

# THE NEGATION OF THE NATIONAL HERO AND HOMELAND IN VICTOR SÁNCHEZ DEL CAMPO'S DESPERATE EVASION (*OBSESIÓN* [OBSESSION], 1947)

FERNANDO GÓMEZ BECEIRO  
Universidad de Santiago de Compostela

*To my parents, Isabel and Luis. To Lucía*

Within the painful lethargy which has encompassed the work of Arturo Ruiz-Castillo, one of his most neglected films and one which has awakened the least interest has been his second feature film, *Obsesión* (Obsession). However, despite the traditional historiographical prejudice regarding filmography, it is possible to see many reviews written about Ruiz-Castillo's life and work highlight the high expectations generated by the promising start of his film career. Indeed, after a successful training period consisting of more than fifty films and supported by a fine intellectual and multi-faceted artistic experimentation stage during the Second Republic, the filmmaker decided to start directing commercial films, sorting through ambitious projects which, due to their controversial content or the technical complexity, are clear reflections of his intense artistic temperament. It was thus that he debuted in the mid-forties with a complex and bold film adaptation of the famous novel by Pío Baroja *Las inquietudes de Shanti Andía* [*The Restlessness of Shanti Andía*]. But, after his successful directorial debut, many setbacks and disappointments forced Ruiz-Castillo to direct a project that seemed to be distant from his aesthetic and ideological concerns.<sup>1</sup> This one would be based on a previously scripted, passionate drama set in colonial Spanish Guinea, featuring Alfredo Mayo.

Thus, the widespread disinterest in *Obsession* may have to do with the fact that during the most energetic and dedicated period of the director's artistic career, he had accepted a foreign project based on the Franco regime's institutional preferences, thus causing the film to be perceived as a failure of authorial will and a possible harbinger of his later works being bent to the will of more conventional cinematic trends. An examination of the nucleus of the story structure, however, reveals the establishment of latent discourse that is closer to the Arturo Ruiz-Castillo's interests than one might initially think. Ultimately, this project gives us an excellent opportunity to understand the more intrinsic features of the real creative work of the filmmaker. Thus, we begin our discussion with a brief statement of the most significant contextual aspects of the film's genesis, before gradually delving into the intricacies of the meaning of his complex amphibological discourse.

---

<sup>1</sup> Two examples of these numerous ambitious projects which Arturo Ruiz-Castillo had in mind were after *Las inquietudes de Shanti Andía* and for different reasons frustrated were the making of a superproduction in color with a Goyesco setting titled *La duquesa Cayetana y Goya* or diverse works related to the filmmaker's literary tastes, like the adaptation of the works of Valle-Inclán (*Radiocinema* January 1, 1947 no. 131).

## STARTING POINT. SOME PARATEXTUAL ISSUES AND COUNTERPOINTS: GENRE, THEME, AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The origins of the film production's complexity takes us back to an original plot written by Ricardo Mazo and José María Alonso Pesquera for a project that was initially titled *En Silencio* . . . It would have been directed by Juan de Orduña if it had not been for the many setbacks in the process of the transfer of the production rights from España Actualidades to Horizonte Films, the production company run by Arturo Ruiz-Castillo and his partner, Alberto A. Cienfuegos.<sup>2</sup> The transfer was probably made necessary by the rapid succession of failures after Ruiz-Castillo's first feature film success. Thus, in April 1947, the director moved to his residence at La Granja de San Ildefonso to take on the technical adaptation of a plot whose colonial appearance initially seemed to be designed to please the institutions.

In this sense, it must be remembered that the Spanish colonial cinema of Franco's early years had just a few fiction works situated in the Spanish territories of sub-Saharan Africa. For that reason the magazine *Primer Plano* strongly denounced this fact since the early forties, urging filmmakers to join the Guinean colonial cause.<sup>3</sup> But if that were not enough, in the specific case of *Obsesión*, this opportunistic operation seemed to be reinforced by the participation of Alfredo Mayo. Alfredo Mayo, by this time at the pinnacle of his symbolic value to the interests of the Franco regime, had become the maximum male figure of Franco's array of stars. Carlos Heredero described him as the "the handsome guy who shows, in life and love, the payoff for being on the winning side [el galán apuesto que rentabiliza en la vida civil y en el amor su pertenencia al bando de los ganadores] (189). Thus, considering the connotations of a film set in the coveted colonial sub-Saharan territories and starring the legendary Alfredo Mayo, if we were to pay attention only to the paratextual aspects prior to the film's premiere, we would assume that the film is largely adapted to the requirements of the dominant cinematic institutions of the governing regime. But even a superficial view of the work should be enough to reveal a few deviations from the expected patriotic speech.

