

Towards New Ways of Representing History: Generic Innovations in the Historical Biopic in Spain

As virtual sites of public memorialization, historical biopics play an important part in shaping our view of the past. The genre employs a range of formal and narrative strategies in order to create persuasive narratives about historical characters and events. However, nation-specific socio-cultural and industrial conditions frequently determine whose lives are deserving of biographical treatment and how their stories are told. The following comparative analysis of two recent historical biopics, *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* (*Clara Campoamor, la mujer olvidada*, Laura Mañá, 2011) and *While at War* (*Mientras dure la guerra*, Alejandro Amenábar, 2019), foregrounds some of these nation-specific circumstances in the Spanish context. It then proposes that these two works employ innovative strategies that signal possible new avenues for the historical biopic in Spain. In the case of *Clara Campoamor*, Mañá suggests alternative ways of representing historical female figures in the public arena, whilst in his film Amenábar mobilizes the conventions of the Hollywood biopic to aid transnational readability.

Keywords

HISTORICAL BIOPIC
FEMINIST BIOPIC
MALE MELODRAMA
FEMALE SUFFRAGE IN SPAIN
SPANISH SECOND REPUBLIC
LAURA MAÑÁ
ALEJANDRO AMENÁBAR
CLARA CAMPOAMOR
MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO

Date submitted: 07/01/2021

Date accepted: 13/04/2021

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Commonly defined as “a fiction film that deals with a figure whose existence is documented in history, and whose claims to fame or notoriety warrant the uniqueness of his or her story” (Vidal 2014, 3), biopics in general and historical biopics in particular play a part in shaping the public memory of the past. As a consequence, multiple pull and push factors influence the production and distribution of biopics. These may include cultural and institutional approaches to the process of memorialization, specific conditions within the local film industry and the indigenous star system, and even conflicting discourses on what constitutes a prestige project.

In this sense the Spanish context is no different, and the two works I shall be considering in this comparative analysis—*Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* (*Clara Campoamor, la mujer olvidada*, Laura Mañá, 2011) and *While at War* (*Mientras dure la guerra*, Alejandro Amenábar, 2019)—illustrate industrial conditions and cultural attitudes that have determined the existence and significance of historical biopics in the Spanish media landscape.

If we first consider Spanish television, the production of biopics “has been frequently linked to economic, socio-political and cultural interests” (Hernández Corchete 2011, 349) which in the last forty years have resulted in uneven patterns of production, characterized by periods of significant output followed by years of scarcity. Many television scholars cite the 1980s as a particularly prolific decade, when generous budgets combined with “the will of the new government to translate socialist ideals into television images” (Palacio 2008, 159) resulted in the production of several prestige biographical mini-series. Whether they dealt with historical or contemporary subjects, these programmes emerged as conscious attempts to reclaim, or

create, icons for a fledgling democracy.¹

The 2010s witnessed a second peak in the production of televisual biopics, once again, prompted by a combination of social and economic factors, most notably the enactment of the Ley General de la Comunicación Audiovisual (Law of Audiovisual Communication), in March 2010. With the expectation that they should invest between 5% and 6% of their profits to support European film, both private and state-owned channels resorted to producing made-for-television films and miniseries to fulfil their quota. In an attempt to expand their existing portfolio of celebrity-driven programs, private channels released a wide range of mini-series based on the lives of artists and singers. Meanwhile, the production of biopics based on historical figures remained mostly in the hands of national and regional state-owned channels, *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* being a paradigmatic example. With a generous budget and displaying high production values compared to those of the historical mini-series of the 1980s, the film was conceived as a prestige project to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the granting of female suffrage in Spain. *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* ignited public interest in a previously-overlooked historical figure (Campoamor) and proved highly successful, attracting two-and-a-half million viewers when it was first broadcast.

Whilst the production of historical biopics in Spanish television has been the object of several academic studies,² tracing the history of the biographical genre in the context of Spanish cinema is a challenge that lies beyond the limited scope of the present article. This is further problematized by the fragmentary nature of the scholarship in this area, which may indicate that the biopic as a film genre has struggled to make a significant mark on Spanish film culture.

Cinema scholars frequently look to the list of nominees and winners of the film industry's most notable accolades, the Academy Awards, to seek confirmation of the genre's enduring attraction and the fact that "in contemporary cinema the biopic is an ubiquitous vehicle for prestige projects, and in many ways it has become synonymous with award-worthiness" (Vidal 2014, 2). If we were to carry out a similar exercise in the Spanish context, with the list of nominees and winners to the Goya Awards as our data sample, our findings would be radically different. For instance, in the last ten years not a single historical biopic has received the Goya Award for Best Film,³ nor has a Goya Award for Best Leading Actor or Actress been bestowed upon a performer playing a historical figure. In this respect, the second production that I shall be considering in this article is also paradigmatic. In 2020, Alejandro Amenábar's film *While at War* garnered a record-breaking seventeen nominations for the Goyas, including Best Film, Best Director and Best Leading Actor (Karra Elejalde). A historical drama recounting the last months in the life of the Spanish writer and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, the film only obtained a meagre five awards, the majority of them for technical categories.

In addition to conditions in the local industry and the shifting production models that may determine the making of historical biopics in Spain, it is essential that we mention the nation-specific socio-cultural and historical circumstances that have had a deep impact on determining whose lives were worthy of biographical treatment.

