

**Killing God, Executing Christ:
Modern Weapons for Old Dreams**

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This paper is deprived from footnotes and references

**Vicente Sánchez-Biosca
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1. The martyrdom of things

A chapter of one of the most reputable studies of the religious persecution in Spain during the civil war, by Father Antonio Montero Moreno, bears the striking title "The Martyrdom of Things." The scholar tries to capture with this paradoxical expression a phenomenon that seems more complex than the murder, torture, and religious humiliation suffered by representatives of the Church during the explosion of anticlericalism that followed the July 1936 Nationalist uprising against the Republic. These attacks against objects –states the author– are exclusive of the "red zone" since Nationalist violence was only perpetrated against human beings, and, he continues, "material destruction unveils the most spiritual side of religious persecution". This is for two reasons: "because things are always more 'innocent' than people and because, when these objects are somehow sacred, their annihilation displays a rage against the religious world far more significant than if the killed are men of flesh and bone."

Beneath the apparent paradox, Montero's perspective is illuminating: on the one hand, he displaces the focus of attention from mere fact to the defiler's emotion and, on the other hand, he stresses the dialectical relationship between the deed's lack of utility and its intense symbolic value. It is precisely the symbolic nature of the violence that ensures a long life in memory to criminal acts against objects of worship in particular.

Moreover, these desecrations have an enigmatic quality, since the perpetrator, when performing them, is forced to assume a momentary identification with the enemy; in other words, to enjoy destroying sacred

images, one has to put oneself, at least for an instant, in the place of the believer. Therefore, profanation does not simply mean to make profane a sacred image; it implies humiliating it and thereby obtaining a surplus of pleasure which is not involved in mere destruction.

2. Two images-events

In a way, Antonio Montero was not mistaken. Two series of images of this kind dealt a devastating blow to the Second Republic's reputation in the very first days after the outbreak of war. Look at them. They do not show death or physical violence and yet, something, even today, makes them painful to view. The first image represents the mummified corpses of nuns of the Salesian Convent in Barcelona and dates from the days following the uprising of July 18th, 1936, the second is dated a few days later, most probably July 28th, and displays a scene even more bloodless: the fake-shooting of the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus located at the Cerro de los Ángeles ("Hill of Angels" in English), near Getafe (Madrid). Both images express, beyond their material details, the notion of the desecration of graves (in the first case) and the concept of sacrilege and blasphemy (in the second case). Despite their differences, both have something in common: their origin is Republican and their authors were committed to the Republic. Thus, if the enemy took advantage of these pictures is because they contain a sort of self-accusation, an obscene pride in their content. Let me put it this way: these images were signed.

I intend in my talk to follow the trajectory of these images, their interaction, their movement, their mutations in different chains of discourse, the way they were appropriated, and, in sum, their migration at a synchronic level (across media: the illustrated press, photography, cinema...) as well as on a diachronic axis (over time). In view of the vastness of the material, I will concentrate on just a few years.

3. The Salesian mummies

The first image was part of a series of photographs taken in a chaotic and fascinating context, when the anarchist union CNT, organizing the workers and people of Barcelona, took over the city's barracks and arsenal, took possession of the streets, and put in motion a system of collectivization and requisition that

overthrew the traditional power system. Many witnesses recollect the climate of orgiastic joy that ensued, and even George Orwell, arriving in the city more than five months later in December 1936, was surprised to find a capitalist city turned upside down. At such a convulsive moment, still and movie cameras could hardly take a critical perspective or distance themselves from the facts they recorded, and most of them were totally immersed in the events experienced. Certainly, there were professional photographers, like Agustí Centelles or Pérez Rozas, who captured that atmosphere in immortal snapshots, but other cameramen also emerged in the midst of the revolutionary turmoil who participated in its spirit. A few anarchist cameramen (the anarchist union CNT controlled the entertainment and media sector) were given the task of registering the euphoria of those days. Using poor but fascinating raw material, some of it technically deficient, the journalist Mateo Santos edited a film that archivists have entitled *Reporting the Revolutionary Movement in Barcelona*.

The film's precarious editing and the speed with which it was released increased, rather than decreasing, the documentary values of its images, since Santos made an effort to respect the climate of spontaneity that reigned in the streets. The euphoric tone of the narration conjures up a hymn to destruction, the ineluctable basis for a future construction. A brief series of shots included in this film figure among the most cited and perverted images in the whole history of cinema.

