

THE ROMANTIC USE OF FLAMINGOS IN A SPANISH POLITICAL  
ALLEGORICAL FILM

by

Miguel Alonso Mira

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science and Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana

May 2012

©COPYRIGHT

by

Miguel Alonso Mira

2012

All Rights Reserved

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Miguel Alonso Mira

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citation, bibliographic style, and consistency and is ready for submission to The Graduate School.

Ronald Tobias

Approved for the School of Film and Photography

Dr. Robert Arnold

Approved for The Graduate School

Dr. Carl A. Fox

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Montana State University, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

If I have indicated my intention to copyright this thesis by including a copyright notice page, copying is allowable only for scholarly purposes, consistent with "fair use" as prescribed in the U.S. Copyright Law. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this thesis in whole or in parts may be granted only by the copyright holder.

Miguel Alonso Mira

May 2012

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. LUIS BUÑUEL AND MORBID CURIOSITY.....	2
3. WALTER BENJAMIN AND ALLEGORY .....	4
4. GEORGE FRANJU AND <i>BLOOD OF THE BEASTS</i> .....	6
5. FÉLIX RODRÍGUEZ DE LA FUENTE AND <i>LOS PRISIONEROS DEL BOSQUE</i> ....	8
6. ROMANTIC POLITICAL ALLEGORY IN <i>SALMA: A WINGLESS NOMAD</i> .....	10
7. CONCLUSION.....	16
REFERENCES CITED .....	17

## GLOSSARY

Allegoresis: an allegorical interpretation understood as explaining a work, or a figure in myth, or any created entity, as if there were another sense to which it referred, that is, presuming the work or figure to be encoded with meaning intended by the author or a higher spiritual authority.

Morbid curiosity: an unusually strong interest in unpleasant events and information. By unpleasant is meant things normally considered unwholesome, unhealthy, noxious, gruesome, frightening, pessimistic, punishing, repugnant, shocking or otherwise negative in some way.

## ABSTRACT

Not many filmmakers have explored using animals to portray, for example, a political conflict allegorically. George Franju and Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente resorted to animals in their films to criticize the political environment of their time, the Nazi administration of Paris for the former, and the Franco dictatorship for the later. They showed morbid and gruesome scenes of animals being slaughtered to illustrate symbolically the violent atmosphere that impregnated the life of the French and the Spanish citizens in those difficult years. Inspired by their work, I have produced *Salma: A Wingless Nomad*, a film that presents the political conflict of Western Sahara through the fictional story of a young Sahrawi refugee whose only way of connecting with reality and the memories of her childhood is through the images of flamingos. For her, flamingos incarnate the freedom her people lost when, consecutively, Spain and Morocco invaded them. They also represent the nomadic tradition of her ancestors, a way of life that she romanticizes as the true identity of the Sahrawis. In this essay, I compare my film with the work of Franju and Rodríguez de la Fuente, providing an analysis on how I built the allegory around the natural history of flamingos. I conclude by saying that even though Franju's and Rodríguez de la Fuente's morbid use of *mise en scene* was effective to depict the violence of the Nazi and the Falangist regimes, my film took a different approach; one that would romantically reveal the reason why the Sahrawis suffered, which wasn't violence or death, but the lack of freedom.

## INTRODUCTION

In the early nineteenth century, German philosopher and theologian Franz von Baader pointed out that "...everything we see in external nature is, for us, already writing, a kind of sign-language, which nevertheless lacks the most essential feature: pronunciation" (qtd. in Benjamin 184). This quote made me think that the way films use animals today is limited to a literal interpretation of their natural history behavior, when there are other forms of expression that depict their life more symbolically and creatively. Among these, I chose allegory.