In his assessment of televisual biopics of the 1980s, Baltasar Fra Molinero argues that historical figures such as the Catholic Monarchs and the Emperor Charles V were perceived as ill-suited to be used as exemplars of the narratives of reconciliation and

consent that dominated the political and public arenas in the aftermath of the dictatorship (Fra Molinero 2009, 245).⁴ Two decades later, the debates around the 2004–07 passage through parliament of the Ley de la Memoria Histórica (Law of Historical Memory) became a catalyst for an intense and often polarized reassessment of the Spanish Civil War and its repressive aftermath. In cinema, this resulted in the production of "some outstanding documentaries but, in the field of fiction film, a succession of feel-good nostalgia movies that all too often romanticize their subject matter" (Rodríguez Ortega 2013, 253). Television documentaries such as *Siempre días azules* (Israel Sánchez-Prieto, 2005) and historical dramas such as *The Sleeping Voice* (*La voz dormida*, Benito Zambrano, 2011) responded to a perceived need to rediscover private experiences and individual memories that had been "forced to remain a private matter until very recently, thanks to repression under the dictatorship and a lack of interested interlocutors at the time of the transition" (Labanyi 2008, 120). As a consequence, these narratives focused "on the victims of history, and no longer on the heroic figure of the warrior" (Loureiro 2008, 231), and audiences seemed to have little appetite for portrayals of exceptional individuals doing extraordinary deeds, which are frequently part and parcel of the historical biopic.

The two works considered in this article, *Clara Campoamor*, *The Forgotten Woman* and *While at War*, partake in this desire to unveil and rediscover forgotten figures and forgotten events, but unlike these other cinematic representations of the past, this is done through the personalized narratives of two historically documented figures.

There are further narrative and formal aspects that are shared by these two biopics and which make them suitable subjects for a comparative

exercise. Even though it was intended for the small screen, *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* should be rightly defined as “cinematic TV,” which according to Paul Julian Smith represents “a new quality television that sets itself apart from ordinary TV through aesthetic and social ambitions that might be called cinematic” (Smith 2017, 124). The film’s high production values, accomplished performances and its renunciation of the traditional mini-series format all serve to validate a comparative exercise with a feature film such as *While at War*.

Thematically, both films are set in the same historical period (the pre-Civil War years), and deal with characters involved in similar professional endeavors (intellectuals who are also active in politics). However, the reason why these two films deserve closer analysis goes beyond these formal and narrative similarities. Although they reflect some of the trends outlined in this introduction, they also stand out as examples of generic innovations and chart possible new directions for the historical biopic in the Spanish context.

Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman is in itself unique by virtue of having a female protagonist that it is not an entertainer, a queen or a saint. Moreover, the film chooses to eschew the “myths of suffering, victimization and failure” which, Dennis Bingham claims, have been a regular feature of the female biopic (Bingham 2010, 10). From the very first moment that we encounter Campoamor—a close-up of her face, her eyes gazing straight into the camera with a defiant expression—we sense that this character is going to challenge our expectations of women in the public space. Constructed as a quest narrative that offers plenty of opportunities to portray Campoamor’s professional abilities and her oratorical prowess, the following analysis will explore how the film proposes new ways of looking at a woman who occupies the

public sphere.

Paradoxically, these feminist interventions bring the film closer to the modes and tropes of the celebratory biopics of the Hollywood classical era, and it is at this point that, once again, we find common ground between *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* and *While at War*. As we shall see in the following comparative analysis, *While at War* borrows the melodramatic conventions traditionally associated with the classical biopic. Whilst in the wider context of the contemporary biopic genre, innovation tends to be associated with parodic and postmodern strategies, I would argue that in the Spanish context, it is this reliance on modes commonly associated with the Hollywood classical biopic that sets *While at War* apart as an innovative film. Recent studies of Amenábar’s work (Jordan 2012; Kercher 2015) argue that his style straddles two different film traditions (Hollywood and Spanish national cinema), and that his Spanish films frequently deploy modes commonly associated with Hollywood genres, thus ensuring the transnational readability of his work. In the rapidly-changing media landscape of today, when new players in the form of streaming services are disrupting traditional models of production and distribution, Amenábar’s transnational model may signal a way forward for the Spanish historical biopic. Having the opportunity to reach out to a wider audience and gain access to international investment may have a significant impact on the issue of whose stories are told and how.⁵

Introducing the Founding Mother and the Martyr

With several historical biopics under her belt, Laura Mañá has spent much of her career chronicling the lives of female politicians and activists whose contributions have been, the director claims, written out or unjustly

ignored by male historians (de Dios 2021).⁶ I would argue that Mañá, as a director, understands that the biopic's representation of the past becomes "part of public memory, pressing historical and ethical obligations upon all facets of the work of performing the past" (Lipkin 2011, 3). Thus, Mañá's deeply personal commitment to represent what she feels has been underrepresented—these women and their work—guides her creative choices and the ways in which she portrays the female protagonists and their circumstances. In the case of *Campoamor*, the director seeks to create a persuasive narrative that elevates and confirms the character's status as Founding Mother of the Spanish democracy.

In order to achieve this, Mañá envisages her role more as a chronicler than as a dramatist. Realistic camera work, extensive use of public spaces, a fast-paced linear narrative and often contentious dialogue contribute to the impression of a film that functions as a scrapbook of dramatized news clippings, images of which are regularly inserted as transitional devices.

As is frequently the case in historical biopics, *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* opens with an intertitle that reminds us that what we are about to see is an historical recreation. It then reassures us that although it is a work of fiction, it has been painstakingly researched and facts have been garnered from reputable sources, such as official documents and memoirs. A sense of chronological time and space is quickly established: objects, costumes and gestures tell us that we are witnessing an electoral process, probably in the early decades of the 20th century. As the names of voters are called out, it seems as if all the participants are male, a pattern only broken when Campoamor herself (Elvira Mínguez) casts her vote. As she leaves the

polling station the camera shows the profiles of the waiting voters, where we can now identify a few female faces. Amongst these, Campoamor appears to recognize one in particular, who in turn doesn't seem to recognize her. Finally, the camera zooms in on Campoamor, who first looks straight back at us and then lowers her gaze, her profile framed by the title of the film "*Clara Campoamor, la mujer olvidada*" (Fig.1).

