valleinclanian *esperpento* is located in a context of crisis whose ramifications stemmed from the loss of the last colonies and the consequent discontent and instability of the late nineteenth century. In the midst of such a climate, there are several authors who affirm a social commitment in the writer of *Luces de bohemia*, beyond a mere use of original literary resources. In other words, Valle-Inclán’s work “presents historical realities and characters with a considerable human density that does not disappear or is not invalidated by the abundant presence of ironic and grotesque ingredients” (Fernández Oblanca, 2001: 152). The middle ground to be reconciled would be the dichotomy realism-inconventionalism, since the singularity of the *esperpento* in the presentation of a given era clashed with the usual ideas of realism. This singularity stemmed from a conscious impulse on the part of Valle, who said the following: “the word in literary creation always needs to be transferred to that plane in which the world and human life are idealized” (quoted in Fernández Oblanca, 2001: 151). Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to the functioning of this supposed idealization in order to understand the corrosive power of the *esperpento*.

In this sense, Valle would speak very significantly about the theory of the three visions in order to better conceptualize the *esperpentic* notion. There would be three ways of contemplating the world from the artistic and aesthetic point of view: “kneeling, standing or raised in the air” (Pólak, 2009: 22). While in the first, typical of classical tragedy, the characters are admired and in the second, as Shakespeare did, they are observed from the same height, Valle opts for a third way. He prefers to “approach them from the air, which is to look at them from a distance, with impassivity and superiority” (Santos Zas) and, in this way, he establishes a gaze that considers his characters “as beings inferior to the author, with a point of irony” (Pólak, 2009: 22). Taking this into account, it can be affirmed that the individuals who populate the *esperpentic* fictions suffer a dehumanizing process, “they lose their greatness to become dolls [...], they are reduced to lumps and simple doodles or become animalized” (Santos Zas).

As a result, the third vision, characteristic of the *esperpento*, must necessarily be represented through a concrete aesthetic, under the lenses of the aforementioned concave mirrors, in order to effectively establish such a distancing gaze in relation to its pathetic characters. In fact, the *esperpentic* aesthetic has been coined by several authors since several of its elements are traceable. For example, Petr Pólak considers that it is “consisting of the systematic deformation of classical norms, by means of which the most beautiful images become absurd” (2009: 17). Furthermore, for Francisco Ruiz Ramón, this aesthetic forms a vision of the

world “to which the writer arrives from a specific Spanish historical circumstance and from a particular ideology, the result of a critical stance, whose root is both individual and social” (1971: 126). This last idea reiterates what Fernández Oblanca mentioned regarding the idea of the *esperpento* as an urgent intellectual exercise and not only an aesthetic one. Anthony N. Zahareas would affirm that “the *esperpento* is not simply a grotesque quality but a grotesque situation; [...] Valle-Inclán’s stylistic virtuosity is not only a case of aesthetic gymnastics but also aesthetics of commitment” (1966: 162). Consequently, it should not be forgotten that his formal exercise, although highly stylized, is dialectically linked to specific historical and cultural coordinates.

On the other hand, although Valle established the bases of aesthetics during part of his work, the *esperpento* cannot be reduced as relative to a single art, already from its very genesis. In fact, “the comparison with Goya has [...] its origin in the declarations of the writer himself, who now as on other occasions understands his work in dialectical relation with painting” (Ríos-Font and Ríos-Font, 1992: 290). Again returning to *Luces de bohemia*, Max Estrella says that “*esperpentism* was invented by Goya” (Valle-Inclán, 1924: 156), so the author is appealing to the inter-artistic component of his conception, which would already be rooted, to a certain extent, in the Spanish tradition. With this in mind, the *esperpentic* aesthetic could not belong exclusively to the literary field and, as a result, its influence would branch out towards other cultural manifestations, where its functioning would share many of the traits, on the one hand, and adapt the remaining ones to the particularities of the medium in question, on the other. Such is the case of cinema.

