

Body, Interiority and Affect in Memoria Histórica Cinema : Can Cinema of Empathy Advance the Cause of the Victims of Fascism?

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Introduction

Whether fictional narratives can make us more empathic has been widely discussed and is still a controversial topic. Can fiction help us feel the pain of others? Can it promote pro-social behavior to aid the victims of human rights abuse? In this essay, I explore these questions in connection to the cinema of *memoria histórica* [Spanish historical memory], born from the need to revisit the trauma of the Spanish fascism that originated in 1936 in the Spanish Civil War and terrorized Spaniards until the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975[1]. To do so, I first discuss empathy and its relation to film, introducing the notion of cinema of empathy. Next, I present as a case study what I consider a prototype of cinema of empathy within the *memoria histórica* genre, the film *La voz dormida* [The Sleeping Voice], directed by Benito Zambrano and released in 2011. Finally, I discuss the potential effects of empathic cinematic strategies in the ideological context of contemporary Spain, as well as their potential benefits for the advancement of historical memory activism[2].

Theoretical Considerations: Empathy, Narrative, and Film

Empathy (feeling *in* or *with*) is generally understood as the sharing of emotion, the ability to feel what another person is feeling[3]. This notion has been explored from different standpoints both in the sciences and the humanities. A definition that captures the complexity of the empathic phenomenon (including not just its cognitive-emotional aspects but also its social-behavioral ones) is the one provided by neuroscientist Jean Decety: "the natural capacity to share, understand, and respond with care to the affective states of others" (vii)[4]. The inclusiveness of Decety's definition is in line with my own view on empathic processes and, thus, it will be my starting point in this essay. From a narrative theory perspective[5], Suzanne Keen has described empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (*Empathy*, 4). Keen's work is particularly useful to help us problematize the idea that fiction not only may promote empathy but also that empathy may lead to pro-social behavior (empathy-altruism hypothesis)[6], since she offers a critical view that discusses empathy's limits as well as the need to account for phenomena such as empathic inaccuracy, failed empathy, false empathy, and personal distress[7]. In the last section of the essay, I will get back to these phenomena, which are particularly relevant for a discussion of the potential effects of strategic empathy (how filmmakers employ certain filmic strategies to elicit an empathic reaction in the audience)[8].

Just as we are moved by literary characters as readers, we are emotionally aroused as spectators by what is presented to us on the screen. In fact, as Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith remind us, "The cinema offers complex and varied experiences; for most

people, however, it is a place to feel something. The dependability of movies to provide emotional experiences for diverse audiences lies at the center of the medium's appeal and power" (1). In this sense, we may argue that in many ways films provide us, just as literature, with an emotional education. However, moving pictures possess the advantage of tapping directly into our biological abilities for mimicking and understanding others and film images can be manipulated by filmmakers to emotionally and strategically guide spectators' emotional responses. Arguably, movies make us feel with more intensity and, thus, they may constitute powerful vehicles for human empathy.

Different models have been proposed to discuss the connection between empathy and film[9]. Here, I highlight two that I find particularly useful to frame our discussion on the potential empathic effects of what I will characterize as cinema of empathy (a definition will be provided later on in this article)[10]. These two models are Ed Tan's "resonance-enactment" and Carl Plantinga's "scene of empathy." Let us begin with Tan's model.

Considering the ideas and definitions of thinkers such as Theodor Lipps, Frans de Waal, and particularly Simon Baron-Cohen, Tan begins by distinguishing empathy from empathic emotion: "Empathy comprises all cognitive operations on the part of the viewer that lead to a more complete awareness of what it is like to experience the situation virtually standing in the shoes of the character [...]." He continues on to explain that "[o]perations may be elementary, such as grasping intentions underlying an action and recognizing emotional states, or more elaborate, such as perspective taking, inferring goals and plans for actions, and categorizing the other person in terms of stable dispositions, like beliefs, wants, and needs" (338-39). For Tan, the processes involved in empathy lead to the understanding of the other's mind, enabling empathic emotion, which requires appraisal: "The distinguishing element of empathic emotion is that it has another person, his or her feelings, and his or her situation as its object [...]. For instance, in pitying another person who is sad, my appraisal of the situation that gives rise to my pity includes his or her appraisal of a loss that cannot be undone" (339). Based on this distinction, Tan places under the label "resonance" the automatic (or automated) empathy, that is, those processes that consist simply of emotional replication (emotional contagion[11] and mimicry) and under "enactment" a more complex type of empathy, willful, which requires dual appraisal of the situation (both from the perspectives of the character and the viewer) and the understanding of the other's states of mind and, thus, "makes use of inference, reasoning, imagination, and introspection" (352). Beyond these two types of empathy, Tan places mindreading (Theory of Mind or ToM)[12], which, according to him, "refers to common-sense knowledge about the contents of other minds and how other minds work" (353)[13]. Through this empathy-conscious reflection link, Tan's model not only allows us to include both the feeling and understanding aspects of empathy (two dimensions often identified with affective and cognitive empathy[14]) but also, by including its reflective aspects, helps us to explore the question (if we go back to Decety's view) of whether film narratives can take us from the *understanding* to the *responding with care* stages of empathy. In fact, Tan's concept of enactment empathy, both enriches and finds a continuity in Decety's multi-staged definition of empathy.

In the context of Spanish historical memory film narratives, and taking into account both Decety's definition and Tan's model, we may articulate a working hypothesis as follows: as audiences of a *memoria histórica* film, we *share* the pain of the fascist regime's victims embodied by film characters (automatically empathize), *understand* their pain (we make use of inference, reasoning, imagination, and introspection to willfully empathize with them), and *respond with care* (we adopt a position favorable to their cause and perhaps engage in some kind of activism, such as making others aware of the fact that those victims and their families have not yet received any adequate or sufficient recognition or reparations from the Spanish government).