In his analysis of television biopics, Jonathan Bignell argues that the format draws "on a range of forms, such as the melodrama, documentary profile, *Bildungsroman*, or teleological Great Man (and Great Woman) discourse charting a rise through adversity to success, depending on their subject, production circumstances, and intended audience" (Bignell 2020, 47). As a product of the public-owned television channel RTVE and intended as a commemorative artefact, it is hardly surprising that *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* opts for the teleological Great Woman discourse, with its evocations of heroism and greatness. Celebratory in tone and reluctant to engage with the darkest areas of the protagonist's life (if there were any), it is a format that takes us back to the classic biopics of the Hollywood studio era. In the words of Custen:

The studio era films were based on a model of history which insisted that change occurred not because inequalities or unresolved social or economic unrest created tensions, but rather because uniquely gifted individuals, distributed through our history and certain strata of our population, were able to see into the future and give us innovative and improved ways to live. (Custen 2000, 132)

The beginning of the film recreates, in fact, the end point of Campoamor's struggle to achieve female suffrage in Spain. From this starting point, the



Fig. 1: Towards the end of the opening scene, Campoamor (Elvira Mínguez) breaks the fourth wall and invites us into her world, to bear witness to her quest. *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* (Laura Mañá, 2011).

plot then develops as a long single flashback, a convention frequently used to frame such teleological narratives. It is also a convention that fits well with Mañá's decision to film Campoamor's story as a quest narrative, an unusual choice for a female biopic. Depicting the obstacles that she encountered, and arguing (via an accumulation of selected moments from her past) that she was destined to accomplish acts of an exceptional nature, it encourages viewers to believe in Campoamor's crucial role in the history of Spanish democracy.

More importantly, this opening scene also functions as Mañá's own statement of intent and a direct rebuke to historians who ignored Campoamor's achievements. The woman who doesn't recognize (or pretends not to recognize) Campoamor, acts as a surrogate figure for us all and for history itself—for all those who have been unable or unwilling to perceive Campoamor's greatness. The protagonist's defiant gaze can initially be read as a mark of authenticity (candor and self-confidence being two of the historical character's well-known traits), but it can subsequently be interpreted as a gesture, a nod to the audience, one which fuses her present to our actuality, her re-created body acting as a guarantee that reassures us of the trustworthiness of this version of the past events. It also declares that the film stands as a memorial site providing tangible evidence of Campoamor's achievements, to ensure that they are not forgotten. Editing and soundtrack contribute to this sense of urgency and steadfastness, with Campoamor's leitmotif played in a rhythmic *spiccato* that reminds us of the need to capture this moment before it passes, whilst reinforcing Campoamor's resolution and persistence in achieving her objectives.

In contrast with Mañá's revisionist and archival-driven approach to the genre, Amenábar's work feels more meditative and less concerned about

the minutiae of historical events. Like Mañá, he wishes to bring to our attention a character (Unamuno) and an event (the confrontation with Millán-Astray at the University of Salamanca's Paraninfo) that has been undeservedly forgotten. When asked about his intentions in telling a story from the Spanish Civil War, Amenábar reassures us that he approaches the process of historical recreation with the utmost respect, and that he is conscious of the need to include reliable testimonials and historical documents from both sides of the Civil conflict (Amenábar 2019).

However, it is surprising how sketchy the film is when it comes to providing concrete details of Unamuno's life and achievements, especially compared to the data-rich biopic of Campoamor.

The film provides enough clues in terms of characterization—the beard and glasses, the iconic “txapela,” his idiosyncratic behavior and irascible nature, his passion for linguistics and his mastery of origami—to persuade the audience of the authenticity of this portrayal of Unamuno (Karra Elejalde). However, other important aspects of his persona are barely discussed, and some even entirely omitted, most significantly his struggles with faith and religion. We see him reading Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, but Unamuno's own philosophy remains undiscussed. As a prominent linguist and an influential writer, Unamuno played a significant role in the intellectual life of Spain, but his contribution to the cultural and political landscape is neither manifested nor verbalized. Many characters remark on Unamuno's celebrity status (from a soldier who asks for his autograph, to Franco's wife who declares herself “a big fan”), but the written works on which his fame rests are conspicuously absent.

Conceived as “a reflective exercise for the benefit of the audience”

(Amenábar 2019), the film is less concerned with recreating events in Unamuno's life than it is with using Unamuno's experiences as a framework to explore universal themes such as intolerance, the dangers of extremist ideologies and the need for reconciliation. Amenábar envisages Unamuno as a martyr for the democratic cause, and the act of remembering that the film evokes is not so much about the martyr as it is about how his martyrdom may help to restore a wounded community.

In order to achieve this, Amenábar deploys a range of melodramatic strategies—notably the extensive use of close-ups to capture Karra Elejalde's intensely physical performance—and he constructs Unamuno as an emasculated figure seeking to reassert his authority and intellectual freedom. His body becomes a canvas, a location of emotional significance that reflects, contains and aids the legibility of the forces in conflict elsewhere. By adopting these melodramatic conventions, the film also “suggests that lost moral structures can be recovered and restored” (Lipkin 2002, 5). In *While at War*, Unamuno becomes the locus of this melodramatic promise that is ultimately fulfilled in the closing moments of the film when, in an act of professional self-annihilation, he decides to take a stand against an irrational ideology represented by the Fascist Commander Millán-Astray (Eduard Fernández).