Animals have been objects of allegorical representation in a wide range of disciplines of the art world throughout history. However, their use in the visual arts, and particularly in film, is not as common as we might expect. As vehicles of morbid media messages, they served the purpose of filmmakers Georges Franju and Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente to criticize the political environment of their time, the Nazi occupation of Paris for the former, and Franco's dictatorship for the later. Through my film, *Salma: A Wingless Nomad* (2012), I suggest an alternative to morbid curiosity by using flamingos as romantic symbols of nomadic life as a tool to describe the conflict of Western Sahara and the Sahrawi community. In this essay, I compare my film with the work of Franju and Rodríguez de la Fuente, providing an analysis of how I built the allegory around the natural history of flamingos and the political conflict of the Sahrawis.



## LUIS BUÑUEL AND MORBID CURIOSITY

In 1932 Luis Buñuel was about to shoot one of the most iconic sequences of his filmography. In his acclaimed non-fiction film *Las Hurdes* (1933), a sequence shows a mountain goat falling from a cliff in order to demonstrate that only when by accident these animals died, the extremely poor and desperate inhabitants of this region of Spanish meseta would eat meat. However, despite the fact that Buñuel depicted the goat's death as accidental, a person with a rifle next to cinematographer Eli Lotar shot the caprine down. What would be the purpose of such a shot, besides emphasizing the extreme character of the poverty of this region? I believe morbid curiosity plays a relevant role when it comes to fully understanding Buñuel's films and particularly this documentary.

Morbid curiosity is a term originally used by professor Jack B. Haskins and which refers to "spectators drawn to burning buildings and suicide attempts, viewers of dead bodies at funeral homes, crowds gathering at the scene of fights and riots, or tourists traveling to scenes of murders and natural disasters." (Haskins).

The studies of Emily D. Edwards on cognitive film theory three decades ago show some of the effects "morbid curiosity" as a visual tool creates. Edwards observes that when exposing people to morbid media messages, "The negative feelings produced create an intense state of consciousness in which personal values are re-examined" (29).

Certainly Buñuel was aware of this fact since part of his own surrealistic agenda was, as he describes in his biography, to provoke and to scandalize. "All of us were supporters of a certain concept of revolution, and although the surrealists didn't consider themselves terrorists, they were constantly fighting a society they despised. Their principal weapon

wasn't guns, of course; it was scandal” (Buñuel 107).

During the meetings at the Café Cyrano in Paris, the place where the Surrealist group emerged during the 1920s, Buñuel laid the foundations for the ideas that would later crystallize in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and *L'Age d'Or* (1930). However, *Las Hurdes* was different. Years passed before people started to realize this documentary aligned with Buñuel's surreal predisposition for self-expression. As film theorist Vivian Sobchack points out, *Las Hurdes* provides us with

...an accurate portrait of social relations, destroys a conventional view of the nature of those relations ...their histories, and their conventions for [rationally] understanding the world ...its primary aim is to cause the viewer to question the very bases of perception itself...

Sobchack doesn't specify in this quote how Buñuel manages to make people question the way they perceive reality, but I think the effects of morbid curiosity that Edwards describes in her studies, such as the creation of an intense state of consciousness, were determinant.

## WALTER BENJAMIN AND ALLEGORY

Walter Benjamin was an interesting thinker whose description of the allegorical form also contributed to development of my film. He revitalized the concept of allegory in his book *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (1928), which links more to the dichotomy of life and death, and therefore to morbid curiosity. In a way, Benjamin's collaborations with the Frankfurt School and some of his later articles moved in the same direction of forcing the crisis of perception that Buñuel had attempted in *Las Hurdes*. Like the surrealists, Benjamin wanted to change the principles of the society in which he lived. Benjamin died as a hunted fugitive in Spain in 1940. Still today people question the origin of his death surrounded by the political confabulations of that time. The fact is that his Jewish and Neo-Marxist intellectual response to that environment provoked a change in society that aligned with the surrealist's method through allegory. Significantly, the intersection of Benjamin's philosophical sphere of knowledge with the French historical avant-garde movement took the form of an allegorical textual exegesis linked to the romanticized concept of nature. Von Baader summarizes this concept:

It is well known that it is entirely up to us whether we use any particular object of nature as a conventional sign for an idea, as we see in symbolic and hieroglyphic writing, and this object only then takes on a new character when we wish to use it, not to convey its natural characteristics, but those which we have ourselves, so to speak, lent it (qtd. in Benjamin 184).

