

"**Trauma and silence: strategies of mediation in the aftermath of civil war**"  
(ID: 898416 DOI:10.1080/13642529.2014.898416)

Journal: Rethinking History, Volume: 18, Issue: 03, pages 391 - 399. (Download Current  
Citation: [RIS BibTeX](#))  
Estimated Publication date - 08 May 2014 (Online), 13 May 2014 (Print)  
Authors: Jill Daniels

"Trauma and silence: strategies of mediation in the aftermath of civil war"

Jill Daniels

**Abstract:** The article argues that there are limitations in relying solely on witness testimony and archival material to document the continuing effects of civil war. It references Daniels' 41-minute film, *Not Reconciled* (2009), which concerns Belchite, a medieval town in the Aragon region of Northern Spain, and the 3-week battle that took place there in 1937. The article explores the ways in which the utilization of fictionalized characters, the voices of ghosts of Republican and Nationalist fighters, can enhance the realist strategy of observational footage and testimony, and demonstrate witnesses' evasiveness and resistance to remembering. While the ruins of Belchite are silent, the voices of ghosts provide a sense of the simultaneity of past, present and future.

**Keywords:** Spanish Civil War; experimental documentary; trauma; memory

By straddling the boundary of fiction and nonfiction, *Not Reconciled* (Jill Daniels, 2009) examines the integral relationship between the flow of time and place. It explores a place that embodies history and where stories are not yet completed. The 41-minute documentary film uses fictionalized characters, the ghosts of Republican and Nationalist

fighters, as well as observational footage to recount the history of Belchite, a medieval town in the Aragon region of Northern Spain and the 3-week battle that took place there in 1937. Belchite has become emblematic of the Spanish Civil War, since it was deliberately left in ruins by General Francisco Franco as a monument to his victory.<sup>1</sup>



**FIGURE #1/BELCHITE**

After the war, a new town was built a few meters from the ruins by the forced labor of Republican prisoners. It was 15 years before the last inhabitants were resettled. By filming the abandoned ruins and inhabitants of the rebuilt town, the documentary reflects on the continuing presence of the civil war. But it also intervenes with the voices of fictionalized ghosts to reflect on what cannot be observed.

There were heavy casualties on both sides during the Spanish Civil War, which raged from 1936 to 1939, with many of those killed thrown into roadside ditches. After the war thousands of leftists, trade unionists and Republicans were executed in reprisals

and buried anonymously in mass graves. The Franco regime ended in 1975 (after Franco's death) with a slow return to democracy, but there was no Pact of Reconciliation, no Truth Commission, no purge of the army or the paramilitary Civil Guard and no assessment of the crimes of the regime. It was illegal to identify the location of mass graves. When flowers were laid anonymously at the location of an unmarked grave it was done under the cover of night. In late 2007, under the Zapatero government the *Ley de memoria histórica* [the Historical Memory Law] was passed, acknowledging the existence of the mass graves. This began the process of identifying their locations and made it permissible to recover bodies.<sup>2</sup> Yet few bodies have been recovered. And the law has generated public hostility as well as support. The trauma of the civil war and its aftermath remains an unacknowledged wound in the national psyche. As Judith Lewis-Herman argues, 'Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims' (1).

The fear of remembering in Spain can be explained by the fact that during the Franco regime there was a pact of silence underwritten by fear. The vanquished Republicans were repressed and dispossessed. The 'disappeared' were, and are, 'absent'. They have been silenced. The effect of being 'disappeared' is to lose a social and political identity.<sup>3</sup> However many people in Spain believe it is better to bury old wounds, particularly now that the majority of participants and witnesses to the war and its aftermath are dead. Nevertheless, specters remain, even if they are buried for the moment. As Judith Butler puts it: 'When versions of reality are excluded or jettisoned to a domain of unreality, then spectres are produced that haunt the ratified version of reality, animated and de-ratifying traces.... there is no loss' (xiii).