### 1.2. *Esperpentic film: an alternative modernity*

It is not sufficient to speak of a mere aesthetic assimilation to the cinematographic medium, since it would be reductionist to think that there is only an intermediate transfer of themes, oral language or character construction. Likewise, the necessary and significant formal transemiotization must be taken into account when it comes to capturing on the screen questions of the *esperpento* in terms of style and point of view. Some of the defining formal considerations of the *esperpentic* film have been reasonably grouped by Ángel Morán Paredes in his article “The cinematic *esperpento*: from *El pisito* to *Crimen ferpecto*”. According to the author, its most notable characteristics are the following (2006: 12):

- A way of narrating in which simultaneous actions prevail, with different characters (main and secondary) together within the frame, which leads to a chaos of dialogues hindering each other.
- Shots of long temporal duration, with a greater predilection for the sequence shot (colder and more distant) and a scale far from the characters, so that medium shots are scarce and close-ups are hardly used.

With the aforementioned formal features, the *esperpentic* film would achieve, from the audiovisual medium, “the demiurgic attitude proposed by Valle-Inclán, the non-identification of the author with his characters” (Morán Paredes, 2006: 12).

However, the existence of this cinematic trend in Spain cannot be explained without the complicated post-Civil War context. Before the *Salamanca Conversations* (1955), considered a turning point in the history of Spanish cinema, the industrial, social and ideological situation of the seventh art was pitiful in the eyes of part of the sector. To exemplify this feeling, Juan Antonio Bardem would mercilessly define these circumstances in the following way: “Current Spanish cinema is: politically ineffective, socially false, intellectually insignificant, aesthetically null and industrially rickety” (quoted in Seoane Riveira, 2017: 195). Be that as it may, from the *Conversations*, which were programmed with the aim of seeking a common commitment that would change

the situation, “between the decades of the 50s and the 60s the history of cinematographic modernity in Spain is configured” (Seoane Riveira, 2017: 193).

In a certain sense, what such an event achieved would be the historiographical division of Spanish cinema, in the manner of two Spains, around a pair of very differentiated sides, “the continuists (followers of the regime) versus the dissidents (opposed to it)” (Seoane Riveira, 2017: 197). It would remain to be defined with certainty the place where the cinematic *esperpento* can be located, since, on the one hand, it is too cynical, disbelieving and rupturist to speak of “continuism” and, on the other hand, it is often accused of an absent political commitment or of generalized cruelty to speak of “dissidence.” According to Seoane Riveira, the *esperpentic* way would need to be considered “an alternative cinematographic modernity to the one consensualized from the Salamanca Conversations of 1955” (2017: 18).

Tracing the precedents of this alternative path, several authors would agree in pointing to the famous Madrid director Edgar Neville as a filmmaker who, to a certain extent, began to work with the *esperpentic* elements, whose most prolific period was the decade of the 1940s with titles such as *La torre de los siete jorobados* (1944), *La vida en un hilo* (1945) or *Domingo de carnaval* (1945). In his feature films “we sometimes find a deforming, almost surrealist and expressionist character [...], therefore, the *esperpentic* aesthetic does not remain so far from Neville” (Morán Paredes, 2006: 7). It is therefore reasonable to consider the director from Madrid a remarkable precedent, since “he will represent the first step on the path of Spanish cinema towards the *esperpento* with the assimilation of Valleinclanian and Quevedo’s literary techniques” (Seoane Riveira, 2017: 202). However, the real initiator of this current was not a director, but a screenwriter.

### *1.3. Rafael Azcona: how a screenwriter initiates the cinematic *esperpento**

Before getting to the well-known and indispensable Berlanga-Azcona tandem, whose work is undoubtedly framed within the coordinates of the cinematic *esperpento* presented here, it is worth emphasizing why the scriptwriter from La Rioja is considered the genuine initiator of this genre. A humorous and extremely acid writer, Rafael Azcona ventured into cinema as a screenwriter with Italian director Marco Ferreri, who adapted a novel by Azcona himself, *El pisito* (1958). This film was to be the first great example of *esperpentic* film, but, although he was the screenwriter, “Azcona is not the garnish, he is the real content and it is Ferreri who serves as a filler for Azcona’s universe” (Deltell, 2011: 8). From this film onwards, the Azconian aspect begins to be perfectly traceable, whose elements would include “the tendency to chorality, black humor, the distancing from his characters, irony, the presence of death” (Angulo, 2000: 35), all of them features shared with the *esperpentic* tradition.