Having enunciated this hypothesis, let us move on to the discussion of Plantinga's model of the "scene of empathy." He defines this type of scene as one:

[...] in which the pace of the narrative momentarily slows and the interior emotional experience of a favored character becomes the locus of attention [...] we see a character's face, typically a closeup, either for a single shot of long duration or as an element of a point-of-view structure alternating between shots of the character's face and shots of what she or he sees. In either case, the prolonged concentration on the character's face is not warranted by the simple communication of information about character emotion. Such scenes are also intended to elicit empathic emotions in the spectator. ("The scene," 239)

The empathy that these scenes may elicit depends on factors such as allegiance to characters—"we are more likely to catch the emotions of those with whom we construe our relationship as one of relatedness and/or likeness" ("The scene," 250)—and narrative context—"scenes of empathy must be put in moral context that assumes a good deal of information about the character in question. For this reason, scenes of empathy often occur at the film's end, after such a context has been developed" ("The scene," 252-53). Another factor is affective congruence—"between narrative context, character engagement, various uses of film style and technique, and the psychological impressions and responses they generate" ("The scene," 253). Finally, Plantinga tells us: "Scenes of empathy are often used sparingly, and the most powerful instances are reserved for a kind of emotional and cognitive summation of the ideological project of the film" ("The scene," 253). Although I agree with the idea that these scenes are intrinsically tied to the ideological project of the film and are dependent on contextual factors, including not only narrative context but also genre and "*conditioners* of response such as viewing context and individual differences" ("The scene," 248), I consider context in a wider sense that includes socio-political factors such as different forms of activism, thus connecting the audience's empathic response to the behavioral dimension of empathy (Decety's "respond with care"). In the *memoria histórica* film genre, this connection is particularly relevant, as we shall further discuss in the last part of this essay.

Based on studies on the centrality of the face in human communication and emotion^[15], Plantinga foregrounds the role of facial expression in filmmaking, making it the central piece of his model: "Indeed, facial expression is one of the dominant ways human beings communicate and express emotion, whether honestly or deceptively [...].

It is not surprising, then, that narrative films, which communicate largely through realistic photographic representations, would make extensive use of close-ups of the human face" ("Facing," 293). This emphasis on the face and the close-up in cinematic affect communication and empathy is definitely consistent with what we know of human social and emotional interaction, both in real life and in filmic representations, however, it eclipses other embodiment aspects of the sharing of affect. In this regard, the model of cinematic empathy that I propose here seeks to recover the importance of the body, not just as a self-contained agent-object of empathy via resonance and enactment but also, and more importantly, as a site of affective transmission. I advocate for an inter-embodied perspective based on the ideas of thinkers such as Teresa Brennan on the transmission of affect. Brennan tells us that, "[t]he transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes [... it] alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The 'atmosphere' of the environment literally gets into the individual" (1). Brennan focuses on the chemical aspects of transmission—a process analogous to what neurologists call "entrainment," stating that, "[t]he form of transmission whereby people become alike is a process whereby one person's or one group's nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another's" (9). Brennan's ideas of the affective communication centered on the physiology of the body in relation with other bodies challenges self-containment notions of individuality, while questioning and enriching views of entrainment as effected solely by sight. She argues:

If entrainment is effected by sight, then on the face of it, our boundaries stay intact. We become *like* someone else by imitating that person, not by literary becoming or in some way merging with him or her. I think it is true that entrainment (whether it is nervous or chemical) can work mimetically, but not only by sight. That is to say, people can act alike and feel alike not only because they observe each other but also because they imbibe each other via smell. (10)

Finally, she reminds us that sight is in itself a complex phenomenon, rather than a pure one: "Visual images, like auditory traces, also have a direct physical impact; their reception involves the activation of neurological networks, stimulated by spectrum vibrations at various frequencies. These also constitute transmissions breaching the bounds between individual and environment" (10). When considering these ideas, it is obviously important to make a distinction between what happens among bodies in proximity in a real setting and what happens between characters and audiences—we are not able to "smell" film characters but we are able as spectators, as I maintain in this essay, to pick up on visual cues and react to the effects of the hormonal alignment of the bodies that we are following on the screen. The most relevant aspect for us here, is that such a physiological perspective, based on the emotional energy and the processes generated in the interaction of bodies, can take us beyond current theories of cinematic empathy relying mainly on facial expression while also pointing to the importance of possessing and exercising a Theory of Body (ToB)—not just a Theory of Mind—in the processes of resonance and enactment (feeling and understanding others) that enable film empathy.

Cognitive literary scholar Howard Mancing has discussed this inseparability of ToM

and ToB stressing its centrality in our engagement with fictional minds: “If we treat literary characters [and, I will add, film characters] as if they had minds and thoughts we must necessarily also treat them as if they had physical bodies, for there is no thought without embodiment” (“Embodied,” 38). My own view, in relation to the ideas previously discussed in this section, is that possessing a ToB implies, in addition to an intuitive understanding—or common-sense knowledge—of other people’s and characters’ bodies and their functioning, an understanding of how those bodies interact and change in contact with one another. Humans constantly use these abilities to make sense of their social worlds, whether real or engineered by storytellers. In this regard, an awareness of both ToM and ToB as indivisible and essential in both our real and fictional experiences can help us theorize on the ways bodies are represented on the screen, as well as how they are received by spectators.