The opening scene in *While at War* finds Unamuno at the very beginning of his arduous path to professional martyrdom and lays bare the personal shortcomings that he must address before achieving self-realization. Unlike the urgency that dominates the score in the opening scene of *Clara Campoamor*, *The Forgotten Woman*, music is entirely absent from the opening sequence of *While at War*. Instead, Amenábar juxtaposes the

noises of ordinary street life—birds singing, the voices of children playing, a ball bouncing on the ground—with the sounds of the approaching conflict—a Nationalist officer announcing the rules of the state of war, soldiers marching, shots being fired. With its powerful simplicity, this soundscape manages to engage and disturb the audience in equal measure, conveying the alarming speed at which violence pierces and rips through the fabric of everyday life. These contrasting aural realities also accompany our first encounter with Unamuno. From the public spaces of Salamanca's Plaza Mayor and its Town Hall, where ordinary citizens are being exposed for the first time to the realities of the conflict, the film cuts to the pastoral image of a young couple (Mikel Iglesias and Martina Cariddi), resting idly beneath a tree, lulled by a gentle summer's breeze. A child approaches them and calls out repeatedly “Grandpa!” At first the young man ignores him, but then a distant gunshot catches his attention. The camera cuts back to the child, only this time the luminous landscape has been transformed into the dark interior of a house, and it is revealed that he is in fact addressing an older version of the young man (Karra Elejalde). A second gunshot finally drags the old man out of his golden reverie and he lies momentarily startled and disoriented on the bed (Fig. 2).

Unlike Campoamor's unflinching gaze, Unamuno's unfocused stare positions his character at a distance from the audience. If Campoamor is identified as the victim in a situation of historical amnesia, Unamuno is immediately subjected to the judgement of future generations, embodied in the figure of his grandson, who will remain throughout the film as a witness to his actions and a surrogate figure for the audience. Unlike Campoamor's struggle against external forces, Unamuno's greatest



Fig. 2: Unamuno's (Karra Elejalde) sleep is disturbed by distant gunshots in the opening scene of the film. *While at War* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2019).

challenge lies within himself and his ego, and these differing personal quests will shape the ways in which the two protagonists interact with their environments and the characters that inhabit them, as I will show in the next section.

External forces

Portraying a period of two years in the life of the protagonist, *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* includes a wide range of locations and multiple characters, “to allow the audience to reflect on the forces impacting on individuals and how individuals respond to those forces” (Bignell 2020, 58). From family relations to politicians, from journalists to members of the public, Campoamor is able to convince almost everyone of the righteousness of her cause. This includes people of all ages, genders and political ideologies. As a virtual site of public memorialization, the film shows a keen desire to be inclusive and meaningful to all sections of society, inviting them to partake in this communal celebration of a momentous event in the history of Spanish democracy. As the trigger and enforcer of this change, the quest narrative confirms Campoamor as the heroic Founding Mother of a modern society, one in which all voices and opinions are treated with equal respect. In a nation where, as I previously argued, it is difficult to reach a consensus as to who deserves the biographical treatment, Clara Campoamor stands as a notable exception.

Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman also offers the first film portrayal of several key political figures of the Spanish Second Republic (Victoria Kent [Mónica López] and Alejandro Lerroux [Fermí Reixach] amongst others) with entire scenes devoted to quasi-didactic explanations of the complex political landscape of

1930s Spain. Campoamor is shown navigating party alliances and legal challenges with the assurance of a seasoned stateswoman, despite being portrayed as an outsider and a newcomer. These interactions reinforce the teleological narrative, the idea that Campoamor was somehow born to take on and succeed in this quest. Additionally, they exemplify Mañá’s intention to present alternative ways of portraying professional women in the public arena. In her analysis of recent biopics of the designer Coco Chanel, Ginette Vincendeau laments that despite her success as a businessperson, the biopics opted to tell a conventional love story. She argues “that the choices the films made in what they represent, and more importantly do not represent, make them a fascinating case study for the female biopic, revealing our culture’s institutional misogyny, which still makes a woman’s professional achievement subservient to her love life” (Vincendeau 2014, 190–91). Through an extensive and detailed portrayal of Campoamor’s professional endeavors and political acumen, Mañá openly challenges the conventions of the generic formula. She even co-opts the romantic subplot as part of her efforts to reframe the female biopic. This is achieved by introducing an entirely fictional character—Antonio García (Antonio de la Torre)—as Campoamor’s potential love interest. A self-absorbed journalist with a casual attitude towards politics, love and life, he is wholly transformed through his interactions with Campoamor. Their relationship, which evolves from romantic interest to a mutually fulfilling friendship, is used as a dramatic device through which conversations about ambition, pursuing a professional career and showing commitment to a cause are presented and normalized as fulfilling avenues for a woman’s life (Fig. 3).

In contrast to Campoamor’s disregard for romantic relationships,

the theme of lost love features prominently in *While at War*. The recurrent motif of the two lovers under the tree—first introduced in the opening sequence and then revisited at key moments in the film—turns out to be an idealized memory from Unamuno's youth, a bucolic refuge where he is forever in the company of his recently-deceased wife (Fig 4).

The haptic sensuality of the scene—the sunbeams caressing the couple's faces whilst Unamuno's wife runs her fingers through his hair—stands in sharp contrast to the writer's distant and sterile interactions with other female characters. Unamuno is surrounded by a coterie of women whose desires he is unable to fulfil. Some believe his influence will save the lives of their husbands, others expect him to use his celebrity status to support either the Republic or the Nationalist uprising. All end up being disappointed. These repeated blows to Unamuno's ego create a powerful picture of masculinity in crisis, a key ingredient of the male melodrama, a genre that Amenábar already explored in previous films, particularly *The Sea Inside* [*Mar adentro*, 2004] (a biopic of the quadriplegic and right-to-die campaigner Ramón Sampedro). As Barry Jordan notes, Amenábar's films "seem dominated by physically impaired, damaged and emasculated males" who in one way or another "experience various forms of enforced passivity, immobility or entrapment" (Jordan 2012, 273). Unamuno's repeated retreat to the fantasy world of his youth becomes a coping strategy against the infantilizing behavior of his daughters, who fuss over him and express concern about his physical and mental capacities.