This is how a very young Víctor Erice and Santiago San Miguel explained it in 1961, considering Azcona the initiator of a new cinematic current whose bizarre realism would be linked to “the deformation of reality, monsters, the *esperpento*, the so-called black humor, Spanish humor”. In this way, the scriptwriter from La Rioja would be one more continuator within the long Spanish artistic tradition “that goes from the Picaresque to the present day” (San Miguel and Erice, 1961). More authors agree, such as Marta Raquel Macciuci, who also does not hesitate to include Azcona in the “path of the fertile Hispanic tradition of satire and mockery”, besides pointing out that he revitalizes practices connected “with Valle-Inclán, with Arniches, with Quevedo” (2001: 4). His more than reasonable link with Luis García Berlanga has meant that, on occasions, the figure of the scriptwriter has remained in the shadows. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out the mutual influence to which they were exposed.

Although it is true that in Berlanga, one of the most recognized figures of Spanish cinema, there are also clear signs of the esperpentic aesthetics in his beginnings, his first films tend to be framed in a more tender and sainesque territory, although not lacking in mordacity. Such is the case of *¡Bienvenido, Mister Marshall!* (1953) and *Esa pareja feliz* (1953), the latter co-directed with Juan Antonio Bardem, whose sarcasm veiled by costumbrist humor and some scenes of chaotic chorality are established as vestiges of what is investigated in the present essay. A very important point that would indicate the change in the director's career when teaming up with Azcona would be the formal issue, a very significant aspect in the conception of the cinematic esperpento, as indicated above. In fact, the extensive shots that made the director famous were not yet part of his repertoire, since "Berlanga did not yet use, in 1958, the long sequence shot of characters [...], the Berlangaian sequence shot appears with the collaboration of Rafael Azcona and not before him" (Deltell, 2011: 9).

It is considered that, until Berlanga worked with Azcona, the manifestations of the esperpento would not reach their most powerful levels. From this point on, their collaboration would extend almost throughout the rest of his career (with the exception of Berlanga's last films, *Todos a la cárcel*, from 1993 and *París Tombuctú*, from 1999). Paradigmatic examples, essential films in the history of Spanish cinema, could be *Plácido* (1961) and *El verdugo* (1963), able to circumvent Franco's censorship through corrosive humor linked to the esperpento, already with a fully consolidated aesthetic thanks to the conjunction between Azcona's narrative potential and Berlanga's duly orchestrated expression. Precisely, again, in that aesthetic "Azcona and Berlanga seem to coincide with Valle-Inclán" with respect to the words of Max Estrella and the systematically deformed tragic sense already mentioned here (González, 2008: 75).

However, the case that interests this study will be his famous film about the Spanish Civil War, *La vaquilla* (1985), in which the esperpentic optics would be used to analyze the conflict that defined the country in the twentieth century and whose resonances, to some extent, still persist today.

## 2. *La vaquilla*: esperpentizing Spain's wounds

### 2.1. Summary, historical context and criticism

This collaboration between Berlanga and Azcona, as already noted, sought the grotesque representation of the most traumatic event in recent Spanish history. To do so, it was based on a simple plot: at the front of the war, the rebel side plans to hold a party in the nearby town, where there will be a banquet and a heifer will be fought, but the Republicans will try to thwart it by infiltrating their lines to steal the animal. From this event onwards, the spectator witnesses a systematic ridiculing of all the agents involved in the film's story.

Regardless of its subject matter, *La vaquilla*, almost reaching two million spectators, "became one of the highest grossing films by the director of *El verdugo*" (González, 2008: 73). This fact, which could be anecdotic, takes on great importance considering its year of release, 1985. It should be noted, as Jo Labanyi points out, that "few films and almost no fiction writing dealt with the subject in the first ten years after Franco's death, when the promotion of an outrageous hypermodernity prevailed" (2007: 95). On this point, Sánchez-Biosca also agrees, since he considers that "at the end of the 1990s, an inverse obsession is already in the air: a compulsive need for rehistoricization that goes hand in hand with a certain disappointment, at least, of the ideals formulated

in the previous decade” (1995: 181). However, the responses to the need mentioned by Sánchez-Biosca were different and even antagonistic in certain aspects.