First, while the essence of colonial cinema could be defined by its "exuberant exaltation of the military spirit in parallel with an equally strong affirmation of imperial destiny of the nation [desbordante exaltación del espíritu militar en paralelo a una no menos intensa autoafirmación del destino imperial de la nación]" (Elena 243),<sup>4</sup> this feature can hardly be detected in *Obsession*, since the colonial aspect seems to be merely an exotic background for the film's events.<sup>5</sup> In fact, along with the theme, plot, and stylistic aspects of the film, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Information consulted in the Archivo General de la Administración (folder 15-46, file 36/04682).

<sup>3</sup> In this context, an especially patriotic article published in *Primer Plano* 26 September 1943, no. 154 stands out.

<sup>4</sup> It should be made clear that the author is referring especially to the concrete case of colonial films with Moroccan themes from the beginnings of Francoism, as being the most representative of the genre to which we are referring.

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the words of Ruiz-Castillo help clarify, as he refers to the film as a "a dramatic comedy from any time or any place [una comedia dramática de todo tiempo que podría haber ocurrido en cualquier otra parte]" (*Radiocinema* 1 April 1947 no. 134), thus denying the importance of the colonial presence and undervaluing it as

deeply melodramatic constants are what catch the viewers' attention. It even has more of a feel of the crime genre than colonial genre.<sup>6</sup> Without a doubt, the presumed imperial exaltation is diluted in the film, giving prominence to a mix of melodrama and black film, so that the dramatic aspects predominate in the general line of development of the story while the look of film noir is perceived primarily with the creation of a fatalistic atmosphere along *stimmung* lines, which is omnipresent in the story, thanks largely to the musical work of Jesús García Leoz and the excellent photographic work of Cecilio Paniagua. It should also be noted that besides the nucleus of the action developed on this substrata of tragic and fatalistic intonation is the progressive and irreversible degradation of the protagonist, Victor Sánchez del Campo, an unhappy and tormented character who could be described as the paradigmatic antithesis of the intensely heroic archetype that Alfredo Mayo so often played.

With all that said, we can anticipate that since the same generic and thematic tone of the film and the design of the story's central character are presented as the primal intertextual counterpoint on which is built a dense and calculated scenario, this project is adorned by an intense web of subtle metaphorical constructs capable of directing the viewer to possible alternative readings of the text. Fundamental divergences from the expected official discourse are also accentuated by the adoption of a narrative structure *in medias res* which begins the story at its climax, relative to the moment of maximum decrepitude of the demented Victor, represented in a preliminary sequence. A detailed analysis of this character is essential to understanding the most profound essence of the film.

#### THE OPENING SEQUENCE AND PRESENTATION OF THE MAIN CHARACTER. THE NEGATION OF THE HERO

Delving into the inner workings of the text, after the opening credits that follow the central themes of a score perhaps more typical of a fantasy drama or horror movie than an epic tale of imperialist exaltation, the opening sequence begins with a succession of three very brief introductory shots and lightning flashes to announce the stormy nature of the sequence (and of the film), followed by a general scene of a town in which a man (José - Arturo Marín-) tries to make his way through the heavy rain. Continuing inside a home, an entire scene shows José entering the room, and by an appeal to outside of the shot "¡Señor Sánchez del Campo! [Mr. Sánchez del Campo!] the presentation of the protagonist of the story in a brief but intense fragment designed through the dialectic of flat-reverse shot that begins with a medium shot behind Victor sitting at his desk and turning to the camera surprised by the call of another character. José encroaches slightly into the frame with his left arm occupying the entire right side of the shot, minimizing the protagonist symbolically but also artistically highlighting his figure, which is constrained by an oppressive lack of depth of field, his body forced into a foreshortened view under gloomy lighting. Thus, the first display

---

simply element ornamental to what we are talking about. In any case, in order to avoid confusion, it is important to anticipate at this point that the colony will fulfill a symbolic function, to which we will later refer.