Within this context and going back to Plantinga’s model, I consider that a scene of empathy can be established by the filmmaker not only by using the close-up as the main empathy strategy, but also by recreating the energy of bodies in affective connection or alignment[\[16\]](#). I am not referring here (not exclusively) to how characters “read” each other’s bodies and how the audience “reads” the bodies of characters nor about how body posture may affect emotional experiences—a field that remains undeveloped[\[17\]](#)—, but, specifically, about a more complex phenomenon: the transmitted affect that flows from organisms to the environment, creating an energy or atmosphere that in turn modifies those organisms. In the context of our discussion, we may call this energy “empathic energy.” Such empathic energy is responsible for creating what we could also call an “empathic mood,” which connects or aligns characters, as well as characters and audiences.

Greg M. Smith, a theorist of mood in film, offers a functional view of mood as “an orienting state that asks us to interpret our surroundings in an emotional fashion” (42). He continues on to explain that “Film structures seek to increase the film’s chances of evoking emotion by first creating a predisposition toward experiencing emotion: a mood” (42). Mood and emotion go hand in hand, they “sustain each other. Mood encourages us to experience emotion, and experiencing emotions encourages us to continue in the present mood” (42). Finally, he states:

Because emotions can be evoked using a wide range of stimuli linked in an associative network, films can use the full range of perceptual cues to evoke emotion [...]. Filmic cues that can provide emotional information include facial expression, figure movement, dialogue, vocal expression and tone, costume, sound, music, lighting, mise-en-scène, set design, editing, camera (angle, distance, movement), depth of field, character qualities and histories, and narrative situation. Each of these cues can play a part in creating a mood orientation or a stronger emotion. (42)

To these cues we must add the empathic energy generated by the transmission of affect among bodies, paramount to the empathic emotion.

Plantinga himself has built on Smith’s mood cue approach to further highlight the

centrality of mood to the film experience, pointing to the link between mood and genre: “Since mood relates to nearly all of the conventional elements of genre, mood assists writers and filmmakers in quickly establishing expectations, and informs readers and viewers about established frameworks through which a given narrative is meant to be experienced” (“Art moods,” 469). This connection is particularly prominent in the intersection between the *memoria histórica* genre and the cinema of empathy that I am discussing here, where the empathic mood constitutes a framework. From the beginning of the film, the audience receives mood cues that evoke empathic emotion. The two most important cues in the cinema of empathy that we have singled out are facial expression and the empathic energy generated by the bodies on screen. It is important to remember, however, that these emotional cues include all those mentioned above (music, lighting, costume, etc.) working together in congruence. Plantinga also pertinently makes evident the connection between mood and social judgment, stating that, “[m]oods play a role in the relationship of narrative films to ethics and ideology” (“Art moods,” 473). This connection is important in the *memoria histórica* cinema of empathy, where mood may lead to reflection and judgment on an ethical-socio-political problem in a given ideological context.

Finally, my model also differs from Plantinga’s in the density and placement of the scene of empathy. Rather than representing the summation or climax of a character’s trajectory and the ideological project of the film that most often appear at the end, I believe that scenes of empathy may occur in different moments of the film, with different purposes. In fact, what I consider cinema of empathy presents a high density and a wide variety of this type of scenes, which may appear at the beginning (to strongly set an emotional tone and create character allegiance), at any given time in the narrative (to guide character engagement), and/or at the end of the film for climatic and moral purposes.

Having clarified the differences between Plantinga’s model and my own, my working description for cinema of empathy can be expressed/stated as follows:

Cinema of Empathy: A type of cinema—often tied to a film genre that features human rights abuse as a central theme, such as the historical memory genre—featuring a high density of scenes of empathy. In these scenes, the human face, the eyes, and the energy created among human bodies are employed as a strategy to both portray and elicit resonance and enactment empathy—among characters and between the characters and the audience—potentially inducing a pro-social behavioral response in the audience, in connection to an ethical-socio-political problem presented in the film.

We may also think of cinema of empathy as a form of filmmaking that is mainly “affect-driven,” where emotion—inner but also, and particularly, shared—occupies a central role, as opposed to a “plot-driven” film, where narrative and action are predominant. This does not mean that cinema of empathy does not provide a solid narrative structure and well-constructed plot, however, this plot is employed as a background to the foregrounded affective states of the characters. Often, it is a plot that the audience already knows, i.e., a historical event whose outcome we are aware of (such as WWII,

the Spanish Civil War) or we can partially predict (a particular episode or sub-event within that known event), enabling the circumstance that Richard Gerrig calls anomalous suspense, when “readers often experience suspense even when they know what will happen” (79). My own intuition is that such circumstance “liberates” to some extent spectators from having to follow closely the events displayed in their attempt to reconstruct the plot, allowing them to focus on the affective cinematic features. Thus, we may argue that suspense—which is experienced when we “lack knowledge about the outcomes of events that have reasonably important consequences” (Gerrig, 77)—is transferred from plot to character: since we know the outcome of the main event that serves as the narrative background (e.g., WWII), we can concentrate more locally on obtaining the knowledge we lack on the characters’ affective states, circumstances, and development in coping with their fate (e.g., how are those desperate soldiers imprisoned in a camp going to react to what happens to them?). In this type of films, our attention shifts to the characters, we focus on their predicaments and emotional responses as we are guided by the filmmaker’s cinematic strategies previously discussed, intended to make us care for those human beings. That is when cinema of empathy occurs. Interestingly, Gerrig himself had the intuition that empathy plays an important role in the experience of suspense, when he stated: “To a large extent, a theory of suspense must include within it a theory of empathy: Under what circumstances do we care sufficiently about other people to engage in active thought about their fates?” (80). I claim that in cinema of empathy this connection between empathy and suspense is particularly strong and enabled by both the use of empathic filmic strategies and by employing a genre that allows for anomalous suspense and for the shift of the audience’s focus from plot to character. Thus, although cinema of empathy can in principle exist in connection to any portrayal of human struggle against a situation of injustice and violence, it often occurs in films of historical memory that seek to revisit a tragic event while foregrounding the emotional experiences of the human beings affected by it.