Had Buñuel opened this epistemological door, he might have reinforced the surrealist logic of the mountain goat scene in *Las Hurdes* by adding more layers of meaning. However, there are two filmmakers who were probably inspired by the work of

Buñuel and Benjamin and who took those ideas further, combining morbid curiosity and the allegorical form in a more explicit way. George Franju was the first.

GEORGE FRANJU AND *BLOOD OF THE BEASTS* (1949)

Unlike Benjamin, George Franju managed to survive the collateral damages of the Second World War and its psychological effects on those who had run away, who had been in jail, or who had suffered torture and discrimination after the Nazi invasion of Paris. Only a few years after the defeat of Germany, the Parisians were able to gather the necessary strength to start expressing their repressed emotions in the aftermath of a war that had left consequences on all of them, and Franju was not different.

His particular depiction of the atmosphere of the city in those crucial transitory years in *Blood of the Beasts* resembles Chris Marker's use of mise en scene in *La Jetée* (1962). They both share a spatiotemporal meditation on the ephemeral nature of mental recovery after going through a disaster and the uncertainty of a future that we wish we could predict but cannot. In order to create that particular environment, Franju resorts to the use of animals from a slaughterhouse (horses, cattle and sheep) as instruments of his allegorical expression. In my opinion, Franju's use of allegory is unique in the way he confronts the hope of a society that wants to move forward, in spite of the long lasting memories of the Nazi massacre. The opening scene is probably the best example of this.

The first scene shows the melancholic nature of the script that uses the passing of time as the driving force: "At the doors of Paris, the uncultivated lands, where young poor men play ... they are seeded of unique relics of a wealth past." But the scene then moves quickly from the beauty of the suburbs of Abattoirs de la Villette, to the hectic activity of the slaughterhouse. Viewers are confronted with a series of death and decomposition almost certainly making reference to the Nazi death camps and the

coldness of their “butchery”-like methods. The juxtaposition of these images with the previous call for hope forces again the crisis of perception that Buñuel had accomplished with morbid curiosity in *Las Hurdes*, but this time, however, accompanied by Benjamin’s interpretation of the allegorical form.

FÉLIX RODRÍGUEZ DE LA FUENTE AND *LOS PRISIONEROS DEL BOSQUE*

(1974)

More than twenty years passed before another filmmaker in Europe employed animals in a political allegory. Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente (1928-1980) used the “cloak of invisibility” allegory offers (Benjamin 191) to expose political propaganda against Franco’s dictatorship. He wasn’t the first one to use allegory for clandestine political purposes as the following extract of a letter from Cicero (106-43 B.C.) to Atticus shows:

Of the political situation I shall say little. I am terrified by now for fear the very paper may betray us. So henceforward, if I have occasion to write to you at any length, I shall obscure my meanings with allegories (*Cicero’s Letters to Atticus*, qtd. in Teskey 122).

In my case, the allegoresis of Rodríguez de la Fuente’s oeuvre gave me the idea for *Salma: A Wingless Nomad*. My film presents the conflict of the Western Sahara using some of the techniques Rodríguez de la Fuente employed to avoid the censorship of Franco, but I apply them to a political context in which secrecy is no longer necessary. Additionally, its theme, whose main pivotal point is first the concept of freedom lost by the Western Sahara during the imperialistic incursions of Spain, and later the illegal occupation of Morocco, feeds from the idealistic view of the nomadic life he promulgated throughout his life.

After his death in 1980, the popularity of Rodríguez de la Fuente, reached unprecedented levels in Spain. Many people connected with his early ideas of environmental conservation and pursued careers in biology and other similar scientific fields related to the protection of nature. I was one of them. Today, I’m thrilled to

discover that his message not only comprised the classic superficial compendium of “environmental propaganda” but also a deeper intricate collection of thoughts blended around an ideology that defended a closer look, a profound admiration, and a legitimate respect for the men of the Paleolithic era (Varillas 2). Rodríguez de la Fuente’s frame of mind considered these men free, nomadic, and respectful with nature. This interpretation provided me with the right philosophical tool to describe the life of the Sahrawis, the original inhabitants of Western Sahara.