<sup>6</sup> We should not find it strange, therefore, that the film has been included by Sánchez Barba in an extensive anthology of titles related in some way to criminal or police themes, and which constitute a body of works to which the author refers as proto-noir film, an antecedent of Spanish noir film of the 1950's (115-116).

of Alfredo Mayo in the film is constructed by a succession of three close-ups, each more oppressive than before, interspersed with the downward-looking speaker reinforcing the progressive miniaturization of the protagonist, in a rapid montage based on the Kulechov effect, forcefully capturing the troubled character's personality. Finally, in the moment of his greatest despair, Victor decides to get up, thereby ending the conversation and being framed into a close angle shot which is a metonymic reflection of what will be the evolution of the character throughout the film's development. So, seeing Victor plunged irretrievably into disgrace after the gradual collapse experienced in the story, we finally face the events of the story, even as we know the tragic fate that awaits him.

Later, after a subtle reference to Victor's alcoholic tendencies by a descriptive overview which tells how to serve a glass of whiskey and culminates with a detailed shot of the glass,<sup>7</sup> the sequence reaches one of the story's most transcendental moments when the protagonist plays on a phonograph the song that will emerge as the *leitmotiv* of the film and will metaphorically guide the development of the next scene. Thus, in the instant that the phonograph is turned on, the dark lighting strengthens the vision of the alliance Victor has in his right hand, symbolically announcing the theme of the plot (a man tormented and torn between the love of two women: alliance - spiritual love versus the voice of the singer - carnal love), until the protagonist decides to move closer to the camera, by varying the frame using a tracking wide shot, which reaches its highest point at the moment in which it is framed in a close angle shot. A strong flash of lightening suddenly illuminates his face, while the narrative presence of the chorus of the song becomes textual counterpoint to the action "I remember what lives in your obsession [*Recuerdo que vive en tu obsesión*]." After that, Victor is seated in a chair next to the camera and is again illuminated by another flash as he drinks whiskey with a withered face. We access this vision by the *raccord* of the character's appearance that will mark the obsessive madness that he suffers, through a subjective shot shown in the photograph of a woman (Lidia-Alicia Romy-), that later vanishes. Nevertheless, the unconcerned Victor, not at all surprised by the hallucination, gets up to turn off the phonograph while new flashes cast multiple shadows on the wall referring allegorically to his disturbed personality while projecting multiple shadows of his face on the set, just before he suddenly turns around to look out of the shot (where we assume the door is located) frightened by the storm and the mysterious shouts of a woman (Mary -Mary Paz Molinero-). Then, a new shot shows the opening of the door of the house and a *travelling* shot shows Victor intending to go outside, completely alienated by the mysterious

---

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted at this point that Victor's refuge into alcohol will be very present throughout the narrative, becoming progressively more patent as a function of the tragedy's advance through certain actions like the atrocious drunken state that Victor suffers after his wife's affair. Along this line, at the beginning of the flashback, a secondary character will foreshadow this fact informing the protagonist of the alcoholic needs of the colonists ("We combine water from a swamp or the rain with alcohol. Whisky also works to fight off the cold, boredom, monotony... Here we are always drinking. It is a physical need [Nosotros combatimos el agua de la ciénaga o de la lluvia con el alcohol. El güisqui sirve también para combatir el calor, el aburrimiento, la monotonía . . . Aquí bebemos siempre. Es una necesidad física]."), with Victor agreeing in the face of his fear of failure ("Count me in, serve me another glass. I believe I am going to need it to fight the swamp [Cuenten conmigo y pongan un vaso más. Creo que lo voy a necesitar para luchar contra el pantano y la ciénaga].")

female voice that calls him incessantly. Now the shot begins to sink into the background music with a deeply empathic function.

Once outside, we have one of the most beautiful and powerful pieces of the sequence with a general shot of the swamp and a long travelling shot pulling back and back and supporting the actions of Victor walking with difficulty in the storm, while the background music merged with the off-camera cries completely support the image that is established as a foreboding dirge of the protagonist, who begins his pilgrimage toward suicide.

Then the *travelling* shot culminates when Victor stops in the middle of the shot with his view fixed off the set, once again appearing completely frightened and passing again to a new subjective shot relative to a second visual hallucination, through the presentation of Mary's face above the water. Thus, after a countershot relative to a possible subjective shot of the ghostly image that encompasses Victor in the first scene, the new view of Victor ends with Mary submerged under the water. The dramatic atmosphere then reaches its peak with a strong zenith: Victor drowning in the middle of the swamp after hearing the last desperate shouts of the ghost "save me! [“¡sálvame!”], which follows the close-up of a photograph of Lidia over the water, while the background music blends with the central chords of the previous song, definitely associating itself with the musical *leitmotiv* referring to the character of Lidia, and allegorically showing the triumph of Lidia over Victor and Mary. In the end, a long fade to black marks the end of the sequence.

