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Prisoners of the State and Mind: Remembering *Los Topos* in Spanish Contemporary Cinema

From 1939-1975, during the Franco dictatorship in Spain, certain individuals who were classified as war criminals by the State hid in the most unimaginable places. These men, named *topos* or moles for their inability to see the light of the day, hid from the regime up until the proclamation of amnesty in 1969. In 2007, the modern democratic government of Spain, ruled by the socialist party, implemented the Historic Memory Law with the purpose of recognizing and giving rights to the victims of the civil war and the dictatorship that followed it. The Historic Memory Law impacted the creation/production of films such as *Los Girasoles Ciegos* and *30 Años de Oscuridad*, which dealt with the recognition of personal memories of victims of the Francoist repression. A film analysis that takes into consideration narrative structure, cultural context, and mise-en-scene, unveils the cinematographic techniques employed by filmmakers to present these men as unsung resistance heroes whose memory deserves to be preserved for future generations.

One may ask why were these men persecuted by Franco and his Nationalist regime? Why were they a threat to their objectives? The reason behind this was due to their professions and positions within the Second Spanish Republic . The Spanish constitution of 1931 promulgated under the democratically elected Second Republic sheds light into this issue. Under title three, *the rights and duties of the Spanish people*, Chapter One: *Political and Individual Guarantees*, Article No. 27 declares the freedom of religion and beliefs to all Spaniards. Article No. 34 states that all Spaniards have the right to express their ideas and thoughts freely and the freedom of

press. Article No. 35 declared that all Spaniards had free choice of profession. The constitution of 1931 protected these men from simply exercising their rights given by the law until Franco's coup and dictatorship outlawed them. Manuel Cortes, the protagonist of the documentary *30 Años de Oscuridad*, was a barber associated with left wing groups and syndicates, later elected mayor when he got into politics. In the films, they show the professions of the characters who would become *Topos*. In order to make the point that these men were persecuted for their political views and affiliation.

In one scene in the documentary, Cortes' wife explains how all the mayors from nearby towns were executed brutally by the military upon arrival. Dr. Ramon Arabat Mata, history professor from Rovira i Virgili University, points out in his article about the repression that the first victims were the mayors, councilmen, unionists, and the teachers of the towns the Nationalist encountered (Arabat pg. 3). Nationalist General Queipo de Llano called it the "Purifying Movement of the Spanish State" and was quoted saying that the words forgiveness and armistice should be removed from the Spanish dictionary (Arabat pg. 10). Manuel Cortes was unjustly declared a target by this fascist government all because of his political affiliation and position in the Republic, who was the enemy of Franco and the Nationalist. The same could be said about the character Ricardo Moza, who was simply a university professor who was affiliated with left wing ideals and an atheist. The Historic Memory Law's Article 2 recognizes and declares "the character of the all convictions, sanctions, and any forms of personal violence produced by political, ideological, or religious reasons during the Civil War, as well as the Dictatorship" (*Ley de la Memoria Historica* pg. 2). In *Los Girasoles Ciegos*, Brother Salvador, the antagonist, symbolizes the unjust convictions of Francoist Spain. In the scene where he meets Elena, he tells her that he knows who her husband was, he feels sorrow for her because she married an atheist

red who didn't allow her children to be baptized. Through his dialogue, one can notice the personal and religious reasons as to why antagonize and target men like Ricardo and Manuel. For that, the law recognizes and considered such judgement illegitimate as stated in Article No. 3.

The repression of the regime was unjust in the treatment of *Topos* like Cortes, wanting to forever taint an oblivate the memory of these innocent people.

The first film, *30 Años de Oscuridad*, is a documentary released in 2012, five years after the historic memory law's implementation. The documentary tells the story of Manuel Cortes, the former mayor of the town of Mijas, Malaga. Cortes spent 30 years hiding from the Franco regime, hiding inside a small, compact room behind a closet. The narrative of the film is told through the retelling of Cortes' life by voice actors Juan Diego as Cortes and Ana Fernandez as his wife Maria. The film gets interrupted by factual sources such as Jesus Torbado and Ronald Fraser, authors of the book *Los Topos* and *Los Escondidos*, and Cortes' own granddaughter, Maria de la Pena. The Historic background of this film is based mostly on Manuel Cortes' account of how he endured hiding from the dictatorship from 1939 all the way to 1977. The film's theme is that of remembrance; the whole documentary's purpose is to recognize who Manuel Cortes was and what he endured during his hiding for 30 years. Torbado and Fraser, who published their books based on the accounts of many known *Topos*, give their insight on Cortes' hiding, the issues he faced, and the dilemma of the Franco dictatorship in its handling of the defeated republicans. Their scenes helped provide historical insight and explanation behind the person that Manuel was before and during the regime, proving his innocence and the type of man he was. The tone of the film is dark, suspenseful and filled with dark colors in the scenes that recreate the issues and experiences that Manuel dealt with in before and during his hiding. Cortes witnessed the Malaga Almeria road massacre of 1937, where many civilians were targeted and

killed by nearby battleships. These scenes were recreated in the style of a comic book, and it flared with intense fear through the narration of Juan Diego as Cortes. Both Diego and Fernandez amplify the seriousness of such experiences the Cortes family endured in the dictatorship.

