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An Accidental Document of the Beginnings of the Civil War in Madrid

Notes on Carne de Fieras

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Contents

<i>1- 1936-1992</i>	5
<i>2- Venus</i>	8
<i>3- Madrid, summer of 1936</i>	10
Bibliography	11

- Armand Guerra, *A través de la metralla, escenas vividas en los frentes y en la retaguardia*, Christie Books, 2014

The shooting of *Carne de Fieras* (*Wild Animal's Meat*, dir. Armand Guerra, 1936) began on July 16th, 1936. The military coup in the so-called Spanish Morocco the day after initiated the Civil War. *Carne de Fieras* was filmed during the summer of 1936 in Madrid; a city that remained on the republican side until the end of the war after the military uprising in the city was crushed. This fiction film narrates a melodramatic story between two couples (a boxer and a cabaret artist, a lion tamer and a dancer) with no apparent connection to the war. And yet the film is a valuable and indirect document that manifests in various ways the very particular conditions and context in which it was made. I have identified a few elements that give the film this documentary resonance: the film production and its montage history, the narrative itself and finally the documentary scenes included in the film.

1- 1936–1992

In the spring of 1936 a French vaudeville troupe arrived in Spain with the intention of performing in the *fiestas* of the towns around the country. However due to a strike of builders that year the *fiestas* had no stalls or stages on which to perform. The group ended up performing in Madrid in the Price circus and in the Maravillas theatre. The main attraction of the spectacle was a number in which Marlène Grey danced surrounded by four lions. A truck decorated with large images of a naked Grey advertised the spectacle of the *blonde Venus* and the lions around the city. This made a big impact in a city unaccustomed to such displays of nudity in the public space. The spectacle was a great success. To maximize the profit the 20-minute dance was repeated 14 times a day. The popular appeal of the spectacle probably gave the entertainment impresario Arturo Carballo Alemany the idea to make a film about

the dangerous dance of the blonde Venus.¹ Carballo hired Armand Guerra, whose real name was José María Estivalis Cabo, to direct the film.

Guerra is a legendary figure in the history of anarchism and cinema who traveled around the world to escape prosecution for his militancy adapting himself to different circumstances. He directed the extraordinary film *La Commune* (1913); developed in the context of the film cooperative *Le Cinéma du Peuple*.² The film reconstructs the events of the Paris Commune of 1871 and includes at the end a wonderful documentary sequence that portrays a resistant group of old communards. Many of his other films tend to be improvised melodramas with a social content. In 1936 he is in Madrid without a job so he did not reject the offer to direct *Carne de Fieras*, a project that did not interest him much. He will write, direct and even act in the film (as the demented servant Lucas).

Guerra was an active member of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (C.N.T.), a key anarcho-syndicalist organization in the history of Spain and the civil war. Guerra was a prominent figure of the actors' section of the Sindicato Único de Espectáculos Públicos (Union of Public Spectacles). The C.N.T. produced numerous documentary and fiction films in these years.³ When the war erupted, Guerra wanted to leave aside this fiction film about love triangles to dedicate himself to more serious matters on the media war front. The producer

¹ Arturo Carballo Alemany was a Catalan impresario who produced and directed a couple of films (*Frivolinas*, 1926) and financed the construction of the Ciné Doré, the current site of the Filmoteca Española.

² See the work of Isabelle Marinone in her doctoral research *Anarchisme et cinéma, panoramique une histoire du 7e art français virée au noir*, Université Paris I – Panthéon la Sorbonne en Histoire et Esthétique du cinéma (2004).

³ For an analysis of the fiction films of the C.N.T. see Gallepie, Yannick, 'Espagne 36: les films de fiction de la C.N.T.' in Nicole Brenez et Isabelle Marinone (eds.), *Cinemas libertaires*, Les Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2015 pp.49–60

the Retiro Park in the center of the city and at the so-called *Playa de Madrid* (*Beach of Madrid*). The Beach of Madrid was the first artificial beach in Spain; it used the waters of the Manzanares river. It was a project of the republican government that opened in 1932. It will be destroyed during the war. The images included in the film are panoramic views showing the people of Madrid enjoying this public place, apparently unconcerned by the war. The apparent lack of direct concern of the film with the war is only broken in a fleeting documentary detail in a scene in another recognizable public space in Madrid. The main character arrives in a car to the Atocha roundabout to catch a train. The driver is recognizable as an anarchist militiaman in uniform — nothing in the film narrative justifies the inclusion of such figure. Behind them a military truck passes by.

The capitalist producer and the anarchist crew, the haste to finish the film and its consequences for the narrative and film form, the obstacles during the shooting for the Spanish and French cast, the decision to completely ignore the war, the modernity of the dance sequences and its approach to gender relations, its banal melodramatic outline and its documentary sequences — *Carne de Fieras* documents a complex set of relations, making it possible for us today to sense something of the complexities of an anarchist summer in Madrid in 1936.

Bibliography

- Ferrán Alberich, *Carne de fieras*, Filmoteca Española, Madrid, 1993
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and dated. *Carne de Fieras* has something of this pedagogical tradition within its narrative and dialogue. The film recurrently addresses the question of gender violence against women. The men in the film appear as obsessed with possessing women; this includes the use of physical violence against them. The film critically addresses this by portraying this obsession as a form of madness (as represented by the character of Lucas played by Guerra himself) but also as a form of exploitation (as represented by the relation between Aurora played by Tina de Jarque and her lover). The dialogue makes clear the intentions of the film with lines such as «brave men do not hit women». The real beasts in the film are not the lions but the jealous men.