Thus, the opening fragments of the film are of paramount importance for the development of the story, both from the point of view of the story by the vast amount of information provided and the introduction of numerous symbolic resources as well as by the creation of a moribund atmosphere, increasingly menacing in the story leading up to the stormy night that pervades the climax's fatalism. In any case, the determining factor of the sequence is, without a doubt, the bizarre and unusual presentation of the film's main character, and from the intertextual perspective, it may be even more disconcerting to consider Alfredo Mayo's previous film, where he performed as a heroic figure from Franco's side. Disturbed, demoralized and vulnerable, it turns out that Victor Sánchez del Campo's character has little to do with the heroic myth associated with the actor. Moreover, as we mentioned before, the bold narrative disposition starts the film at the moment of Mayo's character's greatest pathos, showing his inability to overcome the alienation that drives him to suicide. From the structural viewpoint of the story, then, the closed and cyclical conception of the story simultaneously produces a strong initial counterpoint to what might be expected of the plot and at the same time, presents an attractive narrative, since upon finding out the tragic outcome, the viewer will feel more attracted to the morbid observation of the tortuous, decadent process of the character discovering the already announced end at the beginning of the film.

#### BEGINNING OF THE FLASHBACK AND VICTOR'S MONOLOGUE: THE NEGATION OF HOMELAND AND THE PRESENTATION OF THE COLONY AS AN EVIL SPACE.

After the analyzed introductory sequence and the subsequent discovery of the dead body, the great flashback that makes up the bulk of the story begins when the character of

the commander (Manuel Kayser) starts reading Victor's memoirs, which introduces an internarrative narrator who expressly participates through a voiceover at the beginning of this flashback, and who will return to break in at different times, especially by the inclusion of a sequence that splits the flashback into two distinct parts, the first of a more melodramatic character, reserved for the final thematic elements and aesthetically more characteristic of film noir. So if the same circular, retrospective trajectory of the discourse means a return to the identical fatal characteristic of the melodramatic genre, we will see in this first part of the story the presentation of a complicated dilemma in which the male protagonist will be trapped between carnal love relationship with the person he wants and spiritual love with the woman to whom he is actually married, and who, as we know, will meet a tragic end.

In any case, as we previously saw, the character played by Alfredo Mayo seems to be already tormented at the beginning of the story, because in the opening monologue from his diary (and flashback) Victor is presented as a man who is lonely, hurt and psychologically damaged by a mysterious past. He obsessively decides to start a new life away from his oppressive environment in Spain and therefore, this trip to the colony, rather than a heroic and patriotic move, resembles a desperate flight that is doomed to be unsuccessful.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, then, it is necessary to closely examine this soliloquy:

I'll make a long trip; I'll live far away from civilization for several years. I fear the loneliness, I fear, feeling very alone. That's why I write. This notebook will be my only friend. Tomorrow I'll be on a plane to the jungle region of Guinea. I have been assigned by the government for an important job. I leave no one in Europe. There's no one at home for me. I have no family and almost no friends. This is my big opportunity. I'm going to do my first major work.<sup>9</sup>

As can be seen, the declining path of Victor begins with his desire for escape from a disastrous country, wounded by the indelible marks of a catastrophic past that has brought about the breaking of family and affective ties and the consequent melancholy, solitary character "Detrás de mi no queda nadie. No tengo familia ni casi amigos [There's no one at home for me. I have no family and almost no friends], seeking refuge in virgin territory "lejos de la civilización [away from civilization], where he looks for spiritual regeneration "mi primera gran obra" [my first major work] so that, from that point forward, Spain, will be paired with all manner of negative baggage that weighs down the character while the colony is shown as an escape route to a hopeful future. Thus, from this perspective, the tragedy will

---

<sup>8</sup> In any case a rather habitual aspect in colonial Guinean film, in which characters frequently travel to the colony fleeing from the desolation of their native land (see, for example, the synopses of these films in Fernández-Figares 250-274). Additionally, on the presence of other filmic discourses from the period on this symbolic dimension of the colony as a means of escape, Zunzunegui 13-23 is particularly insightful.