The second aspect that arises from a personal analysis of his extensive audiovisual work is the presence of a clandestine critique of Franco’s oppressive dictatorship through the use of diverse well-dressed political allegories in some of his natural history documentaries, particularly *Los Prisioneros del Bosque* (*Prisoners of the Forest* -1974), a chapter of his acclaimed series *El Hombre y la Tierra* (*The Man and the Earth* -1974-1980), which is filled with metaphors and incisive symbolism designed to awaken Spanish society from its soporific status.

The most spectacular shot of the film shows a golden eagle catching a mountain goat off the edge of a cliff. This shot is so similar to Buñuel’s shot of the mountain goat in *Las Hurdes* that I think Rodríguez de la Fuente might have been inspired by it and tried to replicate it in his own film. However, Rodríguez de la Fuente uses the shot as more than a gimmick to engage viewers through morbid curiosity. The eagle was the emblem of Franco’s government so this shot also allowed him to criticize the regime clandestinely since he portrays the goats in “*Prisoners of the Forest*” as Spanish citizens living under the dictatorship.



ROMANTIC POLITICAL ALLEGORY IN *SALMA: A WINGLESS NOMAD* (2012)

Inspired by the work of Franju and Rodríguez de la Fuente, I produced *Salma: A Wingless Nomad* (2012). Like *Blood of the Beasts* (1949) and *Prisoners of the Forest* (1974), my film uses animals to represent audio-visually the main characters of a political allegory, which focuses on the conflict of Western Sahara.

After the decolonization of North Africa, Western Sahara was the only country that did not acquire independence when the colonists left (1976). Spain invaded the territory in 1884 and called it Spanish Sahara. The Sahrawis, the original inhabitants of that region, who until the occupation had lived in nomadic communities across the Saharan Desert, settled down in some of the cities that Spain developed near the coast. However, when the adjacent countries gained their independence in the late 1950's and early 1960's, a nationalist feeling emerged among the Sahrawis, particularly among those who had taken part in the war as members of the Moroccan Army of Liberation that expelled France from Morocco (1956). Initially, Spain repressed the Sahrawi movements for the independence of Western Sahara. An example is the "Massacre of Zemla" (1970), in which Spanish colonial authorities brutally suppressed a public demonstration by opening fire on it. However, the Spanish government soon realized it would be more beneficial for Spain to support a process of self-determination in Western Sahara that, in return, would grant them access to the physical resources of the region.

The initial plans of supporting the independence of Western Sahara never materialized. Both Franco's declining health and the pressure of the international

community, particularly of the United States, forced Spain to sign the Madrid Accords (1975), by which Spain relinquished the territory to Morocco and Mauritania.

Up to that point, nobody seemed to have paid attention to the Sahrawis. The POLISARIO Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro) which appeared in 1973 to consolidate the different Sahrawi nationalist movements, fought back against Morocco and Mauritania. Even though they managed to expel Mauritania from the Southern parts of the territory, Morocco eventually won the struggle and took control of most of the region, particularly the coastline, where most of the economic resources are.

The violence and the death that characterized the oppressive political environment of the life of the Sahrawis during the years of the Spanish and the Moroccan invasion resemble the political climate in which Franju and Rodríguez de la Fuente produced their films. Both filmmakers found in morbid curiosity the right tool to convey their political message and make viewers understand why the French and the Spanish citizens suffered. For Franju, who released *Blood of the Beasts* five years after Nazi defeat in France in 1944, the use of gruesome images of animals being slaughtered illustrated the traumatic memories of the French and served to express the repressed emotions of the four years of German administration. For Rodríguez de la Fuente the use of morbid images of animals, such as eagles preying on mountain goats, responded more to his personal political agenda. He wanted to defy the censorship of Franco's dictatorship and criticize his regime, which he represented symbolically by an eagle.