For example, quoting Labanyi again, once a certain point was reached in the eighties, some of the films that would confront the issue of the war would be “seemingly driven by a nostalgic desire to romanticize the Republic” (2007: 95), where she mentions *¡Ay, Carmela!* (Carlos Saura, 1990) and *Libertarias* (Vicente Aranda, 1996). Against this idealistic vision, *La vaquilla* seems to position itself, perhaps, more in line with the spirit of the pact of oblivion, without the decision to block the past, “but a decision not to let it shape the future” (Labanyi, 2007: 93), through a reduction of the conflict to the absurd. To this end, Berlanga and Azcona’s film would use a polyphonic and grotesque discourse that “serves to confront the rigid and static vision of the reality of the Civil War” (González, 2008: 78).

However, the film that is the subject of this research has not been classified in a particular current, precisely because of the unusual nature of its discourse. It is very curious how, in Labanyi’s articulation of two general types of cinematic approach to the memory of the war, *La vaquilla* is left adrift. The author differentiates two significant tendencies when it comes to approaching the conflict: on the one hand, that which uses the realm of the fantastic and intergenerational memorial trauma, a “haunting presence of the violent past in the present”, and, on the other hand, “those texts which opt for a realistic or documentary format”, which would transport us “back to the past” (2007: 103). *La vaquilla* does not fit any of these molds, since, although it seems to conform a representation of that warlike past, its esperpentic premises deform any realistic pretension. In this way, something similar to what happened after the Salamanca Conversations would be occurring, dividing the manifestations in binary terms, relegating a possible alternative esperpentic path to dismissal.

Its coarse and cynical character contrasts sharply with the usual sacralization and dramatization with which such a traumatic event as the Civil War is presented. In fact, in Sánchez-Biosca’s opinion, the film is not even considered as an example of esperpentic cinema, which would problematize the supposedly festive character of the film when it comes to exploring the conflict, due to its innocuous effectiveness. For the author, *La vaquilla* would be permeated by the comedy of the eighties and its aesthetics would be “‘fallera’, colorful, eccentric, ‘Valencian’, to the detriment of the esperpentic tonality, of Valleinclanesque style, which once characterized Berlanga’s films during the fifties and sixties” (Sánchez Biosca, 1995: 185). On the contrary, Sánchez-Biosca himself affirms that the script of the film “had been written by Berlanga in collaboration with Rafael Azcona in 1956, but the censorship had forbidden it” (1995: 184), which would indicate that the intentionality of the film does fit in the temporal coordinates of his most remembered esperpentic works.

Even taking into account that the gestation of *La vaquilla* was censored for decades, with the inevitable changes that the script would suffer over time<sup>1</sup>, the film is “the most complete approach to the civil war from the prism of the comic” (González, 2008: 73). Moreover, as will be shown below, the film by Berlanga and Azcona does have many of the characteristics that define the aesthetics of the cinematic *esperpento*, so it should be defined as such. Through distancing formal techniques, a construction of characters based on deformation, demythologization and chorality or a systematic situational confusion linked to the flimsy,

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1 His initial script, titled “No Man’s Land”, underwent changes in its progressive rewrites that eliminated some particularly grotesque scenes or characterizations. For example, the brothel scene shows bald, toothless, near-starvation women, something that does not prevent the soldiers from trying to have intercourse with them. Although it can be argued that the genesis of *La vaquilla* had a particularly corrosive grotesque character, this does not invalidate the idea that will be defended below.

almost interchangeable ideology of its inhabitants, *La vaquilla* achieves a unique commentary on the Civil War from the esperpentic approach.

## 2.2. Distancing techniques, esperpentic heroes, inversion of roles and animalization-symbolism

The first aspect to highlight is the formal question, in which we will see how the semantic sense of some of the shots in *La vaquilla* is in line with the cinematic esperpento. Already from the opening scene, which begins with the reproduction of popular music on a record player and, therefore, signaling a tonal short-circuit between the conflict and its soundtrack, the republican trench is presented in several sequence shots. Although the comparison may seem arbitrary, if one thinks of the aesthetic approach of films like *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957) or *1917* (Sam Mendes, 2019), their sequence shots inside the trenches sought a total immersion in the terror of war, as well as a greater emotional connection with the soldiers. On the contrary, in *La vaquilla*, Berlanga uses these sequence shots in line with the esperpentic postulates of distancing and coldness with respect to the characters. Thus, what is seen at the beginning is a small trench from the outside, populated by soldiers who, in comparison with the dry and hot landscape, are almost reduced to a prop (Figures 1 and 2). This wide framing allows for the seemingly chaotic confluence of many of the characters, who are heard interacting, but it is difficult to properly understand what about. Such empathic disconnection and incommunication among its participants already points to a reflection on the nature of war itself.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Source: Illustrations from *La vaquilla* (García Berlanga, L. (1985). InCine S.A / Jet Films. DVD is from 2013, by DIVISA HOME VÍDEO and Video Mercury Films