Background: Spanish Historical Memory and Historical Memory Film

As I have argued elsewhere, the memory of the Spanish Civil War revolves around its condition of unresolved conflict (Jaén, “Fascism,” 804). To talk about Spanish historical memory is to talk about a past that is presently materialized in the often called “memory wars” (or “memory war”), where some complain about the tiring and constant revisiting of Spain’s traumatic Civil War past and advocate for forgetting and moving on, while others denounce the impunity of Franco’s torturers and murderers—never held accountable for their crimes, living today among the Spanish population—and keep searching for their missing families, perhaps buried in one of the many still unopened mass graves that are scattered around the Iberian peninsula. Although, arguably, these are the two main perspectives involved in these memory wars—and we may tend to think of Spanish society as polarized on the subject of the Civil War and historical memory—they are by no means the only two attitudes exhibited by the population. On the contrary, a diversity of views, ranging from rejection to apathy to fervor, with myriad emotions and reactions in between, can be found with respect to this important issue.

Remembering and forgetting are indeed very charged and controversial notions in the context of the recent history of Spain. When democracy was reestablished after Franco's death in 1975, the *pacto del olvido* (pact of forgetting or agreement to forget) was imposed on Spanish society and an amnesty law that protected those who violated human rights during the dictatorship was passed in 1977. The efforts of families to find their relatives who had been executed and buried anonymously in mass graves were blocked for decades. Initiatives such as the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica [Association for the Recovery of the Historical Memory] (ARMH), born in 2000 and the promulgation of the Law of Historical Memory by the socialist government in 2007 attempted to fight the blockage of memory and evasion of responsibility by conservative groups and fascist sympathizers. However, the conservative government, presided over by Mariano Rajoy (2011-2018), pushed back against the initial success of ARMH and their allies in exposing the past (Jaén, "Fascism," 805). A key piece in this struggle is the fact that many Spanish families have not been able to locate and mourn their loved ones to this date. According to the site of the ARMH, there are still more than 100,000 missing persons forgotten in approximately 3,000 mass graves (see Bernardo). The funding provided by the socialist government led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (in power during 2004-2008 and 2008-2011) for exhuming the graves was stopped during the conservative term of Rajoy and associations devoted to this task then depended on donations and volunteer work to go beyond the 2,000 graves already exhumed (see Azpiroz). More recently, in 2018, the socialist government led by Pedro Sánchez has proposed a reform of the Law of Historical Memory that will have the State lead the exhumation efforts as well as the search for the babies stolen during the Franco era[\[18\]](#). Other proposed measures include the creation of a commission of truth, a census of victims of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's regime, a policy of reparations, the removal of fascist symbols (including the controversial exhumation of Franco's grave from the Valley of the Fallen in Madrid to open a National Center of Memory), and the creation of "lugares de memoria" (places or sites of memory), among other initiatives[\[19\]](#). In addition to these governmental proposals, judicial efforts have been carried out to hold Franco's criminals accountable, such as those initiated in 2008 by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón[\[20\]](#), who was accused of exceeding his jurisdiction, and, more recently, a petition from Argentinean judge María Servini to extradite 20 people accused of crimes of Francoism (including the torturer Juan Antonio González Pacheco, alias "Billy el niño"), which was blocked by Rajoy's government[\[21\]](#). Despite the many obstacles that these initiatives have faced, the number of lawsuits filed in Spain continues to grow and new hopes for justice have been recently raised[\[22\]](#), aided by increased international recognition of the need to further investigate the crimes of Francoism. An example of the international support is the 2014 "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, Pablo de Greiff," where the United Nations urges the Spanish government to—among other recommendations—"[c]onsider alternatives to and annul the effects of the Amnesty Act that impede all investigations and access to justice with respect to the serious human rights violations committed during the Civil War and the Franco regime" (22), so that the necessary investigations can be conducted[\[23\]](#).

It is also important to consider that the memory wars are being fought to a great extent by the post-memory generation (the children and grandchildren of the victims). The term post-memory, coined by Marianne Hirsch, describes “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (103). The post-memory generation—myself included in this group—grew up hearing the stories of how family members were imprisoned, executed, or disappeared during the war and the dictatorship, with some developing a sense of responsibility towards echoing the trauma of Francoism and helping the cause of finding justice for Franco’s victims. Moreover, the efforts to recover Spanish historical memory not only rest on the many initiatives proposed by activist groups and sympathizing governments (the exhumations, historical law reform, etc.) but also on the cultural representations aimed at raising public awareness about the horrors of the war and the dictatorship, among them, storytelling in different forms (oral narration, literary works, films—both documentary and fictional—, and so on). These cultural representations are often part of a genre that I have called narratives of *memoria histórica*: “multimodal narratives commonly expressed via novels, plays, films, and soap operas, but also through administrative and popular media discourses in legal and human rights settings” (Jaén, “Fascism,” 803). Novels and films are prominent vehicles to materialize these narratives and often share the same story. Such is the case of the historical narrative I am analyzing here, *La voz dormida*, created in a novelistic format and then recreated in the cinematic realm.