However, the reasons why Sahrawis suffer today are not linked to the same causes that affected the life of the French and Spaniards. The Sahrawis have gone through similar experiences, like the foreign administration of their country, or the presence of a similar type of censorship, but at the present day, the violence and the death surrounding their political conflict is no longer present, since there has been a ceasefire since 1991. When Morocco invaded Western Sahara in 1976, thousands of families escaped to Algeria. Today approximately 100,000 Sahrawis gather in refugee camps near the border city of Tindouf. The lack of freedom, the feeling of being confined to refugee camps, and not anymore the violence of their political conflict, is the principal cause of the Sahrawis' sorrow and frustration. Because of that, I decided not to employ morbid curiosity as the main cinematographic tool to describe their current political situation and to use, instead, the people's aspirations of running away from the refugee camps as the main idea to build my allegorical interpretation of their lives.

In *Salma: A Wingless Nomad*, a young Sahrawi woman living in Spain recalls the story of her life from the early years of her childhood in the refugee camps of Tindouf to her current experiences in Spain as a legal immigrant. The way I visually depict her feelings and the memories of her childhood is through the images of flamingos. Flamingos are indeed nomadic migrants. Every year a large number of them fly from North Africa, the place where they over-winter, to their colonies located in the Northern latitudes of the Mediterranean Sea. Similarly, every summer about 8000 Sahrawi children from the camps of Tindouf participate in a refugee program that allows them to live in Spain for a few months. Salma, the protagonist of my film, is one of those kids. The

beginning of the story shows her frustration for not being old enough to accompany her brothers in their first trip to Spain. I tried to put myself in her shoes and imagine how she would feel living isolated in those refugee camps. I assumed that like any other kid she would use her imagination to escape from the harsh reality of her daily life.

Knowing that flamingos fly every year over the refugee camps in their seasonal trip to Spain, I pictured Salma looking at the flamingos and dreaming to become one of them, imagining to grow wings that would let her fly side by side with them. For her, flamingos incarnate the freedom her people lost when consecutively Spain and Morocco invaded them. They also represent the nomadic tradition of her ancestors, a way of life that she romanticizes as the true identity of the Sahrawis.

Not only does the intangible nature of her dreams come from the symbolic connection between her desires for flying away and the natural behavior of flamingos, the fact that Sahrawi children never experienced the nomadic life of previous generations also makes them create an idealized version of this type of life out of the collective mythology of their communities. This is one of the principal reasons why in my allegorical interpretation of their political conflict I focused on the romantic representation of their nomadic philosophy instead of dwelling on the morbid atmosphere surrounding the violence of their intifada against Morocco.

The film is built around a letter that Salma writes to her boyfriend who was incarcerated in Morocco for being an active member of the POLISARIO Front. The situation of her boyfriend represents the heartbreaking paradox of the conflict of the Sahrawis. Their aspirations for the nomadic life that they have traditionally pursued and

the freedom connected to that way of life contrasts with the reality of their current situation: imprisoned in jail or confined in refugee camps.

Spanish political leaders have become gradually aware of the irreparable long-term damage that the invasion of Western Sahara caused in the nomadic life of the Sahrawis. With the help of the French, who took control of Algeria (1848) and Southern Morocco (1912), they established political boundaries where for millennia there had only been imaginary lines. Therefore, Sahrawi fluid migratory paths disappeared, and with them the identity and the nomadic spirit of their culture were lost forever. Also, as historian of North Africa Phillip C. Naylor says, there is a “lingering Spanish regret, a feeling of ‘bad faith’ over the way [Spain] relinquished Western Sahara” (236). The creation of the refugee program (1996) in which Salma participates was the response to that feeling of regret; an attempt of Spanish administrators to compensate for the negative effects they provoked. However, from my point of view, this program not only does not help solve the political conflict of the Sahrawis but is simply another way of imperialistic control.