The scene ends up making explicit this lack of communication when a town crier of the rebel side transmits over the loudspeaker that the festivities of the next town will take place, where there will be a banquet, a dance and a bullfight. This form of demoralization angers the sergeant played by Alfredo Landa, who runs to transmit from the Republican loudspeaker, whereas the interruption between characters while the Francoist announcement continues to be heard in the background is really confusing. At last, the sergeant uses his transmitter to command the other side to be quiet, but he will have to resort to shouting. To this, the soldier next to him says “don’t shout so much, my Brigade, it distorts” (06:55). Those on the same side do not listen to each other, nobody cares about what each individual says, and to be heard means shouting, even if it “distorts” the atmosphere.

The use of the sequence shot, as is common in Berlanga-Azcona, is frequently seen in the film. To mention other notable examples, when the banquet begins, in a single shot the viewer can witness the ridicule of the different characters of the Francoist



side (Figures 3 and 4). In this sequence, the camera moves along the table, stopping at each of them (from 1:12:00 to 1:14:00). First, a requeté tells the Marquesa that she has mismanaged her husband's money, to which the Marquesa suggests that she say that the Reds have taken it from him, but give the money to her, as she will give it to the priests so that she can go to heaven more quickly. Next, the priest asks that the dance at the festivities not be "*agarrao*", in order to avoid promiscuity. Finally, the marquis tells a military man how his ailment, gout, could be traced back even to Philip II. Thus, only in those two minutes without cuts, the following is questioned from the grotesque: the inaptitude in management and the everlasting alibi of blaming everything on the "red menace", the greed disguised as charity, the rigid and rancid morals of the Church, as well as the delusions of grandeur and the hereditary privileges of a nobility that had fallen into disrepair. In this way, "the tragedy of Spain becomes a disturbing but comic spectacle" (Santos Zas) and "the 'esperpented history'" shows that it not only remains in the stylistic feature of the grotesque, as mentioned in the introduction to this essay, but is also capable "of a severe social criticism and a deep concern for the national tragedy" (Zahaeras, 1967: 706).

**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

**Source: Illustrations from *La vaquilla* (García Berlanga, L. (1985). InCine S.A / Jet Films. DVD is from 2013, by DIVISA HOME VÍDEO and Video Mercury Films**

The second point to be discussed, vital in the esperpentic matter and illuminating in the war context, is the articulation of the hero in this type of fictions. Returning to the third vision of which Valle spoke, one of its epicenters would be personified by the esperpentic hero, in line with the absurd hero, unable "to face reality with honor and dignity" (Pólak, 2009: 20). This antihero with ridiculous features and strongly determined by his social environment would be described by Valle in this way: "in life there are many beings who carry tragedy within themselves and who are incapable of a lifted attitude, resulting, on the contrary, grotesque in all their acts" (quoted in Pólak, 2009: 20). Consequently, the classical archetypes would have been turned around, now useless before the same fatality of destiny that the characters of antiquity carried on their shoulders with haughtiness (Pólak, 2009: 21). *La vaquilla*, from its chorality, assumes the same representation of the grotesque hero in its protagonist republican regiment.

The film is far from any kind of romanticization of war and its participants. War heroism, with stories about brave soldiers capable of deeds that dignify them, is at the opposite pole of what is presented in the movie. This is perfectly exemplified in the opening moments of the mission, when they must form a small team to infiltrate the rebel zone. The troop, gathered in an abandoned and destroyed church, awaits orders, and when the lieutenant looks for one of them to help with the hunt for the heifer, he tries to hide (16:10). There is no predisposition on the part of the soldiers and their total cowardice is clear, only ended when a soldier who