This proto-feminist dimension of the film is at its best in the character of Aurora played by Tina de Jarque. Aurora's character offers an alternative to the mostly silent and statuesque Blonde Venus: she is outspoken and politically self-conscious. The first time we see Aurora she is rowing in the Retiro Park and we hear her say to her husband 'let's be modern'. It is not clear what she is referring to with these words but it seems that she is speaking of having a 'modern' type of marriage, an open relationship. Later on in the film she has another great line that speaks of her self-consciousness with regards to gender relationships. Her new lover commands her to go to work, and she says: «I would have never guessed that the exploitation would begin after only three days together». *Carne de Fieras*, however improvised or precisely because improvised, is ripped with such details that agitate its conformist melodramatic framework.

3- Madrid, summer of 1936

Various documentary sequences in the film make it a more direct representation of Madrid in the summer of 1936. These are striking sequences of *madrilenos* in their leisure time at

Carballo Alemany also wanted to stop the production, sensing the infeasibility of the project within the new circumstances. The C.N.T. however convinced Guerra to continue and finish the job, since many technicians who were members of the union depended upon their salaries. *Casa de Fieras* is therefore not so much a film of the C.N.T., as it is often assumed, but rather a film that demonstrates the power of the C.N.T. to force a producer to fulfill contractual obligations in the context of the war.

If Guerra accepted to continue with the production of the film, he certainly did not want to spend more than was necessary on this project. As he would put it: 'there is something more urgent than work; to crush the rebels'. The transportation of material, personnel and equipment was difficult in the context of the war: «to arrive unharmed to the shoot was a daily adventure». It also became impossible to have a regular crew since various technicians left the shooting to participate in the war. It was also difficult to find meat to feed the lions due to food restrictions, with the consequent risks for Grey. The intervention of the C.N.T. was necessary to ensure that the lions were properly fed during the summer. The film form bears the trace of these difficulties and the impatience of Guerra to finish the film. The more time passes, the more Guerra favors general shots that require preparation but in which then the action can quickly unfold. Close ups disappear. The film has a general improvisational flavor, as testified by the diversity of acting styles. The different performers, with none or little experience in front of a camera in many cases, act following different registers. The Spanish actors tend to be more theatrical, the French actors more sober. Tina de Jarque, an experienced *vedette*, plays with wonderful self-confidence. Guerra himself plays his character in an expressionistic manner — including an expressionistic characterization and make up that contrasts with the naturalism of the presentation of the other characters.

Once he finished the shooting Guerra rushed to the front in the mountains north of Madrid with the intention of making committed documentary films about the war. He trusted the montage of *Carne de Fieras* to Daniel Parrilla, his assistant during the shooting, who will make a first rough cut of the film. Guerra left on September the 16th with a group of fellow anarchists (Arturo Beringola, Ricardo Morchon, Antonio Cotiello, Domingo Martin, Jose Mendez and Manuel Martínez) and will film the war in different places until December of that same year. The death of various comrades and tensions at the C.N.T. forced Guerra to temper his film ambitions, which included a film about Buenaventura Durruti. The result will be modest: two short documentary films (*Estampas Guerreras 1 and 2*) and an unfinished third one. This material is unfortunately lost. The montage of *Carne de Fieras* is left unfinished. It is not until 1992 that the film is edited and restored under the direction of Ferrán Alberich for the Filmoteca Española.⁴

2- Venus

Carne de Fieras is a rare film within the Spanish cinema context of the time. It is not focused on a rural or folkloric setting as most films of the time were, but it is an urban melodrama. It questions some aspects of normative gender relationships; it speaks of divorce without ceremony; it addresses issues of exploitation and poverty. The images of the almost naked Venus dancing with the lions are also a rarity for the traditionally prudish Spanish cinema. It is not simply a matter of seeing a naked body, but of how this nudity appears in the film: as part of a modern dance routine. Marlene Grey moves around the lions following a *free dance* style; a style that had been developed in the vaudeville context first in the USA and then in Northern

⁴ See Ferrán Alberich's description of the restoration and editing process in *Carne de fieras*, Filmoteca Española, Madrid, 1993.

Europe. Spain, with its own dance traditions, had paid little attention to these developments. *Carne de Fieras* is therefore a rare film in the Spanish context due to the presentation of such modern images, but also in its presentation, however fleetingly, of a vision of society close to the anarchist ideas of the time.

The narrative focuses on a good-hearted boxer who rescues a homeless boy from drowning and welcomes him into his home, catches his wife with another man and divorces her, and then falls in love with the character of the blonde Venus who is also in a relationship with the lion tamer. The film can be described as a melodrama with a happy ending; one of those endings we are not really to believe in (as Douglas Sirk would put it). The storyline is built around a series of attractions: apart from the dance with the lions, there is a performance by Tina de Jarque, a song by Antonio Galán and a comedy number. On the other hand, the narrative has an improvisational quality; surely due to the hastiness, as we have seen, with which the film project materialized. The significance of the performances and this improvisational quality distinguish the film from other fiction films affiliated to or directly produced by the C.N.T. I would argue that both the clumsiness and the fascination with the modern attractions at work here give *Carne de Fieras* a rare lightness or accidental freedom with regards to the topics it approaches.

The C.N.T. fiction films of the time tended to be pedagogical vehicles with a social mission. These are in line with an anarchist 'tradition' that uses film as an educational tool with which to teach the spectators against social problems such as alcoholism or sex work. These films employ popular genres, such as the melodrama, in an attempt to have mass appeal. Yannick Gallepie calls this type of film «proudhonian pedagogical dramas».⁵ Today, but also at the time, they appear heavy handed

⁵ See Gallepie, Yannick, 'Espagne 36: les films de fiction de la C.N.T.', op. cit., p.54