The filmmaker, the “I” of this essay, was confronted with the problem of how to represent the trauma of war and, the silence that has followed in the present. How does one bear witness to a traumatic past when memory is fraught with fear and betrayal? Since film cannot directly record memories of the past or history itself, strategies must be deployed to represent bearing witness. Bearing witness is by no means straightforward, even before it is mediated through film. We must first ask who bears witness, and second, how to *evaluate* the account of an event that is now in the past. It cannot simply be a matter of a recuperation of the past, since the past can never be regained. Memory of the past is subjective and memory is not reliable. Memory contains elisions. We remember imperfectly. Memory is ‘not a limpid reflecting pool [but] more like a minefield (or bed of fossils)’ (Marks 2000: 64). The film’s *construction* therefore must include an acknowledgement of the inevitable limitations of bearing witness. It must create its history ‘through imagination and evocation [of the past] not [its] recuperation’ (Kear 2007: 134).

In *Not Reconciled* violent trauma is represented in the creation of fictionalised ghosts who speak and images of ruined buildings that say nothing. But the film complicates this representation through the use of an additional realist strategy that includes archive material, observation of inhabitants’ daily lives and witness testimony that engages with the past in the present.

Eyewitness accounts and archival images are generally utilized in documentary films to provide *authenticity* by offering ‘evidence’ that serves as testimony of the ‘real’. Those who were present at an event and witnessed it directly provide an account of the

event. But even this account of the past is inevitably mediated by the context of its production and the subjectivity of the witnesses. David MacDougall argues that in many memory films, particularly documentary films and television programs, ‘filmmakers are tempted to use the surviving photographic record *as if this were memory itself*’ (italics in the original, 232). Archival moving images, particularly those on black and white analogue film often contain scratches, dirt and deterioration. This patina of age ‘tends to exaggerate its status as a sign. This sign is often confused with authenticity’ (*ibid*). MacDougall draws the conclusion that documentary films, in order to represent memory, need to employ other strategies to represent memory meaningfully.

There is a danger that ‘the photographic image as an indexical trace of an event [in the past] acquires a materiality that substitutes its presence for the contingency of the absent moment it depicts’ (Kears 2007: 135). Although the archival images in *Not Reconciled* do not purport to be fully *authentic*, they nevertheless indicate a sense of an earlier time that, mediated in the present, *evoke* a sense of the past in the imagination of the spectator. They are mediated further through the voice-overs of the fictional ghosts who comment on them, thus providing a context for their place within the filmic structure. Brief eyewitness testimonies are also provided by subjects whose accounts are presented as contradictory or evasive or whose infirmities render them potentially unable to comprehend the questions. ‘He was there, but he’s deaf’ says a woman, pointing to an old man who lapses into an incoherent mumble. These are not reliable witness testimonies but narratives of fear; fear of recollection; fear of the terror of war and the fear of opening old wounds in villages whose closed communities necessitate the need for silence.

In the creation of fictional ghosts as surrogate witnesses to events of the traumatic past, to uncover what may be hidden, I am not alone. As Lewis-Herman notes: ‘Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told’ (1). Avery Gordon points out that ghosts tell us that life is far more complicated than it may appear: ‘In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for our consumption’ (16). The creation of the haunting image of the ghost as fictional eyewitness reminds the spectators of their own role as witnesses to others’ lives. Their creation aims to bring to light what is repressed and hidden in the present. It aims to bring the past back, in Marianne Hirsch’s words, ‘in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability (20).