Moving on to the genre that will provide us with our case study, the *memoria histórica* genre, we find an alternation of plot-driven and affect-driven narratives. Interestingly, affect-driven *memoria histórica* films often feature female protagonists, such as *Las trece rosas* [13 Roses] (2007)—based on the tragic story of thirteen young women executed by Franco’s regime shortly after the war ended^[24]—or the one that I am discussing in this essay, *La voz dormida*. These female protagonists appear sometimes in a coming of age context, as it happens in *El laberinto del fauno* [Pan’s Labyrinth] (2006)—where Ofelia struggles to cope with her fascist stepfather’s cruelty and her abused mother’s vulnerability—or *El viaje de Carol* [Carol’s Journey] (2002)—which narrates the story of the daughter of an international brigades American pilot and a liberal Spanish woman as she moves (with her mom) to a Spanish village during the war and, upon her mother’s death, is adopted by her fascist relatives. However, when tracing scenes of empathy in the *memoria histórica* genre, we also find “female-focused” films, such as *Libertarias* (1996), that are fundamentally plot-driven as well as films mainly constructed around male’s affective experiences that can be considered affect-driven, such as *El lápiz del carpintero* [The Carpenter’s Pencil] (2003)—the story of a left-wing doctor imprisoned by the fascists—or *La lengua de las mariposas* [Butterfly] (1999)—also a coming of age tale, centered on the relationship between a young man and his teacher, a free thinker persecuted by fascism. Hence, I stand with Plantinga when he tries “to counteract the assumption that scenes of empathy focus only on female characters and are aimed only at women in the audience” (“The scene,” 240). In fact, the *memoria histórica* cinema of empathy, fundamentally affect-driven, does not seem to be conditioned by the gender of the main characters.

Although a taxonomy of the *memoria histórica* cinema is outside the scope of this essay, it is, nonetheless, important to provide readers with a description of this genre and its context. I define *memoria histórica* films as those focused on the Spanish Civil War and its human tragedy, often in the context of the Spanish socio-political project of recovering the historical memory of the victims of fascism. These films may be set during the actual war (1936-1939), during the post-war repression and Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975), or during the democracy (1975-today). They are often placed in the category of drama but can also be constructed as comedy or tragicomedy (e.g., *iAy Carmela!* (1990)—the story of three itinerant performers trapped on the fascist side during the war), fantasy (e.g., *El laberinto del fauno*) or horror films (e.g., *El espinazo del diablo* [The Devil's Backbone] (2001)—Del Toro's predecessor to *El laberinto*—, centered on a post-war haunted orphanage). Some of these films present the empathic strategies outlined above and, thus, may be considered examples of cinema of empathy. *La voz dormida* is arguably the most prototypical of these examples.

Case Study: *La voz dormida*[25]

La voz dormida was first conceived as a novel by Spanish poet and novelist Dulce Chacón[26]. The novel was later reinterpreted and re-elaborated in the 2011 eponymous movie directed by Benito Zambrano, who wrote the script in consultation with Chacón. Zambrano has pointed to the novel's emotional content as the main reason he decided to adapt it for the screen, as well as to his own commitment to continue Chacón's work[27] of raising awareness in Spanish society about the need to hold accountable those responsible for the fascist regime's repression and atrocities. Indeed, this intention seems very clear and, thus, I will argue that with this film Zambrano seeks to elicit an empathic response in favor of Spanish fascism's victims within the context of the *memoria histórica* recovery movement, a context that is conditioned by the "memory wars" between those who seek to recover the memory of Franco's victims and the ideological inheritors of fascism. The latter group attempts to block the recovery efforts, claims their status as co-victims in the war, and advocates for "forgetting and moving on," dismissing the almost forty years of fascist brutal repression that the opponents of fascism had to endure.

La voz dormida follows the two main characters of the novel: Hortensia (a resistance fighter, pregnant and locked up in Franco's inhumane female prison of *Ventas* in Madrid)[28] and Pepita (her sister, who moves to the city to help Hortensia and soon sees herself also involved in the resistance against fascism)[29]. The film is structured around the affective experience of the characters and features a high density of scenes of empathy centered on the human face and the eyes. However, more importantly, it focuses on the body and the affective energy created and communicated among bodies: bodies abused, bodies assembled in solidarity, bodies that show, hide, and leak their emotional interiority.

By employing the energy of the bodies as the central empathic strategy, *La voz dormida* takes us beyond the assumption that empathic filmmaking must rely on prolonged exposure to the face to elicit audience empathy. Due to the high density of its inter-embodied scenes of empathy, which function as the articulating spine of the film from

the beginning to the end, this film also defies the idea that the empathic scene must be contained and used in a particular climatic context in the film narrative, not to risk falling into what Plantinga calls “sentimentality” that is “unearned or misplaced emotion” (“The Scene,” 251). Moreover, since *La voz dormida* places its empathic charge on an assembled unity of moving bodies that channel emotional interiority (rather than a close-up of a main character morally evolving throughout the film), it proves the potential for another kind of scene of empathy to move the spectator not simply in a cathartic moment but throughout the film, in a sustained empathic elicitation that may stimulate with more intensity both resonance and willful empathy. Let us discuss a few examples of how this film portrays the energy created by the interaction of bodies and its role in the sharing of affective interiority, creating an affective atmosphere that in turn alters the individual. I argue that this inter-embodied portrayal constitutes a powerful filmic strategy to communicate affect (both between characters and between characters and audience) and elicit empathy (both automatic and reflective) in the spectator, beyond facial expression. Thus, it is paramount to a cinema of empathy, which can be particularly effective when practiced in the historical memory cinema, where it may induce an empathic emotion potentially leading to empathic behavior for the victims of human rights abuse.