Los Girasoles Ciegos was released in 2008, a year after the law's creation. The film is based on the fourth story of the novel with the same name. The plot follows the Mazo family, which consist of a mother, a son, and a father, who hide the father from the authorities, as he himself becomes a *Topo* hiding from the regime. The novel centered itself around the theme of defeat, as each of the four stories deals with its own type of defeat. In the case of the fourth story, of which the movie is based on, it is the complete defeat of the civil war's losers. The differences found between the film and the novel are seen in the narrative style of the story. The novel divides the point of view through first person accounts of a grown up Lorenzo, who recounts his childhood trying to hide his father, Brother Salvador, whose account is in the style of a confession, and the omniscient narrator that tells the story without internal thoughts and as it is. The film, on the other hand, tells the story only through two points of view: the family and the priest. The film won the Goya Award (Spain's version of the Oscars) for best adapted screenplay yet was critiqued for its Franco Dictatorship setting, its tiring bias of the republicans, and its adaptation of the book. While the film did take some liberties in its adaptation, it is one of the few films that mentions or features the story of *Los Topos*.

The key character that demonstrates the effects of the Historic Memory Law on *Los Girasoles Ciegos* is Lorenzo Moza, the child. In many films centered around the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, children are normally seen as the witnesses of the events, the atrocities, or the impacts done by the nationalist during those crucial times. In the case of *Los Girasoles Ciegos*, Lorenzo is the one who witnesses the treatment of his mother upon the

inspection of the national guard and Brother Salvador's barging into his home, attempting to rape his mother and beat up his father. Sara Santamaria Colmenero, professor at the School of Communication and Culture in Aarhus University, argues on the idea of “the places of the memory” (*Lugares de la Memoria*) and how Lorenzo reflects on the events that transpired during his childhood. During the final pages of the novel, Lorenzo laments have not done anything to stop Brother Salvador from barging into their home (*Girasoles Ciegos*, pg. 94). By the end of the book, Lorenzo never forgot how his father “threw himself into the void”, yet he doesn’t fully remember the events that lead to it, like his father sitting in the balcony or saying goodbye before killing himself. Alberto Mendez, the author of the novel, affirms that a “Denial of Memory” followed in postwar Spain, where the events were remembered but never talked about. (Colmenero pg. 127). Lorenzo remembers his father and his death as he threw himself down, it’s a place in his memory that’s affected by trauma of a postwar Spain. The film further amplifies this through the actor of Lorenzo, Roger Princep. The ending remained unchanged from the novel, for the scene where Lorenzo reflects seeing his father die, Ricardo is seen from a wide longshot, waving goodbye and walk off into the balcony to throw himself “into the void”. Lorenzo in the film represents the witnesses of the dictatorship and the hardships that were lived in that time. As a witness, he embodies the personal recognition of victims like his father.

Through both films, certain cinematic techniques were utilized in portraying the hardships, fears, and emotions of *Los Topos* through the cinematic techniques utilized in each film. In scene 48:52:31 from *Los Girasoles Ciegos*, fear can be seen in the emotions of the character Ricardo Moza, through a median shot where a zenith key light focuses over his reactions as the national guard enters his home searching for him, fearing for the life of his family and himself. This type of scene demonstrates the gravity of the *topos'* situations. Cortes’

situation parallels that of his fictional counterpart when his father's house gets searched up. In scene 27:13-27:35 from *30 Anos de Oscuridad* highlights the fear in Cortes' face as sweat pours throughout it, all while a first-person shot is taken into focus to capture that feeling of terror and tension Topos like him faced in the dictatorship. Additionally, the scene is followed by Cortes' nightmares of being chased by the guard, who then change their appearances into grim reapers, symbolizing his death coming soon at their hands. Through both films, fear was their physical and psychological prison, one that kept them isolated from the world, hiding for their lives in such closed areas.

In conclusion, The Historic Memory Law Impacted the creation/production of films such as *Los Girasoles Ciegos* and *30 Años de Oscuridad*. As argued in this paper, these films used cinematic techniques to present these men as unsung resistance heroes whose memory deserves to be preserved for future generations.

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