The encroachment upon his personal space that he experiences at home extends progressively to arenas of professional performance: the Dean's office at the university and the coffee house where he holds his daily

"tertulia." As the Nationalist forces take control of political institutions and public spaces, Unamuno is forced to perform perverse versions of his professional duties. For instance, when he is appointed as the head of the regional purging committee, he is expected to judge the political profile of students instead of their academic achievements. When the coffee house is overrun by soldiers chanting Nationalists slogans, he takes his two faithful companions—the Evangelical Pastor Atilano Coco (Luis Zahera) and the leftist academic Salvador Vila Hernández (Carlos Serrano-Clark)—on long walks along the city walls, a liminal space that seems to offer some reprieve, but also symbolizes Unamuno's state of denial. Similarly to the ghosts in Amenábar's Gothic tale *The Others* (*Los otros*, 2001), Unamuno is too afraid or too proud to admit his mistakes; it is only when he finally confronts the Nationalist "invaders" in the final scene at the Paraninfo that he sees himself as "other" (obsolete) "and thus the real intruder" (Jordan 2012, 173).

In this sense, Campoamor is also portrayed as an intruder, and her otherness, in the form of her uniqueness (a mature, unmarried female lawyer who becomes one of the country's first female MPs) is the focal point of many conversations and interactions. However, unlike Unamuno, she starts her journey from the position of the outsider. She is frequently shown in the act of accessing these sites of patriarchal power, sometimes as the first woman to do so, and thus her interactions with these spaces—the courts, parliament and the university—are portrayed as moments of triumph. Domestic spaces also feature prominently in the film and Campoamor, like Unamuno, is frequently subjected to the judgement and questioning of members of her family, with whom she lives. But instead of



Fig. 3: Campoamor (Elvira Mínguez) and Antonio (Antonio de la Torre) discuss love and politics. *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* (Laura Mañá, 2011).



Fig. 4: Unamuno's idealized memory of his younger self (Mikel Iglesias) and his wife (Martina Cariddi). *While at War* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2019).

Unamuno's silent retreat into the golden memories of his youth, Campoamor counteracts their criticism by bringing into the domestic space the tools of her trade: parliamentary dispatches and the typewriter. She then proceeds to mount an aural assault in the form of frantic, through-the-night, typing and speech rehearsing, thus forcing the other members of the household to acknowledge her voice and ultimately to engage in discussing her ideas.

These bloodless dialectical battles between the protagonists of both films and their friends and family foreground the argument that it should be possible for people with opposing political views to discuss them passionately without having to resort to physical violence. In the case of *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman*, this extends to the public arena. Mañá's commitment to providing a realistic portrayal of parliamentary procedure demands that Campoamor's opponents must retain an aura of professionalism regardless of their chauvinistic and narrow-minded ideas.

Conversely, Amenábar's melodramatic narrative demands villainy and the manifestation of the same as a propelling force, epitomized by Unamuno's ideological nemesis, José Millán-Astray. With his cape, eye patch and crippled body, Millán-Astray conforms, at least outwardly, to the stereotypical idea of the monstrous villain. His expressive gesturing and flamboyant personality, while these are well-known traits of the historical character, contribute to a performance of overblown excess that somehow reduces Millán-Astray's fascist ideology to the level of mindless propaganda and sterile fundamentalism. The roots of the ideology or why it might be attractive to certain sections of society is never fully explored; the film simply demands from the audience an acceptance that fascism is "a bad thing." This affective response

is triggered by recurrent exposure to Millán-Astray's ritualistic chanting of the Spanish Legion's motto "¡Viva la Muerte!" ("Long live death!") and his association with the only scene of death and bloodshed in the film. In this sequence, Amenábar shows a column of young soldiers from the Spanish Legion marching towards Cáceres. Their commander Millán-Astray drives past them, delivering a rousing speech on the glory of dying for one's country, and prompting them to sing the Legion's well-known, albeit unofficial, anthem "El novio de la muerte" ("Bridegroom of Death"). As Millán-Astray's car drives into the distance, the camera slowly pans left and down to reveal the corpses of a woman, a man and a dog lying amongst the tall grass and out of the soldiers' view. This poignant tableau functions as an iconic representation of the practice of taking people "for a stroll." A euphemism used to describe the murder of thousands of people in both the Republican and Nationalist zones at the beginning of the war, "to take a stroll" ("dar el paseo") meant to seize the victim, murder them and leave them in a ditch, well, mineshaft or common grave (Casanova 2013, 196). The extensive media coverage in the early and mid-2000s of the exhumation of mass graves from the Francoist Repression, together with the memory of the most iconic victim of this practice, the poet Federico García Lorca, ensure that audiences possess sufficient references to enable them to read and interpret Amenábar's image as the most uncomfortable evidence of the barbarism of a senseless war.

In addition to his value as a melodramatic plot device, Millán-Astray is also part of a cast of lesser-known characters from the history of the Spanish Civil War that Amenábar wishes to bring to light (General Miguel Cabanellas [Tito Valverde] and Nicolás Franco [Luis Bermejo] are other examples). In answer to the question

“is this yet another film about the Spanish Civil War?” the director replies that in his opinion, “people know very little about their Civil War” and that he is frankly surprised at the meagre amount of films that have been made which deal with Franco’s rise to power (Muñoz 2020). Thus, the film provides an insider’s view of the political intrigues that paved the way for Franco to gain sole control of the Nationalist army, as well as an exploration of how certain symbols of modern Spain (the flag and the hymn) came into existence. In this sense, Amenábar seems to be taking a leaf from the book of one of his favorite directors, Steven Spielberg. The latter’s highly successful biopic *Lincoln* (2012) also eschews real battle scenes in favor of political confrontations that take place in the House of Representatives. This “provides Spielberg’s biopic with an unaccustomed focus, reconstructing historical events that most filmgoers, even those with a fair knowledge of Lincoln and the period in general, would know little if anything about” (Palmer 2016, 282). For Amenábar, his film became an opportunity “to offer a realistic and profound portrayal of Franco” (Muñoz 2020) by placing him in locations and contexts rarely depicted before. Thus, the focus on the political backdrop of the conflict creates a space for the director to explore lesser-known aspects of Franco (Santi Pregó): the fact that he was a cold, calculating strategist; his diplomatic skills and his tenacity. A sense of historical truth is preserved because even though the events presented in the film may be unfamiliar, they are dramatized in ways that connect to what is already known about the historical character: his highly distinctive voice, his devotion to the country and his family, and his deep religious beliefs.