Clip Salesas

The fact that these images were captured by both still photography and film is significant. Even more important, however, is the need to ascertain in the filming and editing of these shots the attitude that sustained the gaze and the chain of discourse. In fact, this short sequence shows evident pride at the event depicted, as an expression of the ongoing social revolution of the moment. How can we know that? A close look at these poorly edited shots offers some unequivocal clues to their interpretation. What is blatantly obvious amid the overall awkwardness of mise-en scene?

First, the crowd expressing itself in an orgiastic climate. Second, the atrium of the convent where the mummies lie seems to exercise such an

attraction that a photographer is seen taking pictures from the other side of the railing. Third, the added sound confirms the enthusiasm that the author wished to convey. Fourth, and most importantly, the movie camera seems to have attracted, as in the famous photo by Weegee at Coney Island, the gaze of the multitude, the mob, to the extent they turned their back on the mummies so as to interact with the filmmakers, most probably mounted in a truck, as is made evident by the first shot. This gesture confirms that, beyond the pride at being filmed, something special makes them regard the camera as a comrade, whether because of the particular people who are filming or because of the signs daubed on the truck, and the dress and marks of identity displayed by the film crew. Put briefly, the desire for a historical record of the moment implicates the filming in the event. The filming not only creates the event; it is the event in itself.

Our knowledge of the circulation of this film is patchy, but it is well known that it fell into Nazi hands from August 1936 and was immediately used as a powerful counter-propaganda weapon.

4. Anti-communism

The strategy used by Nazi cinema, as well as by Nazi Germany's allies, was appropriation. In many sequences whose subject was not even the Spanish civil war, these shots were used to depict a voracious enemy of western civilization, bent on destruction. What is surprising, however, is that the anticlerical anarchist responsible for the filming and editing, as we know, was symptomatically replaced by another figure, more feared and hated by fascism: that of communism. In four films produced by propaganda services from different countries (Nazi Germany, the Swiss anti-Komintern association, Fascist Italy, Francoist Spain) the same footage appears with slight differences. The first, *Geissel der Welt. Kampf um Spanien* (*Scourge of the World: The Battle over Spain*)(Carl Junghans, 1937, Hispano-Film-Produktion, a film finally not released on Hitler's personal orders), was what Goebbels called a 'Spanienfilm' [Spain film], a first attempt to engage in anti-communist propaganda by taking Spain as a battlefield against the *Asian hordes*.

Clip Geissel der Welt

Geissel der Welt denounces the scourge of the world that is communism. Spain is the theater where Soviet propaganda has planted its incendiary torch. The short series of shots of the Salesian convent is incorporated into a discursive environment of chaos and destruction that enhances the evil power unleashed by Soviet communism. Using editing as an efficient tool, the film alternates scenes of destruction and death with the relentless advance of uniformed Soviet soldiers during a parade. A more sophisticated use of montage iconographically fuses the railings of the Salesian convent with the bars of a metal gate on the arrival in Madrid of the Soviet ambassador, Marcel Rosenberg (August 28, 1936). The shot / reverse shot structure suggests a causal link between these events, eliminating the spatial discontinuity. Thus, the Soviet ambassador is presented as having induced the desecration of the mummified corpses. Soundtrack with variations of the International.

The second film was *La peste rouge / Die rote Pest [The Red Plague]* (Jean-Marie Musy, 1938), a film devoted to denouncing the destructive power of communism made on the initiative of the Swiss National Action against Communism, in which the Spanish episode was just an avatar of the communist “Trojan horse” strategy. The third film was *Spagna, una grande, libre [Spain, One, Great, and Free]*, produced by the Italian fascist INCOM and directed by Giorgio Ferroni in 1939. The fourth was *La División Azul [The Blue Division]* (Joaquín Reig and Víctor de la Serna, 1942), a Spanish documentary celebrating the Francoist collaboration with the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front after Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Each of these films adopts a different emphasis within a fascist framework, but the differences are highly relevant.