claims to be a bullfighter offers himself for the adventure. However, when this pitiful commando of 5 men arrives at the stable where the heifer is, the bullfighter does not dare to attack her, not even with threats such as “either you kill her or you end up in a court martial” (30:25). Between all of them, they will try to corner it, but, before that, the sergeant realizes that the bullfighter has had his bowels done on him (Figure 4). After getting out of there, he will try to defend himself in an unconvincing way saying: “for the record, it wasn’t fear, it’s just that yesterday I ate plums and as they were green, of course, today I had a shitting problem” (34:30). The figure of the soldier, on the one hand, and the bullfighter, on the other, are simultaneously reduced to scatological absurdity. This scatological, vulgar and tawdry path that, undoubtedly, vertebrates *La vaquilla*, is one of the reasons why the film could be accused of being ordinary and not esperpentic. However, it should be taken into account that, in the esperpento, “the same principle of subversion of classical norms is applied to language”, giving equal space to “registers of popular, vulgar and torn speech” or “outburst and blasphemy” (Santos Zas), so it is consistent if it is intended to affect the aforementioned esperpentic demystification of human behavior in war. Thus, the scatological aspect joins the continuous sexist attitudes of the soldiers on both sides.

Figure 4



Figure 5



Source: Illustrations from *La vaquilla* (García Berlanga, L. (1985). InCine S.A / Jet Films.  
DVD is from 2013, by DIVISA HOME VÍDEO and Video Mercury Films

Already at the beginning of the film, the Republican sergeant is worried when he realizes that, on the Franco side, there will be a ball attended by the women of the town. He believes that, “if word of the ball gets out, I’ll get the troops horny and go over to the enemy en masse” (11:30). This perception that positions primary sexual impulses above the ideological is repeated again later, with the Republican team already infiltrating enemy lines. Instead of returning to their area, the lieutenant decides that they should go to an improvised brothel in the village (Figure 5). There, they will meet other soldiers and Francoist characters, so the Republican sergeant concludes: “communism, fascism, but when it comes to having sex, we all agree” (56:10). With this statement, both Republicans and Francoists assume the grotesque representation of a patriarchal Spain, defining their grotesque antiheroes as simpletons of little reasoning involved in a war they do not understand. Once again, “behind the buffoonish, the grotesque, the comic and the absurd, a dramatic situation is always glimpsed” (Santos Zas).

Not only is there a widespread misunderstanding of the conflict, but also a lack of ideological consistency in all the characters, illustrated by the arbitrary geographical location of its components and “a reversal of roles [...] that generates a series of misunderstandings and deceptions fundamental to the film’s comedy” (González, 2008: 77). The first point becomes clear at the

beginning of the film, when both sides meet for an exchange in no man's land, since, as the Republican sergeant says: "they have tobacco, but they lack cigarette paper, and we the other way around. Well, we exchange one thing for the other and that way we all smoke" (7:20). Once reunited, a Francoist soldier and a Republican soldier talk about the possibility of exchanging themselves between them, since the Republican's girlfriend lives in the town controlled by the rebel side and the Francoist's family lives in the Republican zone. To such a proposition, the superior Francoist rank says: "But have you thought that the war is a joke? But don't you know that there are two Spains, ours and theirs?" (10:12). The soldiers do not quite understand why tobacco can be exchanged and they cannot, which points out how the only reason they fight on their side is a random spatial issue.

Similarly occurs with the role reversal to which the Republican commando that infiltrates the village is subjected. For the mission, they must disguise themselves as Francoists, which, inevitably, will force them to behave like them. However, one of the most remarkable scenes in this regard occurs when, after the first failed attempt to steal the heifer, the Republican commando bathes in a pond (Figure 6). Suddenly, a van appears with Francoist soldiers who also decide to bathe there. As they are all naked, without their uniforms, they do not identify themselves as enemies, to which the Republican sergeant adds: "What life is, Lieutenant. Here, naked, no enemy, no nothing" (37:57). Again, the arbitrariness of ideology is called into question, exemplified in how the dispossession of ideologically charged symbols equalizes the human condition, at least on this occasion.

**Figure 6**



**Source: Illustrations from *La vaquilla* (García Berlanga, L. (1985). InCine S.A / Jet Films. DVD is from 2013, by DIVISA HOME VÍDEO and Video Mercury Films**

Finally, as for the animalization characteristic of the *esperpento*, in addition to the constant references to pigs and swines, which are undoubtedly related to the behavior of the soldiers, perhaps one could point out the case of the republican soldier's girlfriend, disputed both by him and by a Francoist suitor. According to Luis M. González in his article on the film, taking into account that "the representation of the homeland has usually been made through a female figure, the dispute between the two soldiers for the same woman can be read as a symbol of the civil strife" (2008: 78). In this sense, the reading would fit with the patriarchal view of the soldiers, in which the feminine would be only an object of desire subject to male domination and, in this case, the fight for the bride would be equated to the fight for the heifer, an animal.