<sup>9</sup> Voy a hacer un largo viaje, voy a vivir lejos de la civilización varios años. Temo la soledad, temo sentirme muy solo. Por eso escribo. Este cuaderno será mi único amigo. Mañana salgo en avión para la región pantanosa de Guinea. He sido destinado por el gobierno para realizar una importante obra. En Europa no dejo a nadie. Detrás de mi no queda nadie. No tengo familia ni casi amigos. Es mi gran oportunidad. Voy a hacer mi primera gran obra.

occur by the very nature of the colony as a projection of the maligned metropolis (this is another place -Africa- but it belongs to the former -Spain-), and so the different stages of the evolution of the character can be read in the text because of the unbreakable bond with his disturbing homeland. Far from any kind of glorification of imperialism, the colony will be shown in the film as a tragic and evil place, something that's also powered by an overtly pejorative conception of the characters that inhabit it, highlighting the misogynist and xenophobic discourse of the settlers and their dependence on alcohol.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, it should be noted that throughout the story we know that the "important work" by which Victor will try to overcome his frustrations and shortcomings refers to the construction of a dam that will be constantly threatened by accidents caused by bad weather.

In fact, Victor's obsessive madness will increase in parallel with the worsening weather conditions, before finally convulsing into a storm and culminating in the drowning death of the character. Taking this into account, as we have seen that the great project of Victor is to make a dam to hold back water, the metaphor is evidently that he will die by the failure of his own work, so that any mention of adverse events related to the dam (and water) can be seen as a symbolic premonition of the tragic outcome of the story. In summary, clarifying this intense interweaving of insightful metaphors, Victor will try to escape his troubled past in a faraway place by rehabilitating himself far away from his oppressive former environment. Nevertheless, the condition of this new place as a projection of the old country results in an inevitable failure constantly foretold by numerous anticipatory allegories.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE SERIES OF EVENTS AND KEY TRAGIC OUTCOME: THE DEADLY PENINSULAR REMINISCENCES

Victor's arrival in the colony corresponds to the melodramatic development of the story, its evolution towards the tragic climax being determined by three events that determine the progressive dementia of the character. But, as mentioned previously, these events are related also to protagonist's fatal links with Spain. The succession of these three elements of

---

<sup>10</sup> Leaving aside for the moment the question of the colonists dependence on alcohol, their male chauvinist character stands out in the banal and paradoxical character with which the correspondence with women is initiated and in Victor's very emotional behavior, once he is married; while machismo is equally apparent in Victor's numerous offensive remarks about the natives (like, for example: "These niggers never learn, nor do follow orders... [A estos negros les falta la curiosidad, Estos negros ni escarmientan ni obedecen las órdenes...]" Along this same line, these same pejorative descriptions might have been insinuated metaphorically in a previous take at the beginning of the flashback through a *mise-en-scène* that presents a shot of the whole ranch, with a colonist situated in the foreground and, behind him, two women, black, timid, expectant and trapped under the diagetic weight that is the gallery that rises above them (the male character occupies the whole frame, while the native women only occupy the inferior background of the screen).

<sup>11</sup> Besides the metaphorical value of water and other allegorical devices already adduced to the analysis of the first sequence of the film (like the literal meaning of the musical leitmotiv), the discourse is enriched by numerous symbolic foreshadowings of the course of events, like the projection of the shadow of a rifle aimed towards the outside when, in the first sequence, Victor hears the desperate screams of Mary's ghost, the shot at the target by Victor at the moment he is convinced to maintain correspondence with a woman, the breaking of the wine glasses when the newlyweds toast to their happiness, as well as the fade to the faces of the two women which, as a constant reminder of the interference of destiny in Victor's hopeful projects, which is inserted throughout the story.

Victor's connection with Spain echo ominously of his traumatic past and foretell the inevitable failure of his goals in the colony.

In this sense, after an early fragment of a short dialogue between Victor and his friend Jorge (Raúl Cancio), that shows the difficulty of the escape from Spain, the protagonist seems to express satisfaction with his escape "we lost contact with the world" [hemos perdido el contacto con el mundo]. He warns Jorge that evasion is impossible "[Oh, no. We still have the radio, press ... [ Oh, no. Aún tenemos la radio, la prensa...]]", and a few brief *stock-shots*<sup>12</sup> of the routine work of the settlers in the jungle lead to the disastrous first link with the old country, which is brought about by Victor's decision to correspond with a girl who is a Spanish orphan. But, the truly interesting thing about the fragment from the discursive point of view is it is presented here as an inducting element of Victor's mental illness through a detailed shot which shows the hand of Nancy (Aurora Velasco) changing the photo of Mary for that of Lidia in the letter that Mary sends to Victor, which is strengthened by the allegorical connection of the faces of the two women shown in the mirror. The explosive character of Victor's mental illness will be explained in the sequence that shows the desperate situation of the three girls interned in the religious orphanage, equally desirous of the opportunity to flee, but whose only route to freedom seems to be marriage. These facts are also aesthetically strengthened by a very dark illumination and the predominance of an analytical montage of short shots that stress the effect of the oppression of the three female characters in the asphyxiating space in which they find themselves. In this way the personalities of the two antagonistic women are introduced here (Lidia, carnal love, the femme fatal who represents rebellion and bad habits / Mary: spiritual love, represents obedience and respect . . .), who interpose themselves in Victor's life fused in the same virtual person through the letter that Victor receives (Mary's spirit / Lidia's face). So, the destiny personified in the frozen photo of Nancy is interposed between the three principal characters of the story, being the source of all the calamities. In this way, after an ellipsis that leads to Mary's arrival in the colony, Victor will commence his downward journey without understanding the events, bringing about the first important allusion to the failure of the great work that the protagonist seeks to complete.