Moreover, the creation of fictional ghosts as witnesses in *Not Reconciled* is intended to circumvent the danger of encouraging a solely outraged response. Jo Labanyi argues that there is a danger of spectators feeling morally improved by having momentarily ‘shared’ the suffering represented in the text, without going on to make any connection with the present (cited in Leggott 2009: 29). As Butler comments: ‘graphic depictions can sometimes do no more than sensationalize events. When that happens we respond with outrage periodically, but the outrage is not transformed into a sustained political resistance’ (xvi). To discourage outrage and encourage reflection that may lead to political resistance, I use performativity and reflexivity to create distanciation. I create binaries: past and present, the dead and the living, the ruins and the ‘new town’, and remembering and forgetting. The use of fiction, that is performativity, within the

framework of non-fiction, is here to bear witness within a structure that creates distanciation rather than actively promoting identification. But by combining performativity and documentary realism, the film holds in tension the possibility of *over*-distanciation, of complete distanciation and non-engagement.

The fictionalized ghosts, created through scripted voice-overs, are based partly on published texts of the history of the town and partly on diaries of the protagonists in the civil war, left and right. The film does not assert an authentic truth but creates a narrative based on selective subjectivities. The two central ghosts represent young Republican fighters, Rosa and Carlos, killed in the civil war and buried in a common grave waiting to be discovered. Other voices of fighters act as a backdrop. They are heard over images of the ruins and the new town. The voices evoke the history of the town in its diversity, the events that took place during the civil war, while a visual representation of decay collides with the expressive force of the aural narratives. The film is partisan in its approach. Its creation of fictional ghosts is based on a concern for justice in a country haunted by terrible events and actions that have been and are still being denied. Rosa and Carlos are not, however, symbols or mouthpieces for crude political propaganda; they are ghosts with human frailties and needs. As they wait to be discovered, they bicker and flirt with each other, boast of their exploits and rage against their fate. Their voices tell us they are lurking in the shadows ‘if you look out of the corner of your eye you might see me. I’m always here under the ground’. Gordon points out that ‘the ghostly haunt gives notice that something is missing—that what appears to be invisible or in the shadows is announcing itself’ (15). He writes: ‘the ghost presents itself as a sign to the thinker that there is a *chance in the fight for the oppressed past* [...] the past is alive enough in the present, to

warrant such an approach' (*ibid*). The ghosts in *Not Reconciled* provide a framing structure for recounting the history of the town and for bearing witness to the battles, executions and burials in anonymous graves.

Belchite, once a prosperous market town, was severely damaged in the war, and it is crumbling to dust. All that is left in the ruins are the signs of human traces: collapsed passages, glassless windows, open doorways, walls newly spray-painted with anarchists' circled 'A's, faint traces of painted shop signs, dead animals, and human artifacts: a small plastic comb or the remains of a leather shoe.



**FIGURE #2/TRACES OF WRITING**

As Paul Willemen notes: 'A ruin is a historical sign that has escaped from history. It is history constantly overcome by nature and only as such does it become an object of contemplation because history itself cannot be contemplated' (58).

The shots of the ruined buildings appear immobile as though they are in stasis, but they are not. Antonio, a ghost, observes: ‘You learn to listen for the sounds of falling walls, the faint whispers of the living and the dead, and to watch as the cracks widen and the walls crumble’. The film illustrates Doreen Massey’s argument that: ‘space has to be imbued with the temporal. As a slice through time, space is a dynamic simultaneity and that is quite different from a stasis’ (Massey, undated).

The absence of war in the present is expressed through static shots, long shots and observation. The static shots of the ruins contain movement: tourists walk in and out of the buildings; birds fly through the frame and grass sways in the breeze. In a long static shot in a bar in the new town, we may observe a barman seemingly unaware of the camera, lost in his own interior world, unmoving, locked out of events around him. In another, a 5-minute static shot of the ruins, the camera observes a ruined church while the fictionalised voices give their subjective accounts of the battle that took place there. Tourists wander about looking at the empty space, and a man photographs a woman. As the camera zooms slowly in they stand side by side, their hands raised to shade their eyes, looking into the space beyond us. In employing such strategies, the documentary examines the metaphorical nature of silence and absence in a place where history tells us that once there was the opposite, the chaos and roar of guns and bombs. As Massey notes: “Long takes give us, in the midst of the rush and flow of globalization, a certain stillness. But they are not stills. They are about duration. They tell us of becoming, in place” (*ibid*).