Like other Sahrawi children, Salma has no other choice but to accept taking part in this integration program because it is the only way she has to get out of the refugee camps during the summer season. The program admits only children between the ages of 7 and 13, but if the host family agrees, the Spanish government grants these children the opportunity to stay longer and continue their education in Spain. Salma manages to stay and accepts the paternalistic solidarity of the former Spanish colonists in exchange for an education that she could never find in Tindouf.

As the film moves towards the end, she reveals that she has a son, and that he will receive Spanish citizenship. Her son personifies the hope among Sahrawis that eventually their children will be free and will fight for the independence of their country using Spain as the platform for their demands. On the screen, I chose to show a group of scientists ringing a juvenile flamingo to illustrate Salma's son obtaining the Spanish citizenship. The ring represents symbolically the irony and the contradiction underlying Salma's aspirations. By becoming Spanish, her son gains the freedom that she romantically dreamt about, but in the process, she indirectly kneels down before the system of political boundaries that she despises.

## CONCLUSION

Right after Spain abandoned Western Sahara (1976), the Sahrawis proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). In only four years about sixty countries recognized them as the legitimate inhabitants of the region (Naylor 234). Nowadays, the number of countries supporting their cause fluctuates but still is significant enough to wonder why nothing has changed in more than three decades.

Innumerable documentaries, TV shows, and both print and online publications have frequently paid attention to the conflict of Western Sahara. However, their conventional expository approach, enumerating systematically the different facts in favor of the Sahrawis' self-determination, has proved to be ineffective. Allegory gave me the opportunity to exploit the endless potential of cinema as a medium, whose main virtue, in my opinion, is the capacity to convey abstract feelings on the screen that otherwise would be difficult to communicate.

My choice in *Salma: A wingless Nomad* was to romanticize the symbolic connection between the nomadic life of flamingos and the aspirations of freedom of the Sahrawis. I hope this new interpretation of the life of the Sahrawis will help viewers to connect emotionally at a more personal level with the nature of their feelings and shed some light into a conflict that still remains unresolved. Additionally, I would like this essay to ignite the same passion for exploring the different possibilities that the allegorical use of animals offers in film as George Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* and Rodríguez de la Fuente's *Prisoners of the Forest* produced on my own work.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Verso, 2009. Print.
- Blood of the Beasts*. Dir. George Franju. Forces et voix de la France, 1949. Web.  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hk4LHcOMA4s&feature=related>>
- Buñuel, Luis. *My Last Breath*. Fontana Paperbacks, 1987. Web.
- Edwards, E.D. "The relationship between sensation-seeking and horror movie interest and attendance." Unpublished Ph. Dissertation. University of Tennessee, 1984. Print.
- El Hombre y la Tierra*. Dir. Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente. Radio Television Española (RTVE), 1974-1980. DVD.
- Haskins, Jack B. "Morbid Curiosity and the Mass Media: A Synergistic Relationship". *Morbid curiosity and the mass media: proceedings of a symposium sponsored by the School of Journalism, University of Tennessee, Knoxville and the Gannett Foundation, April 5-6, 1984*. Print
- L'Age d'Or*. Dir. Luis Buñuel. Vicomte de Noailles, 1930. DVD.
- Las Hurdes*. Dir. Luis Buñuel. Ramon Acin, 1933. Web.
- La Jetée*. Dir. Chris Marker. Argos Films, 1962. DVD.
- Los Prisioneros del Bosque, Prisoners of the Forest*. Dir. Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente. Radio Television Espanola (RTVE), 1974. DVD.
- Naylor, Phillip C. *North Africa*. University of Texas Press, 2009. Print.
- Salma: A Wingless Nomad*. Dir. Miguel Alonso Mira. Thesis film, 2012. DVD.
- Shobchack, Vivian. "The Dialectical Imperative of Luis Bunuel's Las Hurdes". Wayne State University Press, 1998. Print.
- Teskey, Gordon. *Allegory and Violence*. Cornell University Press, 1996. Print.
- Un Chien Andalou*. Dir. Luis Buñuel. Luis Buñuel, 1929. DVD.