As an answer, then, to the terrible problems that come up in the construction of the dam, Victor goes about committing violent acts against the natives, bringing about a terrible sickness which highlights his personal voyage toward insanity, with constant delirious confusion between the two women.

However, after a new ellipsis that omits the character's disease, Victor seems to have overcome his madness, and even reconciled with his wife, thereby accepting his situation. But the calm will not last long, becoming a mirage of longed-for happiness when the second connection with the mother country surfaces. Preceded now by the record that Lidia sends to

---

<sup>12</sup> In spite of the fact that the press at the time gave assurances on several occasions that sequences were filmed in Guinea, the majority of the takes in the jungle were, in reality, filmed in the Parque Natural del Monasterio de Piedra, while the fundamental space of the swamp was built on a soundstage equipped with airplane engines set up to produce wind (Cámara 15 July 1947 no. 109). In this way, it is easier to suppose that the few fragments that give evidence of Guinea might be stock-shots, pulled most probably from documentaries filmed by Manuel Hernández Sanjuán on his expedition to the colony with the Hermic Films team (For information on Hernández Sanjuán's work and other aspects relative to life in the colony the work of Ortín y Pereiró is of interest).



Mary, the *leitmotif* of the film is reactivated and again Victor's personal situation will have contact with new elements from the peninsula. This second link will be even more devastating than the last and is produced by the decision to temporarily return to Spain, where the now irreparable descent of the protagonist and the manifestation of his most negative aspects take place. Through a skillful presentation along the lines of a summary, conveying the dizzying sensation of the character's self destruction, two months of the story are condensed into brief scenes having to do with Victor's first encounter with Lidia, the distrust of Mary, Victor's infidelity with Lidia, his already-evident alcoholism and Lidia's heartbreaking goodbye in which Victor shows himself to be ready to abandon Mary.

So, now that we have arrived at the peak of the melodrama, the flashback interrupts with a brief pause that refers to reading the diary, so that fracture occurs in the discourse of the *flashback*, and opening up a narrative turn, in keeping with the most typical aspects of black cinema. Then the second part of the retrospective story begins with the third and final stage of dementia connected with the old country, with the arrival in the colony of Lidia, inevitably leading to a catastrophic turn of events, beginning with the succession of foreshadowing sequences: the beginning of the correspondence with Mary, the encounter between Victor and Lidia colored with obvious sexual connotations,<sup>13</sup> and Victor and Mary's fateful walk through the swamp, romantically wandering over their own gravestones (recall that Victor and Mary both die under the waters of the swamp).

In any case, the long climax of the film really begins with the sudden onset of the final storm, reactivating the *stimmung* seen at the beginning of the film, so that the characters feel trapped by a steep, unavoidable and centripetal dynamic that leads to the final catastrophe.

Thus, after a fight between Jorge and Victor, in which we see that Victor, in his absolute state of insanity is even willing to kill his friend, the final piece of the story begins with the dam's near-collapse due to storm damage. Mary decides to go and notify Victor, who is in the jungle with Lidia. Victor is completely free from worry about the possible failure of his project.

It is then when the series of events is set into motion with a circular, decadent aesthetic that commences a converging montage showing Victor and Lidia fleeing the tornado.<sup>14</sup> Mary pursues them, and the inclusion of additional shots shows the devastating weather, and culminates in the moment when Mary discovers the lovers taking refuge in a hut. After that, Mary flees unexpectedly and rushes out again into the terrible storm, culminating in her drowning in the swamp screaming the words that resonate in the first sequence "Victor! Save me! [¡Victor! ¡Sálvame!]" As can be seen, as the catastrophic events that advance the allegorical element of water (associated with death) is reaching a greater presence in the image (with scenes in which the characters walk with difficulty across swamps or cross frames with tremendous waterfalls behind them), foreshadowing the events that are soon to transpire.