Tina Wasserman asks: ‘How can one access the temporal past by confronting a place? What can a place reveal? In many ways, nothing is revealed. A place cannot be

interrogated' (165). The ruined buildings of Belchite are mute. If I simply filmed these buildings with no further mediation, the image would not reveal an absent history, the catastrophe of war. Still, the image does bear traces: the physical signs of battle, bullet holes in the walls, traces of former human habitation, falling walls. And these can provide strong visual surrogates for the past. Used with the voiceover ghosts they are eloquent. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas note: 'of critical importance to our conceptualisation of the role of the image in bearing witness are the uses to which it is put, and the contexts in which it is placed. The material image is relieved of the singular burden of veracity when it is seen within the much broader context of its reception and use' (4). Returning to a site, therefore, as a sign of history, is a powerful place to start the process of representing the past. But the image itself is insufficient. Hence the value of dialogue, the words of the ghosts and interviewees, as well as the impressionistic soundtrack, created by David Chapman, which is based on natural sounds. Appearing and disappearing, the audio track conveys wind 'whistling its warnings of events past or yet to come' (McLaughlin 2011: 96).

Begona Aretxaga, in an examination of her own experience of life during the Franco regime, asserts that life in Spain consisted of a permanent state of terror that was 'transformed into presence, absence and ghostliness' (128-9). This view is underlined in filmed interviews with witnesses to the war who are reluctant to discuss their experiences of that period. The documentary does not rely on interviewees to act as witnesses to history, to provide incontrovertible veracity. This method alone would not take into account the frailty of memory, the resistance to remembering and the inclination towards

forgetting, nor the fact that what is revealed is mediated through film. The film is not able to elicit revealing responses from these subjects in terms of veracity. Yet it is able to reveal uncertainty, distraction, and avoidance.



**FIGURE #3/BALCONY**

The spontaneous ‘interviews’ combine with the scripted voices of the ghosts to provide a dialectic between present and past; between nonfiction and fiction. The ghosts are the fictional witnesses of being present in the past and provide an account in the afterwards from their present in a mass grave. They draw attention to the fact that something is missing, absent and shrouded in silence. Their accounts contain gaps, hesitations, discrepancies and contradictions. The chorus of ghostly voices confuses the linear notion of past, present and future; it creates a sense that all moments are present simultaneously.

Cahal McLaughlin comments on *Not Reconciled*: ‘To write “interview” may misrepresent the stylized approach that Daniels takes, which seems to come upon people as they sit on public benches and ask direct questions [...] “Do you remember the war?” and “Are you left or right?” Their silences, shifting, standing up and walking away, or their distraction by a passing vehicle are as important to her project as the information they provide. Because what Daniels seems to be exploring is the fear of opening up traumatic memories of violence perpetrated by neighbours on a massive scale in a contemporary context of uneasy peace’ (*ibid* 2011: 95-6). The film does not ignore life as it is lived in the present but the inhabitants of the town are represented as living under the perpetual shadow of memory and history. Their daily lives continue in the present but they choose to reveal nothing.

Witnessing is not proof; it is discourse. And even as the witness recalls events, these memories are fragmented and unreliable. *Not Reconciled*, therefore, is an exploration of both remembering and forgetting. The ghosts do not assert a truth they create a narrative gathered from diverse published eyewitness written accounts. This dialogue creates composites of fictional witnesses and protagonists, a performative strategy that merges with the realist strategy of filmic observation of the inhabitants of the new town, tourists who visit the ruins, archival stills, and brief interviews with people who do not remember or refuse to remember. These strategies of fiction and nonfiction represent an effort to rejoin memory and history with the present through the creative act of the imagination. As Hirsch notes: ‘the horror of looking is not necessarily *in* the image

but in the story the viewer provides to fill in what has been omitted. For each image [the spectator provides] the other complementary one' (*ibid*).