These scenes of empathy particularly focused on the body are constant throughout the film. Zambrano emphasizes embodied affect by foregrounding with his camera the emotional flow among bodies: the piled imprisoned bodies, the bodies trembling in synchrony before the firing squad and then inert after the executions, the tortured bodies, those witnessing and feeling other bodies being tortured, the bodies of relatives lining up by the entrance of the prison to visit their loved ones, the crowded bodies in the fascist courtroom moments before a death sentence is read. Indeed, Zambrano’s film constitutes an embodied emotional journey through the affective experiences of the human beings who struggle to cope with oppression, abuse, violence, and imminent death. I will now discuss briefly three representative scenes that illustrate the strategies I have identified as constituting a cinema of empathy.

The first of these scenes takes place at the beginning of the film, where a *saca* (the taking out of inmates for an execution at dawn) is taking place. Ángeles, a member of Hortensia’s close circle, is called. She shakes with fear while she cries “qué lástima de mi madre” [what a pity, my mother] and keeps repeating that she did not do anything. Unable to control her bladder, she also wets her clothes. Her close friends help her prepare for the moment and their bodies desperately agglutinate and cling together in an effort to cope with fear and anger, as the sentenced are torn off from the group. The murderers and their victims are finally gone, lights go off, and next we spectators find ourselves facing a wall where several inmates stand in front of the firing squad. To the sound of the gunshots, which loudly resonate in the prison gallery, the inmates respond with cries of “¡asesinos!” [murderers!] and “¡fascistas!” [fascists!], as a crescent whispering shapes into “The Internationale.” The camera then shows us Hortensia singing in dim light, while raising her fist along with her peers. The anthem continues in the background as Zambrano moves us back outside, where the executed prisoners are being placed in wooden boxes and we get a close-up of Ángeles’s dead body.



In this scene, the emotional contagion among the characters, whose nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with each other^[30], builds a powerful mood of indignation and resistance that permeates the audience, whose emotions are likely heightened by the diegetic music intended to create affective congruence, “the matching of affective meaning in both music and visuals [that] heightens the spectator’s experience of the overall effect” (J. Smith, 160). Rather than relying on a long-duration close-up of the central character (Ángeles, about to be called for execution), the scene is constructed around the bodies of the inmates and the emotions they project, absorb, and reflect, creating a powerful affective energy that both shapes the mood of the scene and is prompted by it. The filmic cues that contribute to the creation of this mood, and, consequently, to an enhanced emotional experience in the audience are, among others, the facial expressions of agony and compassion, the shaking movement of the bodies, the vocal expression (crying, singing), the music (a tune of resistance), and the chiaroscuro lighting. The knowledge of the contextual aspects of the narrative—those relative to the genre (the violence perpetrated against the victims of fascism) as well as the wider sociological context (the lack of reparations for those victims and the current Spanish memory wars)—contribute to the construction of this mood of indignation in the audience.

The second scene I will be discussing is the gathering of the inmates for the Christmas honoring of Jesus Christ (at 00:56:57 in the film). This is a form of humiliation for many of the inmates, whose ideological convictions are contrary to the impositions of the Catholic Church and doctrine. The scene begins with the mandatory singing of the fascist anthem, the “Cara al sol” [Facing the Sun], as the inmates raise their right arms in fascist salute. The fascist music contributes once more to creating a mood of oppression, as Zambrano shows us the gallery crowded with these confined bodies. The prisoners are forced to listen to a speech about the birth and significance of Jesus, and how worshiping constitutes part of their “reeducation.” Zambrano interrupts this mortifying speech with the whispering of the inmates’ comments of rejection, as well as their facial expressions and bodily gestures of distress and frustration as they glance at each other. Next, the nun announces that they will all have to kiss a baby Jesus doll’s foot in a sign of love and submission or face the punishment of not being allowed to see their loved-ones during the Christmas visitation. Tension mounts, the prisoners become agitated, some comply, others refuse and get beaten, others debate what to do before their turn comes. In solidarity, Tomasa, a close member of Hortensia’s group, steps forward before Hortensia’s turn is up and challenges the command: “El reglamento no dice nada que haiga que besar imágenes” [the rules say nothing about kissing images] (00:59:08). The nun insults her, tries to force her and eventually, the porcelain Jesus doll falls and breaks. Possessed by wrath, the nun brutally beats up Tomasa with a stick as she yells at her “¡puta!” [whore!] and “¡comunista!” [communist!].



Here, Zambrano skillfully takes us from resonance to enactment empathy. Engagement in this situation, both for the characters and the audience requires not only emotional

contagion—as they/we witness humiliation of those who submit and kiss the doll and the physical pain of those who refuse and are beaten—but also reasoning within an ideological context: we willfully empathize with the characters, both with the submissive ones (out of our understanding of their difficult situation, as they will be severely punished if they do not obey) and with the rebellious ones (for we know the additional hell that awaits them). Allegiance to the characters that we perceive as morally superior (those who prefer to be loyal to their principles and refuse in spite of the consequences) is an important factor in our empathic response, along with the narrative context—both at the micro (the story of the inmates) and the macro (the historical background integral to the *memoria histórica* genre) levels—and the congruence created by the music, facial expressions, body language, and discourse of intimidation of the guards on the one hand and, on the other, the affective reactions of the inmates, which flood the gallery with an atmosphere, once more, of indignation and moral conflict in the face of a choice between their values and their loved ones. Moreover, through this moral dilemma, Zambrano creates what we could call an ideological suspense: will the main characters betray their beliefs? Finally, Tomasa's brave act and her brutal beating shock us and bring us back from enactment to an automatic empathic response; indignation becomes physical pain as we witness the uncontrolled violence exerted on Tomasa's body and the emotional responses of the other witnessing characters. In this scene, the filmmaker has managed to lead us on an empathic journey where we, the audience, can potentially both share and understand the affective state of the characters, as they do so among themselves through their predicament.