However, in the case of this animal, the process is the opposite, since it is evident that the struggle to see who gets the heifer symbolizes the armed conflict between the two sides, engaged in a war that would decide the leadership of the country. One of the stereotypical symbols of Spain is the bull, so the correlation leaves no room for doubt. The animal as a symbol of the divided

nation is made explicit in a final scene that breaks the comic tone of the film. After the chaos that occurs in the town square, the heifer escapes, so both Republicans and Francoists go in search of it. Finally, the two bullfighters of the respective sides argue over who gets it, but the animal, exhausted, ends up dying (Figure 7). In a close-up of the corpse, insults and gunshots are heard (1:53:08) and, later, the vultures end up devouring it in no man's land. The heifer, reduced to carrion and with two "*banderillas*" stuck in what remains of its flesh, is the last image of the film (Figure 8). The intentionality is direct and, by breaking with the general tonality, Berlanga and Azcona succeed in creating a scene that is iconic for its symbolic-visual power, but demagogic in its political discourse. Two "*banderillas*" nailed that equate the violence of each of the sides in the body of a mutilated and abandoned Spain: *La vaquilla*, in this final gesture, distributes equally the guilt in relation to the Civil War, pretending to leave behind a violent past under the cloak of the esperpento.

Figure 7



Figure 8



Source: Illustrations from *La vaquilla* (García Berlanga, L. (1985). InCine S.A / Jet Films.  
DVD is from 2013, by DIVISA HOME VÍDEO and Video Mercury Films

### 3. Conclusions

Although the esperpento initiated by Valle-Inclán enjoys great health, as attested by numerous scholars who praise its corrosive capacity to deform reality and in which its historical coordinates are perfectly located, the same attention has not been paid to its functioning in the seventh art. As we have already seen, the esperpentic aesthetic can be interestingly recodified on the screen. However, the history of this type of film in Spanish cinema was complicated, as their outlandish character condemned them to not fit into any of the dominant strands. Here we claim an alternative place for the esperpentic cinematic path, with the aim that some of its precedents and paradigmatic examples be relocated and removed from ostracism.

In the Berlanga-Azcona combination, if cases such as Plácido and El verdugo serve to unmask the profound hypocrisy and pettiness of the upper classes or condemn the death penalty established in the Franco regime from the esperpentic, *La vaquilla* dares to use the same aesthetics against the unsolvable pain of the Spanish Civil War. With this study, in fact, we have tried to demonstrate that this film is effectively part of the esperpentic path, as many of its elements define it. First, its formal composition articulated around the usual sequence shots, whose scenes follow a wide and variegated range of characters, as well as a scale far from the emotionality of the close-ups, coincide with the demiurgic attitude of the esperpento, by means of which the author

distances himself from his characters, now dwarfed. In addition, the choral protagonism of *La vaquilla* works significantly in its intention to demystify war heroism, since the soldiers are represented as fools driven by their lowest passions and an evident lack of understanding of the causes that move them, in line with the archetype of the esperpentic hero: unworthy, ridiculous and conditioned by a grotesque reality. Finally, the reversal of roles, which questions the ideological stability of the sides in the conflict, as well as its animalization or the symbolism of some of the film's elements, are strong contrasts that add more layers to its grotesque universe.

In short, *La vaquilla* is a cinematic esperpento that approaches the Civil War with a very particular aesthetic. Its representation, systematically deformed, is far from the majority of approaches to the conflict, within realistic assumptions or in the realm of the fantastic. Therefore, the film by Luis García Berlanga and Rafael Azcona functions as an alternative approach to the historicization/anti-historicization of the conflict. Although the film, through the esperpento, ridicules the essence of the war and all its combatants equally, it ends up taking ideological sides in its last minutes, accusing, in the same way, both the Republicans and the Francoists for the devastation suffered in Spain. In this way, *La vaquilla* establishes itself as a discordant piece within the Spanish collective memory: too cynical, deeply offensive against the Manichean and triumphalist past of the Francoist side, but insensitive and forgetful of the sad historical contempt suffered by the losers of the Republican side.

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