The objective of this method of representing history-is to develop a new approach to documentary practice, to contribute to the advancement of knowledge on the cinematic representation of place, memory, and identity, as well as history and politics. *Not Reconciled* explores the nature of bearing witness. It does not create a definitive veracity of events that happened in the past but it does produce an evocation, conjecture and an enquiry.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Because of this, in the old town of Belchite, there is no continuation of past in the present social relations. Its living social identity ended when the last inhabitant left in 1954. The ruined town has no identifiable significance in the social fabric of the population in the new town adjacent to the ruins. At the two open entrances to the ruins, there are no official descriptions of the town or its history, no description of the 3-week battle that took place there. The site remains open to the elements.

<sup>2</sup> In villages it was generally known where bodies were buried but it was illegal to recover them. The Historical Memory Law (<http://leymemoria.mjusticia.es/>) includes clauses relating to compensation payments and pensions for relatives of victims of the civil war and Francoist repression. Additional clauses also oblige towns to remove plaques, symbols and memorials commemorating the war from public buildings and streets. This, however, is still ignored. In Lecera, a village near Belchite, a street that runs

---

through the centre of the village is still called *Calle Franco*. In the new town of Belchite a street is called *Los Heroes de Belchite*, referencing the nationalist victors.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Preston catalogues in detail the victims of violence on all sides in the civil war, in *The Spanish Holocaust* (2012): “For all families, the death of a loved one without proper burial and ritual was traumatic. To be able to visit a grave, leave flowers or meditate permits some reconciliation with the fact of loss. This was denied to almost all the families of those killed in the repression [...] for the families of all the victims [...] mourning and the support of their community were replaced by insult, humiliation, threats and economic hardship.” (207-8).

<sup>4</sup> *Not Reconciled* can be seen online at <http://vimeo.com/28050084>.

## References

- Aretxaga, B. 2006. *States of Terror*. Centre for Basque Studies.
- Butler, J. 2010. *Frames of War*. Verso.
- Gordon, A. F. 1997. *Ghostly Matters*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Gready, P. 2003. *Political Transition*. London: Pluto Press.
- Guerin, F. and Hallas, R. eds., 2007. *The Image and the witness: trauma, memory and visual culture*. Wallflower Press.
- Hirsch, M. 1997. *Family Frames: photography, narrative and post-memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kear, J. 2007. ‘Chris Marker replays *Hiroshima mon Amour*’ in *The Image and the Witness: trauma, memory and visual culture*. Edited by: F. Guerin and R. Hallas. Great Britain: Wallflower Press.

- 
- Leggott, S. 2009. *Memory, Postmemory, Trauma: The Spanish Civil War in Recent Novels by Women*. Flinders University Languages Group Online Review (Fulgor). Volume 4. Issue 1. <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/fulgor> [last accessed on 23 July 2012].
- Lewis-Herman, J. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Harper-Collins.
- MacDougall, D. 2006. *The Corporeal Image*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Marks, L. 2000. *The Skin of the Film: intercultural film, embodiment and the senses*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Massey, D. Undated. *Landscape/Space/Politics: an essay*. Available from: <http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com/landscapespacepolitics-an-essay/> [last accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2012]
- McLaughlin, C. 2011. ‘‘Not Reconciled’’, a film by Jill Daniels, High Ground Films (40 mins., 2009)’ in *Journal of Media Practice*. UK: Intellect.
- Preston, P. 2012. *The Spanish Holocaust: inquisition and extermination in twentieth-century Spain*. London: Harper Press.
- Wasserman, T. 2007. Constructing the Image of Postmemory, in *The Image and the witness: trauma, memory and visual culture*, edited by D. Guerin and R. Hallas. London: Wallflower Press.
- Willemen, P. 1993. Gitai – ‘The Nomadic Image’, in *The Films of Amos Gitai*, edited by P. Willemen. BFI.