---

<sup>13</sup> Then the sequence with the lovers' encounter ends with a medium shot that shows Lidia locking the door and looking sensually at Victor (off camera), as there is a fade to black.

<sup>14</sup> It is precisely with this term (tornado) that Mary mentions the storm, reflecting this centripetal and unsavable character of the fatalistic atmosphere, also present, as we will see, in the very narrative conception and aesthetics of the discourse.

Victor, in a state of complete insanity, starts a process that is certainly the opposite of the one presented in the first sequence, another product of this always cyclic, desperate vision of the story. So after seeing Mary drowned in the swamp pitifully shouting for help, Victor returns tormented to his house. We can see that his face is completely withered while he drinks whiskey and he has atrocious hallucinations without being able to distinguish fiction from reality, finally producing the last mirage of happiness with the inner voice of Mary, a result of the memory that lives in his obsession “You’re free [Eres libre]”, she says. Having despicably liberated himself from his wife, Victor will still try to go back to Lidia, who abandons him, believing him to be a killer. In this way tragedy returns with the same, already evident result. Victor is completely alone (just like the beginning of the story, without friends and without family), accompanied only by the ghost of his woman.

Finally, the last flashback images show Victor running through the village, laughing insanely and passing out in front of the swamp due to the supposed frightening image of the ghost, which is a premonition of his own impending death, a moment in which the reactivation of the off-screen narrator’s voice ends the flashback, bringing us back to the reading of the diary with an epilogue of certain moralizing character in which a decision is made to hide the acts, since “God has made his final judgment (...) with the punishment of human misery [Dios ya ha emitido su fallo inapelable (...) con el castigo de las miserias humanas].” In the same way, the colophon to the closed, circular story turns out to also be favored by a perfect enjambment of the temporal dimensions of the discourse tying the content of the offscreen voice to the opening sequence of the film (we’re seeing the last thing Victor wrote before his death).<sup>15</sup>

#### SYNTHESIS AND FINAL CONCLUSION: THE (POSTWAR) OBSESSION OF VICTOR SÁNCHEZ DEL CAMPO

At the beginning of the present text we briefly alluded to the extended discounting of Arturo Ruiz-Castillo’s works that appear to be in accordance with the conventional cinematic tendencies or of the official government position, warning instead that it could be possible that the true artistic skill of the director is revealed with at least the same plenitude in a film initially so far removed from his creative interests like *Obsession*. Starting from the premise of the colonial story (only an excessively simplistic view could see it as such), we consider that the expertise of the director is shown by a latent discourse that certainly cuts against the grain established by strictly formal operations, wrapped up in a cloud of intertextual references. From this perspective, the amphibiological character of many of the film’s sequences is made evident by the depiction of some ostensibly ambiguous dialogues in which the sense of absence acquires a special interest by the imprecise character or the omission of information

---

<sup>15</sup> For a greater understanding of the symbolic, promontory and circular character of the film’s discourse, remember the point discussed about Victor’s presentation at the beginning of the film at the culminating moment of his madness through a triple succession of shot/countershot with the framing, angles, depth of field and symbolic lighting, the refuge in alcohol which leads him to hallucinations (visual and auditory), the return of the idyllic past (the song which symbolizes his relationship with Lidia and the relationship that leads back to a union with the woman he has killed) and his involuntary pilgrimage to the death where the ghost of the woman awaits.