Finally, it is worth noting that the narratives in both *Clara Campoamor*, *The Forgotten Woman* and *While at War* shine a light on the mechanisms

by which historical records are constructed, and this is nowhere more evident than in their portrayal of how the actions of both protagonists are reported in contemporaneous newspapers and radio broadcasts.

In *While at War*, news reports feature prominently and are used diegetically to advance the action and locate the events in time and space. However, the film routinely questions the truthfulness of those sources and draws attention to the role of the media in supplying propaganda. Amenábar does this by unpicking the circumstances in which these media reports were generated. In one particular scene, the leaders of the Nationalist uprising visit Unamuno at the coffee house and, as the meeting closes, a photographer offers to take a group portrait. Flanked by José Millán-Astray and Francisco Franco, and half-blinded by the light of the camera’s flashbulb, Unamuno comes to the realization that he is being manipulated. The philosopher’s troubled features convey both his present physical discomfort and also the fear that this photographic record will be interpreted as his silent acquiescence of the actions of the insurrectionists (Fig. 5). Viewed from the perspective of Unamuno, who grows increasingly frustrated at being misquoted and misrepresented, mass media is mostly perceived as a source of misinformation, half-truths and propaganda.

Conversely, newspaper articles, in particular those written by the character of Antonio, are presented in *Clara Campoamor*, *The Forgotten Woman* as trustworthy and tangible evidence of the protagonist’s impact on society and are frequently used to establish a chronology of the stages of her quest. Unlike the spectral voices on the radio waves that Unamuno feels unable to control or influence, the press is a constant physical presence in Campoamor’s life. The film includes several scenes involving scheduled



Fig. 5: Unamuno (Karra Elejalde, right) has his picture taken with Millán-Astray (Eduard Fernández, left) and other leaders of the Nationalist uprising. *While at War* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2019)



Fig. 6: Victoria Kent (Mónica López, left) and Clara Campoamor (Elvira Mínguez, right) are interviewed outside the Spanish Parliament. *Clara Campoamor, the Forgotten Woman* (Laura Mañá, 2011).

or impromptu press conferences that showcase the protagonist's abilities as a public speaker. Additionally, in these scenes the spectator is positioned alongside members of the press, witnessing Campoamor's actions as if they were experiencing an unmediated event (Fig. 6).

Confidence, conviction and professionalism define Campoamor's public interventions and remain key referents of her performance in the closing scene of the film. There, she delivers a masterful final speech at the Spanish Parliament, which is followed by the adoption of the law on female suffrage and thus the triumphant completion of her quest. *While at War* also concludes with Unamuno's notorious intervention at the University of Salamanca on the 12th of October 1936. However, this cathartic moment ultimately leads to Unamuno's fall from grace. In the following section, I shall explore how these final scenes confirm the two characters in the roles in which the directors initially cast them, that of a Founding Mother and a martyr.

The voices of reason

Towards the end of the film, Campoamor's quest narrative develops through a series of trial-like scenes (parliamentary speeches and confrontations with political opponents), detailing the tortuous journey leading to the ratification of women's suffrage in the Spanish Parliament.

These trial-like scenes allow heroes "to address the community with impassioned pleas for whatever it is they hold dear to their hearts" (Custen 1992, 186), and present a further opportunity for Campoamor to display her exceptional professional abilities. Though these are relatively long scenes that are rather heavy on rhetoric, Mañá counterbalances these aspects with a camera style reminiscent of television

news broadcasts, strongly immersive, dynamic and immediate, consisting of multiple brief medium shots and close-ups edited in quick succession. They include frequent reaction shots of MPs, the general public and Campoamor's relatives as she delivers her speeches, all of which helps to position the audience not just as witnesses, but also as participants in these historical events.

Additionally, and as Tom Brown observes in his analysis of the film *Amazing Grace* [Michael Apted, 2006] (another "talky" biopic, featuring a wealth of parliamentary procedure) there are "sincere pleasures of middlebrow style emerging from the 'cinematizing' of oratory" (Brown 2014, 125). For instance, the verbal exchanges between Campoamor and her opponents contain moments of wit and humor, and Campoamor/Mínguez possesses a rich, deep voice with a commanding and highly persuasive tone. Furthermore, Campoamor's speeches have been carefully adapted to be both accessible and substantial in content, thus providing intellectual pleasure in the act of reading and interpreting her message. Significantly, Campoamor's speeches are delivered mostly against a background of silence, a surprising choice for a film that relies heavily on its score to guide our emotional responses. Mañá seems to trust in the power of Campoamor's words to deliver the intended message without any need to add the conventional rousing score that customarily accompanies cinematic speech-giving (Fig. 7).

In contrast with the communal pleasures that audiences derive from the dramatization of Campoamor's final speech, in *While at War* the film's climax is staged as the ultimate face-off between two opposite and irreconcilable sides of an ideological spectrum, represented by the belligerent, empty rhetoric of Millán-



Fig. 7: Campoamor (Elvira Mínguez, standing on the right) delivers her final speech at the Parliament. *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* (Laura Mañá, 2011).



Fig. 8: Unamuno's (Karra Elejalde) intervention at the Paraninfo. *While at War* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2019).

Astray on one side and Unamuno's conciliatory, rational stance on the other.