However, the most effective use of propaganda resources was achieved in *España heroica*, a film conceived and edited in Berlin in 1938 by Joaquín Reig, who was a member of both the Spanish fascist party Falange and of the German National Socialist party. Learning from the propaganda methods used in *Geissel der Welt* and without shooting a single shot, Reig authored this montage film that would have two subsequent German versions, both entitled *Helden in Spanien [Heroes in Spain]*. Drawing on the iconographic association of railing / gate images from *Geissel der Welt* and the use of shot / reverse shot to imply a causal relationship between the Salesian convent and the Soviet ambassador, the film intensifies the amount of shots containing violence and destruction

(fire, smoke, ruins, unruly masses), to the point of near illegibility, but in the process creating a suffocating atmosphere and a relentless pace. The voice is sober - "Russia sent to Spain its ambassador, Moses Rosenberg" - and leaves the dramatic impact to the images themselves (you will have noticed that the ambassador's name Marcel Rosenberg has become "Moses Rosenberg").

Clip España heroica

The sequence of images of profanation concludes with a kind of *signature* by the Communist Party (in the form of graffiti on a wall) that is not without irony. The sequence climaxes by establishing an association between the Salesian convent footage and another documentary sequence of immense sacrilegious proportions: the shooting of the monument to the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Cerro de los Angeles. This 'attraction' (I deliberately use Eisenstein's term) is decisive, linking for posterity the two most terrible examples of the 'martyrdom of things'. As we shall see, their combination is as explosive as it would be long-lasting.

5. Shooting the Heart of Jesus

Let us pause briefly to consider the film images of the Cerro de los Angeles scene that we have just seen. In fact, the scene represents a symbolic deicide. This issue is of great significance and I can only discuss it briefly here. As had happened with the Salesian convent fragment, the brief film sequence of three shots had been disseminated by international newsreels, causing serious damage to the Second Republic's legitimacy. To give a few examples, they circulated in the British Paramount News (August 17, 1936), and in the American Universal Talking News (August 24), Pathé Journal (August 13), and, as late as November 1936, Fox Movietone News. Unlike other manifestations of anticlericalism and desecration, this sequence threatened the very core of the Christian faith and incorporated an anachronism (the rifle) that had produced many victims by that date. Certainly, the men's espadrilles, the lack of alignment of the firing squad, the variegated weapons and the equally

variegated clothes give the image a farcical quality, as with many anticlerical mockeries, but the effect of the shooting of the Sacred Heart is not diminished. However, the symbolic violence conveyed by this sacrilegious act is enhanced by the significance of the effigy of the Sacred Heart in the Christian liturgy and the role that historically had been assigned to the monument in Spain. What, then, was the meaning of that imposing image silhouetted against the sky which the improvised firing squad of militiamen is about to shoot?

The Heart of Jesus has a complex meaning in the Christian liturgy that I cannot even begin to summarize, from the visions by Mary Margaret of Alacoque in the XVIII century to the enthronement in the homes in the 20th century. Rarely has the dialectical relationship between symbolic abstraction and obscene materiality (blood flowing from the heart, open chest, crown of thorns ...) reached such a peak. Hence, the profuse iconography ranges from the kitsch to the morbid.

In the case of Spain, this liturgical significance (which had its cult especially in France) was enriched by a historical incident: a revelation made to the Jesuit Bernardo Francisco de Hoyos in Valladolid in 1733 declared Spain to be the ideal place to realize the kingdom of Christ. Hence the catchphrase: "I shall reign in Spain and with more reverence than elsewhere." The 'Great Promise', as the prophecy came to be known, gave rise to the cult of the Sacred Heart in Spain.

And in fact this prediction materialized on May 30, 1919 in a singular spot: the Cerro de los Angeles, located at the geographic "heart" or center of the Iberian Peninsula. On that date, the king of Spain, Alfonso XIII, on behalf of the Spanish monarchy, inaugurated a monument by means of which he instituted the country's official consecration to the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, certifying the indestructible alliance of Church and Monarchy. No other performative act could have so profoundly signalled the Catholicism of Spain, in a period of confrontation that would increase following the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931, and would explode in 1936. The monument became a symbol and the subject of a symbolic battlefield. No wonder that the commemoration of the Bicentennial of the prophecy, in 1933, took a particularly vindictive stance against the secularism of the Republic. The Cerro de los

Angeles would become known as the "Altar of the Nation" and the base of the monument was inscribed with the phrase, changing the future tense to the present: 'I reign in Spain'.