The third and final scene I will be discussing is the conversation between Hortensia and Pepita through the prison bars during visitation time. Visitation scenes appear several times throughout the film as a crucial empathic strategy on Zambrano's part and are instrumental in foregrounding the transmission of affect among the bodies. Since the bodies are actually separated by two lines of bars while they talk in the visitation gallery, with a large gap between them, the flowing emotional energy and the affective atmosphere are particularly highlighted by the physical void between the organisms, further demonstrating the lack of self-containment of affect. These scenes often begin in the film with Zambrano's camera showing us the bodies of the relatives who line up waiting before the prison's gate. With cues such as facial expressions of worry, hope, weariness, and resignation; body postures (e.g., shoulders hunched because of the cold); the dark color and humble clothes of the characters; and hard lighting, Zambrano conveys the emotions that circulate among those bodies, creating a mood of desperation that orients the spectators and prepares them for the visitation scene. As the gates open, the bodies of the relatives flow in a torrent into the visitation corridor, their faces full of expectation. Likewise, the camera shows the hopeful bodies of the inmates, who also rush to meet their loved ones.



The particular visitation scene that I am discussing here takes place right after Hortensia gives birth. It is constructed mainly as a shot-reverse-shot, with close-ups alternating between each sister's face, as they talk to each other across the bars. The

sisters talk about the baby, Pepita's new boyfriend—who also fights in the guerrilla, alongside Hortensia's husband—and the inconvenience of falling in love in such turbulent times. They try to find some joy in the midst of their desperate situation. The lighter tone of the dialogue contrasts with the facial expressions of sadness and the sordid atmosphere of the gallery. The filmic cues described above for this type of visitation scenes are present here too and Zambrano chooses to further mark its heightened emotional tone by musically framing the encounter with the main theme of the film, “Nana de la hierbabuena,” whose lyrics speak of a mother condemned to death and saying goodbye to her baby daughter before being executed, a situation parallel to Hortensia's, whose sentence is to be executed shortly after giving birth. Sung by the protagonists, the *nana* [lullaby] permeates the gallery, silencing the other voices, and suspending the action during a few seconds, as we spectators are mesmerized by the eyes of these two women and drift into the emotions that flow between them. In this scene, the slowing down of the narrative, the use of the close-up with the camera alternating between the facial expressions of both sisters—eyes locked on each other's—and the congruence created by the use of the music all contribute to building a bittersweet mood that frames the complex affective states of the sisters.



Implications, Conclusion and Further Directions

Let us now go back to the framing question of this essay, can cinema of empathy advance the cause of the victims of fascism? First, it is important to clarify two points: 1) I am not suggesting that directors such as Zambrano are consciously building a cinema of empathy. Although filmmakers can be conscious to a certain extent of the strategies that they employ to elicit audience empathy, the notion of cinema of empathy I introduce here is a category born of critical observation rather than creative production itself; 2) the model of a cinema of empathy that I outlined in this essay remains at the speculative level, as empirical studies on the empathic impact of film are still in their infancy; my observations may or may not be validated by future studies of audience emotional response to film, and in particular, response to filmic representation of inter-embodied affect. This being said, the main question can be approached from a theoretical perspective in the context of the Spanish historical memory of fascism and its status as unresolved conflict.

Whether a cinema of empathy, a cinema that features empathic strategies based on embodied affect and shared interiority, may help advance the cause of the recovery of the victims of Franco's repression in Spain is a question that needs to be considered from a perspective that includes both the complexity of the notion of empathy and the ideological complexity of contemporary Spain. Let us now go back to Keen's theory of narrative empathy and the notions of empathic inaccuracy—“the discordance arising from gaps between a[n] author's intention and a reader's experience of narrative empathy^[31]”—, failed empathy—“the inefficiency of shared feelings in provoking action that would lead to positive social or political change”—, false empathy—“the self-congratulatory delusions of those who incorrectly believe that they have caught the feelings of suffering others from a different culture, gender, race, or class [we may add

here ideology]”—, and personal distress—, where empathic over-arousal may lead to “aversion to the source of the negative feelings[32].” In view of these phenomena, we may infer that an empathic response in audiences will depend on the particular ideological group spectators identify with (as well as their individual specific contexts). Contemporary Spain is a diverse society where different ideological groups with different attitudes towards historical memory exist, and, thus, it is impossible to find a correlation between empathic intention and empathic response. Whereas empathy may be elicited in spectators that already support the cause of the memory recovery (the in-group), for others, who might be indifferent to this cause—i.e., those not having any family members affected by it, not having been exposed to it, or declaring themselves “apolitical”—the result may be failed empathy or personal distress. Moreover, for those who are opposed to the cause, failed empathy may result in a negative reaction, further emboldening their anti-memory attitudes. Finally, the question remains to what extent an empathic reaction may promote pro-social behavior of any kind. If this is at all possible—the empathy-altruism hypothesis continues to be hotly debated—the assumption could be that such behavior will depend on and correlate to a certain extent with the level of personal involvement in memory recovery activities that each spectator has in real life. Those who already belong to *memoria* recovery activist groups will likely be inspired to further participate in activities organized by those groups. Others may be prompted to compile relevant information and/or share it through social media. Yet others may participate in protests, donate money to help families of victims locate and open the mass graves where their loved ones might be buried. Those who are relatively new or unexposed to the cause might be sufficiently moved to join an activist group or do research on their own. There is a wide array of possibilities at the crossroads of social and individual contexts.