The scene begins by reaffirming the discourse of obsolescence and passivity that marks the character of Unamuno for much of the second half of the film. Instead of walking, he is driven to the Paraninfo, an act that resembles the cart ride to the place of sacrifice so common in the iconography of martyrdom. Once they arrive at the Paraninfo, he sits down, barely noticing the speeches of various public officials, and ultimately decides to distract himself by folding a piece of paper into an origami figure. Throughout the film, we connect with Unamuno haptically through close-ups of him picking up, handling and touching pieces of blank paper. He is seen repeatedly folding them into origami figures, an activity that seems childish to those unfamiliar with the complexities of the art, but it is in fact a visible evidence of his intellectual prowess. But because this tool of his profession is deployed in unexpected ways, the act of writing, which occurs very rarely in the film, acquires an extraordinary significance in this final scene. As he folds back one of the corners, the paper is shown to contain the letter that the wife of Atilano Coco entrusted him in the hope that it would help with her husband's release. Amenábar then cuts to a zenith shot of Unamuno, who purposely turns the paper over onto its blank side and starts writing frantically. In literary biopics, these exaggerated gestures feature frequently in the depiction of the act of writing and serve to "encourage viewers to 'read' the act on screen melodramatically, as an external sign of an unfolding internal truth being made visible" (Haiduc 2020, 26). For Unamuno, this action signifies his final awakening, where the unfolded origami figure can be read as a symbol of his dismantled fantasy world. Finally, he stands, walks to the dais and delivers

a brief speech declaring his opposition to the Nationalist uprising and denouncing their message of national unity as dangerous propaganda. His words are met with hostile sounds from the audience, expressions of disbelief from the authorities, and Millán-Astray's accusation of treason.

Despite the cathartic release that Unamuno's intervention affords—the solitary voice of reason standing up against the faceless hordes of fundamentalism and Millán-Astray's discombobulated outburst—this moment of triumph belongs more to a narrative of martyrdom than to one of heroism. Unamuno is perfectly aware of the fact that he is committing professional suicide, and in that sense, he belongs to the extensive list of Amenábar's characters who cannot cope or overcome their traumas and who "find a remedy in self-annihilation via suicide" (Jordan 2012, 274). Paradoxically, this is also a moment for Unamuno to assert his freedom of choice. Looking back to Amenábar's earlier biopic *The Sea Inside*, the protagonist Ramón Sampedro finds in self-negation and suicide "a purpose and a meaning which he never found in life or in those around him and which made him a national celebrity" (Jordan 2012, 218). In the same way Sampedro's assisted suicide and his controversial recorded testament "helped transform the public debate over euthanasia," Unamuno hopes that his message of national unity will persuade those present of the futility of war. More importantly, he sees this trial-like setting as an opportunity to declare publicly his own version of the recent events and to distance himself and his philosophical ideas from the Nationalist ideology. Despite his inability to persuade the audience seated before him, this scene proves highly effective in perpetuating an image of Unamuno as a martyr for the cause of reason, dialogue and democracy (Fig. 8).

It is common for historical biopics to include intertitles explaining what happened to the characters after the events depicted in the film. In *While at War*, we are told that Unamuno was dismissed from the university and died two months later. This is followed by a further note explaining that in 1977, Spain held democratic elections once again. Instinctively, we establish a connection between Unamuno's final conciliatory speech and the act of national reconciliation that the first democratic elections seem to represent.

As ever, *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* is far more explicit when it comes to getting its message across. Alongside the factual data that Campoamor went into exile in 1936 and died in Switzerland in 1972, the final intertitles also mention the first democratic elections in 1977 "when no one questioned the right of women to vote," thus emphasizing Campoamor's pivotal role in the establishment of full democracy. One final note, however, reminds us of the biopic's selective view of history and of the teleological mode adopted in this film: "Elsewhere in the world, the approval of female suffrage rested on the efforts of thousands of women. In Spain, it was achieved by one woman speaking from her Parliamentary seat." Thus, the film concludes with an upward trajectory and the ultimate reminder of Campoamor's professional exceptionalism and commitment to her quest.

The historical biopic in Spain, towards new directions?

In his comprehensive study of the biopic genre, Dennis Bingham argues that female biopics are frequently dominated by a downward trajectory, and narratives of victimization and failure. He adds that these recurrent patterns in the female biopic "can be broken only by deliberate efforts to

rethink them and a definite desire to undo and rework them" (Bingham 2010, 222). Mañá does this by portraying Campoamor as the main agent of her personal and professional destiny. There are the customary conversations about marriage and relationships, but they are codified as a generational issue between Campoamor and her mother, rather than as a female issue. In my analysis of the film, I have shown how *mise en scène* and the adoption of a quest narrative are combined to present a portrayal of a credible character whose motivation is undoubtedly driven by professional ambition. I would argue that Mañá's feminist interventions on the genre can be compared with those of other directors of innovative female biopics such as Mary Harron and Sofia Coppola, who, "working within the framework of the facts, leave the subjects alone, basically, with us, allowing them to discover themselves as we learn about them" (Bingham 2010, 350). Although this celebratory portrayal of the character's exceptionalism positions this biopic closer to earlier, more traditional forms of the genre, the fact is that *Clara Campoamor, The Forgotten Woman* is an innovative biopic, precisely because it chooses to portray and commemorate female competence instead of the "tragic romance, decadence and ruin" that seem to be the trademark of biopics dealing with professional women (Vincendeau 2014, 183).