[Slides showing 'detentes' (emblems of the Sacred Heart on a cloth, worn by soldiers over the heart as a protection from bullets), flyers, anticlerical drawings... using the image of the Sacred Heart]

Seen in this light, the gesture of the firing squad of militiamen shooting the monument takes on a new significance that is at once religious, social, and political. The acts of reparation on the Nationalist side were immediate and Burgos, Salamanca and other cities became the theaters of these celebrations. With great solemnity, on August 20th, 1936, Salamanca, the sancta sanctorum of Franco's Spain, became a privileged place: in a presbytery filled with civil and religious authorities and representatives, and lined with members of the various Nationalist militias, a representation of religious war was staged in which the fusion of Christian symbols and fascist components revived the pact sealed in 1919 between the Monarchy and the Church.

6. In motion

Let's now return to the film takes and interrogate them more closely. If you look carefully, you will see that the guns are aiming at a number of different targets. In ragged formation, without uniforms, this group does not represent a genuine firing squad. Even more revealing, in a scene of the utmost gravity, is the movement made by one figure on the right of the screen, who turns his head and peers in the direction of the camera. In so doing, he raises a series of inevitable questions: who is he looking at? Who is behind the camera? What is this militiaman expecting to be said or ordered from this off-screen space to the extent of being distracted from the terrible act he is performing? This movement is a clear sign, it reveals the simulation, the pose... But it raises a number of questions that remain unanswered: was there a movie camera and a photographer with a still camera positioned next to each other? Was there more than one movie camera? If we consider the entire sequence of three shots, was the third shot, at a 90 degrees angle to the first shot, taken at the same time or

later? If they were taken at the same time, it would mean that at least two cameras were shooting simultaneously, transforming the place into a veritable cinema set. If the two shots were taken by the same movie camera, it's even more revealing that the firing squad has had to sustain its pose for a while so the cameraman could take the second shot. Either way, something becomes apparent: there is a pose, the act of filming has somehow determined the scene. And a deal has been reached between the filmmakers and photographers and the militiamen. Last but not least, was this event unique or has it been performed several times? The scene becomes a *mise-en-scène*; the sacred place a theater; the executioners turn into actors. Regardless of the circumstances that remain hard to reconstruct, that the images are faked is beyond doubt. However, the symbolic act does not seem to lose its strength, its barbaric meaning.

The data we have at our disposal is equivocal and confusing, mixing references to photography and film, and the rumors and clichés are quite vague and sometimes inconsistent. It is said that the simulacrum was repeated between July 28 and the final blasting of the whole monument that took place on August 7, after several failed attempts.

All this suggests that the images of the desecration were simulated or perhaps even stimulated for the international press. Although they were widely circulated in newsreels overseas, Nationalist cinema did not get access to them till much later. Republican propaganda realized quickly that these images were fatal and avoided using them, but it did make a significant reference to the site, re-named Cerro Rojo [Red Hill], in a film devoted to the trial of 83 Nationalist soldiers captured after General Lister took the position.

7. Grievance, ceremonial, and set topics

On July 18, 1939, the *year of Victory* in the new official calendar and the anniversary of the Nationalist uprising of 1936, a Festival of reparation to the Sacred Heart was held on the site of the ruins of the Cerro de los Angeles. Religious persecution had become an indestructible set topic, a recognizable genre within the Francoist interpretation of the Civil War. And the discourse of the Nationalist uprising as a crusade remained intact for decades. These iconic

images played a major role in sanctioning the legitimacy of the religious war. In so doing, both series of images, provoking horror and astonishment, were a warning and a reminder of the dangers that threatened Spain. The 'General Indictment' (*Causa general* in Spanish), the vast report carefully compiled by Francoist prosecutors on the crimes committed in the 'red zone', contained a chapter, the fifth, entitled "Religious Persecution".

8. A poetics of ruins

The fixing of visual motifs under Francoism is manifested in the official newsreel NO-DO, created in 1943, with its first edition (76A) issued in 1944, and its second edition (120 A) appearing the following year. However, what is astonishing about the regime's politics of memory is the decision to preserve the ruins of the old monument at the Cerro de los Angeles as evidence. The destroyed monument had to be seen by visitors as a vivid memory of the profanation and, at the same time, a relic: both an explicit indictment of the enemy and a holy heap of stones. Facing the ruins of the old monument, the elderly sculptor Aniceto Marinas, responsible for the first effigy, was commissioned to erect a new one. The two monuments would together form a sort of collage in which the poetics of ruins theorized by Agustín de Foxà in the pages of the Falangist magazine *Vértice* joined pathos and heroism, effectively combining epic and victimhood. Moreover the desecration added a new element: it turned the site into a place of pilgrimage. The roles played by the Cerro de los Angeles would be many and lavish: the ruins would be adorned and turned into the scenario for mass rituals of reparation which reaffirmed the reign of the Sacred Heart in Spain, with the king's formula of consecration renewed by the new Head of State, Franco himself.