about specific characters and situations, appealing then to the imagination of the viewer to gloss over the faults of an inconclusive surreptitious discourse whose possible dissidence is only insinuated in the film. On the other hand, if in his celebrated essay about Spanish cinema in the '40s Jose Luis Castro de Paz referred to the repeated textual formulations of the war-time trauma in some of the most outstanding films of the decade conforming to a particular knot of semantics and form such that "the irretrievable loss of the love object . . . and the resulting loneliness and melancholy can be read as metaphors for a desolate, anguished country populated by overwhelming and sobering memories, dealing with a guilt complex that uncontrollably spills forth."<sup>16</sup> (213-214), it would not be out of place to find the sense of the absence this veiled and (self) censored information to that which we just referred in that of its own post-war context corresponding to the era of the film's development. So, having detected the complex presentation of the protagonist and the ambiguous references to his enigmatic past as some of the most attention-getting aspects of the work, it is viable to consider Victor's frustrations and complexes, like the concealment of his experiences prior to traveling to the colony as symptoms of war trauma. In fact, in the where the theme of the correspondence with the women in the orphanage, Victor claims to be a peaceful citizen and to have not used a weapon since he was very young (only to hunt birds, he says), while he uses a revolver for shooting practice with his companions, which he does with a skill and precision that would only be consistent with great experience. He seems to obstinately hide a traumatic past which is likely to be related to the elided war conflict.<sup>17</sup> In any case, it is possible that the unseen war wound is visible not only in the story's protagonist, but in all the principal characters who suffer from a loss that conditions their conduct, which turns out to be especially significant the allusion to the loss of the father figure (obviously, an especially strong phenomenon in the Spain of that time) in the case of Mary, Lidia and Nancy, the three orphanage recluses. Definitely, avoiding any possible hint of a glorious exaltation in accordance with the paranoiac imagery of the Franco regime, *Obsession's* underlying discourse turns its gaze toward the downtrodden, traumatized sentiments of the post-war Spanish society with a psychological melodrama of a colonial environment in which the most particular traces of presumable imperialist apology that results from the fusion of Alfredo Mayo with the colonial genre are inverted to create a story diametrically opposed to the expected, in which the epic, patriotic characters are negated and stripped of their heroic condition. In the last case, the story of Victor Sánchez del Campo is that of an intimate

---

<sup>16</sup> "La pérdida irremediable del objeto amoroso . . . y la soledad y la melancolía resultantes pueden leerse como metáforas de un país desolado, angustiado, poblado de agobiantes y sombríos recuerdos, soportando un complejo de culpa que brota incontrolable".

<sup>17</sup> Even considering the possible bellicose insinuations, it is not possible to reject a strange oedipal explanation for the character's trauma. Then, at a point later on in the tale, Victor, after telling a story about a childhood misdeed (symptomatically related to running away from home), relates the following while a close-up shot isolates this part out of its context in a certain incomprehensible way: "I did love my mother. It has been a long time since that. I too was suffocating inside that house. [Yo quería mucho a mi madre. Hace ya tanto tiempo de eso. Yo también me ahogaba en aquella casa en un primer plano extravagante que aísla el fragmento de su contexto de un modo ciertamente incomprensible."].

posthumous diary of a man whose guilt complex brings about the separation from his stormy past, trying to flee from a devastated country whose macabre memories incessantly pursue him. In any case he can only find his redemption by that most definitive of evasions: death. Also, knowing the tragedy at the beginning of the film, the story is of his agony and his penitence. From this point of view, the discourse could hardly be more heartbreaking. There are neither heroes nor homeland in Ruiz-Castillo's film, only broken beings in decline whose home has been transfigured into the captivity that subjugates them.

Translation by Mark David McGraw

## Bibliography

- Borau, José. *Diccionario Del Cine Español*. Academia De Las Artes Y Las Ciencias Cinematográficas De España. Madrid: Alianza, 1998.
- Cámara, 109 (15 July 1947).
- Castro de Paz, José Luis. *Un cinema herido. Los turbios años cuarenta en el cine español (1939-1950)*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2002.
- Elena, Alberto. "Cine colonial." Borau: 243.
- Fernández-Figares Romero de la Cruz, María Dolores. *La colonización del imaginario. Imágenes de África*. Granada: Universidad de Granada/Diputación de Granada, 2003.
- Heredero, Carlos F. "España bajo el franquismo: imágenes parásitas y resistencia crítica." Monterde, José Enrique y Esteve Rimbau, coords. *Historia general del cine, V. IX Europa y Asia (1945-1959)*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1996:183-234.
- Monterde, José Enrique y Esteve Rimbau, coords. *Historia general del cine, V. IX Europa y Asia (1945-1959)*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1996.
- Ortín, Pedro y Vic Pereiró. *Mbini: cazadores de imágenes en la Guinea colonial*. Barcelona: Altaïr / We Are Here! Films, 2006.
- Primer Plano*, 154 (26 September 1943).
- Radiocinema*, 131 (January 1947).
- Radiocinema*, 134 (April 1947).
- Sánchez Barba, Francisco. *Brumas del franquismo. El auge del cine negro español (1950 / 1965)*. Barcelona: Publicacions i Edicions UB, 2007.
- Zunzunegui, Santos. "Sombras de ultramar: el imaginario colonial en dos films españoles de los años 40." *Paisajes de la forma*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1994.