In conclusion, although a correlation between empathic intention, empathic filmic strategies, and empathic audience responses cannot be established and despite the lack of sufficient empirical studies on empathic response to film as well as on the empathy-altruism connection, I maintain that 1) a cinema of empathy as a distinct type of film currently exists and is practiced in connection to certain genres centered on human rights abuse, such as the *memoria histórica* genre and 2) insights from a diversity of disciplines in the humanities and the sciences (narrative and film studies, social neurosciences, sociology, history, etc.), efficiently channeled through the interface known as cognitive approaches, may provide the grounds for future empirical studies to help us corroborate, nuance, and/or reject our initial hypotheses on the power of fiction to elicit empathy and pro-social behavior.

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[1] On the historical memory of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship and its status today, see among others the website for the ARMH (Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica [Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory]); Labanyi; Junquera, *Valientes*. On fictional representations of Spanish historical memory, see Valis; Leggott and Woods; Mayoral and Mañas.

[2] This essay is related to a previous piece entitled "Fascism, Torture, and Affect in Post-War Spain: *Memoria Histórica* Narratives and Audience Empathy," centered on the political context of the Spanish memory problem and *La voz dormida* narrative both in its film and novel formats. Here, I solely focus on the film version of the story and on the cinematic strategies employed to elicit empathy.

[3] Empathy is also described in relation to sympathy or feeling *for* someone (feeling concern without necessarily sharing the same emotion). On sympathy as a precursor of empathy, deriving from the classical idea of pity or compassion, see Jaén, "Empathy."

[4] On the complexity and multidimensionality of empathy, see Batson, "These things."

[5] On empathy and narrative, see also Hammond and Kim.

[6] See among others Batson, "The empathy-altruism;" Echols and Correll; Oatley, Mar, and Djikic; Nussbaum; Pinker.

[7] In her 2007 book *Empathy and the Novel*, Keen describes these phenomena as follows. Empathic inaccuracy: the "discordance arising from gaps between a[n] author's intention and a reader's experience of narrative empathy" (xiii); failed empathy: "the

inefficiency of shared feelings in provoking action that would lead to positive social or political change" (159); false empathy: "the self-congratulatory delusions of those who incorrectly believe that they have caught the feelings of suffering others from a different culture, gender, race, or class [we may add here ideology]" (159); personal distress: where empathic over-arousal may lead to "aversion to the source of the negative feelings" (19).

[8] See Keen, *Empathy* and "A theory."

[9] See among others Zillman; Neill; Oatley.

[10] Although the notion of "cinema of empathy" has been employed in different contexts, usually within the field of film criticism (see for instance Roger Ebert's review of the 1966 film "Au Hasard Bathalsar"), there does not exist to my knowledge a systematic effort to describe in detail what constitutes a cinema of empathy. In this essay, I take the initial steps towards theorizing this notion in connection to the cinema of historical memory.

[11] On emotional contagion, see Hatfield, Cacciopo, and Rapson.

[12] On Theory of Mind or mindreading and the different approaches to the notion, see among others Baron-Cohen; O'Connell; Gallagher; Gopnik and Meltzoff; Goldman; Gordon; Ratcliffe. On the connection between Theory and Mind and fiction, see among others Jaén, "Cervantes" and "Literary;" Kidd and Castano; Leverage *et al.*; Mancing, "Sancho;" Simon, "Celestina" and "Psychologizing;" Zunshine.

[13] A key piece of Tan's model is its reliance on studies such as Keysers and Gazzola on empathic processes and Theory of Mind: "They propose that TOM (i.e., general knowledge of other minds and people in their particular social and cultural context) informs reflection on what situations could be like for observed persons that you do not know" (353-354).

[14] On the cognitive and affective views of empathy, see Strayer; Shamay-Tsoory.

[15] See for instance Ekman; Izard; Tomkins.

[16] See Brennan, 9.

[17] See G. M. Smith, 26.

[18] Babies of women executed under Franco's dictatorship were often given away to families sympathizing with the regime. The case of "la monja que repartía bebés" [the nun who dispensed babies], Sor María Gómez Valbuena, who died while awaiting trial in 2013, recently shook Spanish society (see Junquera, "Recé").

[19] See the complete socialist party's proposal, "Propuestas: Memoria histórica," on the party's website.

[20] On Garzón's efforts, see "La denuncia" on Baltasar Garzón's website.

[21] See Mannarino.

[22] On the current state of the judicial efforts to recover historical memory, see the documentary *El silencio de los otros* [The Silence of Others] (2018), directed by Robert Bahar and Almudena Carracedo.

[23] See also the 2017 Addendum to the "Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances," 143.

[24] For more information on the story of *Las trece rosas*, see Fonseca.

[25] For a more detailed version of this analysis of *La voz dormida*, see Jaén, "Fascism ».

[26] On Chacón's novel, see Colmeiro; De Grado.

[27] See Velázquez Jordán. Unfortunately, Chacón died of cancer before the movie was released.

[28] On Franco's women prisons, see Aguado; Mangini, chapters 6-8.

[29] On the participation of women in the Spanish Civil War and the resistance, see Lines; Mangini; Nash.

[30] See Brennan.

[31] See also Ickes, *Empathic accuracy* and "Empathic accuracy: Its links."

[32] See the beginning of the essay for more details on these definitions.