9. Re-emergence

The images discussed in this talk have been persistent and have never stopped circulating. Despite the dramatic force of their visual content and the emotional shock they provoked, little by little they lost their concreteness and came rather to embody general ideas. That is the destiny of strong images that become

symbols, ossified and rooted in the memory of later generations. I have no time here to continue this meandering journey through the later relative relaxation of wartime discourse and the birth of a new rhetoric of peace during the sixties, as well as the rewriting of all issues relating to the war during Spain's transition to democracy. Nevertheless, I would not like to conclude without pointing out that icons can be resurrected as shock weapons, abruptly and apparently against the tide. This is what happened around 2006-2007, when the ghosts of the two Spains reappeared in the form of a media memory war, with the approval of the so-called Historical Memory Law, the war of obituaries, a proliferation of publications, symbols, etc.. Although a wave of canonizations took place in March 1987 (the process had in fact started already in January 1986), the beatification by the Vatican on October 28th, 2007 of 498 additional martyrs murdered during the SCW had a tremendous media impact. And they resurrected the old images with renewed vigor.

Two examples will suffice: the television documentaries *Mártires de la fe* [*Martyrs for the Faith*] (José Manuel Albelda, Telemadrid, 2007) and *La cruz, el perdón y la gloria. La persecución religiosa en España durante la Segunda República y la Guerra Civil* *The Cross, Forgiveness and Glory. Religious Persecution in Spain during the Second Republic and the Civil War* (Diego Urbán, Círculo Hispanoamericano Isabel la Católica, 2007). Both declare their desire not to disturb the ashes of war, but only to revalue the life of Catholics killed and subsequently beatified. *Martyrs for the Faith* devotes a section to analyzing the martyrdom of things and brings to the screen the maximum authority, Monsignor Antonio Montero, Archbishop Emeritus of Mérida-Badajoz, author of the book I quoted at the beginning of my paper. Interestingly he makes this point: "What I call the martyrdom of things is ... cruelty to symbols: burning saints, defecating on a holy seat... It is something that brings together great ignorance, a mad passion, and a large amount of unconscious suffering."

The other film, *The Cross, Forgiveness and Glory*, introduces two photographs of the Salesian convent to embody unmitigated hatred for the Church. But we may ask "hatred on the part of who"? In this film, the desecrated corpses of the Salesian nuns are made to represent religious persecution both

under the Republic and during the Civil War – a period of eight years. Shortly after, two photographs of the shooting of Christ at the Cerro de los Angeles are associated with other atrocities committed against objects of worship (the Tibidabo Sacred Heart, for example). The ostensible aim is an indictment of the Zapatero government's politics of memory, presenting Zapatero's stance in the Church-State agreements as a resurgence of religious persecution.

10. Conclusion

Let us conclude this brief journey. What I have tried to outline here is an example of the still under-researched field of the genealogy of images. Strictly speaking, it aspires to be a contribution to our understanding of the role of images in shaping layers of collective memory or of the socialization of historical images. This research cannot be done by a single person or by relying on professional competence in a single field. It requires the collaboration of archaeologists and film restorers (to evaluate the different generations of copies), semiologists (to analyze composition, staging, assembly and editing), historians of mass communication (to study comparatively the migration of a particular set of images across different media), contemporary historians (to evaluate thoroughly the specific circumstances of each recycling of the images concerned)... In other words, what is needed is collaborative research that brings together different disciplinary formations – in film, photography, the illustrated press, television, internet... and, by extension, museums, fine arts, commemorative architecture, textbooks... In short, an interdisciplinary exploration of the tortuous life of iconography.

Today, as history professionals feel the need to use images, and when the media govern the socialization of history, it becomes imperative to impose rigor in the use of archives, subjecting source materials to meticulous critique. And the difficulty is enormous because of the precarious nature of the materials, their ceaseless migration in the media universe, and the almost total promiscuity with which the digital image is disseminated via the Internet.

Making the old dreams true require, we feel it, new weapons.