In its extensive use of the melodramatic formula and its tendency towards the hagiographic, *While at War* also shares a space with "the Hollywood biopic of the studio era, with its emphasis on the celebration of the 'Great Man' as a motor of history" (Vidal 2014, 4). Once again, it is in this connection with the old-fashioned celebratory formula that, paradoxically, *While at War* proves innovative, as it is an approach to the historical biopic that is rarely seen in the context of

Spanish cinema. In his analysis of Amenábar's oeuvre, Barry Jordan observes that the director "draws his inspiration mainly from classical Hollywood and more contemporary Anglo-American, independent sources," but also, "while his style might be strongly Anglo-American, his films seek to exploit, as well as to update and refashion, traditional genre formats" (Jordan 2012, 270). Since the release of his first successful transnational coproduction *The Others*, Amenábar considers that his "exceptional achievement of crossing over to Hollywood as no other Spanish director had done before" is an ongoing learning experience not only for him but also for the entire Spanish film industry (Kercher 2015, 212). It is perhaps this penchant for disruption and hybridization that guides Amenábar in "his often unusual, very personal, choice of subject matter" (Jordan 2012, 269) and also in his unusual treatment of the chosen topic. I have argued that by adopting the melodramatic conventions of the Hollywood biopic to narrate such an idiosyncratic moment in the history of contemporary Spain, Amenábar opens up the field to enable an examination of some lesser-known characters (i.e. Millán-Astray) and an uncommon portrayal of the better-known ones (Franco). Moreover, it forces viewers to reconsider the symbols of the nation, specifically the national flag. When asked about the flags that dominate the opening and closing shots of the film, Amenábar admits that he "fancied closing the film with a flag filling up the entire screen, in the way they do in American films." Whilst he concedes that it could be read as "una americanada," he argues that Spaniards should face the history behind those symbols, "which are the only ones that we have," and grow accustomed to its presence (Miró 2019). These two flags (the Republican red, yellow and purple in the opening

shot and the red and yellow one in the closing one) not only act as visual temporal markers, they also function as images "that metonymically reproduce the film's narrative content" (Epstein 2016, 312). On the one hand, they stand as references to the recurrent notion of the Two Spains, a concept that Unamuno himself explored in his 1917 novel *Abel Sánchez*. On the other, they hint at the more universal adage that those who forget their past are doomed to repeat it.

In the formal analysis of the film, I have also identified themes and motives that appear elsewhere in Amenábar's work. These similarities become especially relevant when we notice that his last four films are based on real events, and three of them (*The Sea Inside*, *Agora* [2009], and *While at War*) could qualify as biopics, with two of them dealing with Spanish issues and/or protagonists. Based on this considerable body of work, it could be argued that he is becoming a model for the genre within the Spanish film industry. Equally, Mañá's late career has been devoted to "rescuing figures, and momentous events in the history of feminism, of women and of humankind" (Zecchi 2014, 200). From the life of the Argentinian anarchist Virginia Bolten to the portrayals of Spanish writers and social activists Concepción Arenal, Clara Campoamor and Federica Montseny, Mañá emerges as a director of consensual biopics that play an important role in the memorialization of these historical characters and events. The director is currently working on another historical biopic featuring a female protagonist: a mini-series on the life of Neus Català, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps (de Dios 2021).

It might be naive to assume that the work of two directors could transform the fortunes of an entire genre, but in Amenábar's case, his career appears to be a succession of "experiments in

generic hybridity in order to create a personal auteur cinema” (Jordan 2012, 23). He has successfully applied this distinctive approach to genres such as the thriller (*Thesis* [Tesis, 1996]), the Gothic horror (*The Others*), as well as the biopic (*The Sea Inside*), so it is conceivable that other directors and producers will follow his lead. Mañá’s career, on the other hand, has been guided by a desire to insert the unsung heroes of feminism into the public discourse. In the biopic genre she has

found an effective tool to champion—using visual evidence and persuasive arguments—people whose lives are worthy of depiction. Whether it is by mobilizing the conventions of the Hollywood biopic to depict Spanish historical characters or through feminist interventions in the genre, it cannot be denied that Amenábar and Mañá are propelling the historical biopic in the Spanish context in new and unexpected directions.

1/ This was achieved through recasting historical characters (*St Teresa of Avila* [Teresa de Jesús, TVE 1, 1984]), reestablishing censored cultural icons (*Lorca, Death of a Poet* [Lorca muerte de un poeta, TVE1, 1987]), or simply by creating a contemporary legend (*El Lute: Run for your Life* [El Lute: camina o revienta], TVE 1, 1987)).

2/ Examples include Sira Hernández Corchete’s *La Guerra Civil televisada* (2012), Francisca López’s et al *Historias de la pequeña pantalla* (2009), and José Carlos Rueda Laffond and Carlota Coronado’s *La mirada televisiva* (2009).

3/ The list of nominations and winners during the last decade does however include a number of films inspired by real events, for instance *Living Is Easy with Eyes Closed* (*Vivir es fácil con los ojos cerrados*, David Trueba, 2013), *The Giant* (*Handia*, Aitor Arregi and Jon Garaño, 2018), and *The Endless Trench* (*La trinchera infinita*, Aitor Arregi, Jon Garaño and Jose Mari Goenaga, 2019).

4/ At that time, there was a sense that the image of these two historical figures was tainted by their association with Francoist propaganda. Their legacy has been reassessed in recent years and they now feature in two highly successful historical fiction television series: *Isabel* (RTVE, 2012–14) and *Charles, King and Emperor* (*Carlos. Rey emperador*, RTVE, 2015–16).

5/ A clear example of this trend is Netflix’s current offering of Spanish biopics which includes titles such as *Smoke and Mirrors* (*El hombre de las mil caras*, Alberto Rodríguez, 2016), *The Photographer of Mauthausen* (*El fotógrafo de Mauthausen*, Mar Targarona, 2018) and *Elisa & Marcela* (*Elisa y Marcela*, Isabel Coixet, 2019). All of these productions exhibit features that ensure transnational readability such as the use of the generic conventions of spy thrillers, love stories that appeal to niche audiences and references to historical events with an international appeal.

6/ In addition to *Clara Campoamor, the Forgotten Woman*, Mañá has directed three other television biopics with female protagonists: *Neither God, Nor Master or Husband* (*Ni Dios, ni patrón, ni marido*, 2010), *Concepción Arenal, the Prison Visitor* (*Concepción Arenal, la visitadora de cárceles*, 2012) and *Federica Montseny, the Woman who Speaks* (*Federica Montseny, la dona que parla*, 2021).

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