

# The Illusion of Distance and the Spectre of Proximity in the Films of Jorge Semprun

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## Abstract

*Historical and political films offer a unique perspective on the relationship between distance and proximity: based in chronological fact and accuracy, they bring that which is remote, past, or out-of-date back into the here-and-now of the present day. The films of Jorge Semprun are exemplary politico-historical films, reanimating rebellion, conflict and ideological differences from a broad European and 20<sup>th</sup> century perspective. While the visual reanimation of the past may appear to bring the events into the immediacy of the present, the viewing experience itself, complete with contemporary misunderstandings and misconceptions, only underlines the remoteness of the event. This paper explores how this juxtaposition of distance and proximity in politico-historical film reflects the position of Europe and of Semprun; symptomatic of the traumatic irresolution of history and memory. Ultimately, Semprun's films only show something which is there without ever really being there: haunted by spectres of proximity, ghosted by the illusion of distance.*

Key words: Film, Communism, Resnais, Semprun, French Studies, Hispanic Studies

My words can't tell you the simultaneously infinite and yet finite beach rolled out like an immense carpet of rosy sands. My words are colourless. Barley sonorous. What I can tell you, a painter would show you. I would like to break your heart with the magnificent calm of a beach safe from man. But I can't do it, I can only tell it. I can only tell the desire. But a painter would break your heart with the epiphany of the sea.

- Hélène Cixous

Jorge Semprun was born in Madrid in 1923 into a politically significant family: his father was a Republican governor, and his mother the daughter of a former Spanish prime minister. Following the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain, Semprun and his family were exiled first to the Netherlands and later to Paris, where he quickly adopted the French language. Joining the French Communist Resistance after the Nazis invaded France Semprun was eventually arrested in the winter of 1943. Deported to Buchenwald in Germany, Semprun was recruited for work by the largely Communist run *Arbeitsstatistik*, a role that he credits with the possibility of his survival. Upon liberation in April 1945, Semprun returned to Paris and spent the best part of the next two decades working clandestinely between France and Spain as part of the Spanish Communist Party fighting against Franco. Becoming disillusioned with Stalinist ideals in the late 50's and early 60's, Semprun was eventually expelled in 1964 for questioning the ideals and practices used by the party. Finally sitting down to write his experiences, he went on to publish profusely in French and occasionally in Spanish until his death in 2011.

His novels have received a growing amount of critical attention, but his films, for which he has been the scriptwriter alongside directors such as Alain Resnais, Josef Losey and Costa-Gavras, have been largely neglected. While his novels have been analysed for their anachronistic portrayal of time and their aesthetic fictionalisation of history, the same features of his films have been almost entirely overlooked and, while his narratives are often considered testimonial proof of the concentration camp experience, the same veracity is rarely attributed to his films.

This preference for his written works is somewhat surprising given that image is alleged to bring us closer to events, to make them more real, more identifiable and more immediate. Seen through language, sight appears to be the root of knowledge: the French verb 'voir' [to see] is found also in 'savoir' [to know], and 'pouvoir' [to be able to], and the German verbs 'schauen' and 'anschauen' meaning 'to look at' or 'to behold' lie at the root of 'Anschauung', 'an opinion' or 'mode of view' (Jay, 1993: 1). There is a truth and a concrete proof attributed to image that seems to demonstrate a proximity to the depicted events themselves. Indeed, upon witnessing filmed cinematographic images of Buchenwald, Semprun remarks:

Les images [...] acquéraient une dimension de réalité [...] à laquelle mes souvenirs eux-mêmes n'atteignaient pas [...] je me voyais ramené à la réalité. Tout avait été vrai, donc tout continuait de l'être: rien n'avait été un rêve (Semprun, 1994: 261).

[The images [...] acquired a dimension of reality [...] which my own memories had not achieved [...] I was brought back to reality. Everything had been real, and so everything continued to be real: nothing had been a dream.] (All translations from French my own unless otherwise stated.)

Images mark the truth and the veracity of the events, yet Semprun's novels never use photographic evidence, and his films too never use genuine images of political or historical events, despite their heavy debt to certain events in history and European politics. Inverting the typical approach to historical and political events, Semprun's films juxtapose assumed proximity through image with an intentional distance of unattainability, allowing for a re-evaluation of the use of image and film in the portrayal of historical fact and biography.

There are three films that should be considered: *La Guerre est finie* and *Stavisky*, both directed by Alain Resnais and sharing a similar style to many of Resnais' other films, and *Z*, directed by Costa-Gavras. All three were released in quick succession, in 1966, 1974, and 1969 respectively.

*La Guerre est finie* is set over four days in April 1965, and depicts Diego, also known as Domingo and Carlos, an exiled Spanish communist living in France who works for the communist underground. Amid sexual encounters, Diego learns of the party leaders' plans to call a general strike but, knowing that comrades are being rounded-up and arrested by Franco's police, realises a strike will only prove futile and self-destructive. The film demonstrates Diego's internal conflict between his 'out of touch' party elders and a new group of anarchic young students, hell bent on terrorism to garner attention. The focus of the film comes to rest on Juan, a comrade who is never present in the film, but who remains in Madrid and risks arrest. The film ends with Diego returning to Spain from Paris in order to ensure the safe return of his friend.

The plot of *Stavisky* is based on the life of Serge Alexandre Stavisky, known also as *le beau Sacha*, and the events that take place between 24 July 1933 and his suicide – or murder – on 8 January 1934. A French-Jewish financier of Russian origin, Stavisky was a womaniser, a fraudster, and a charmer – the latter meaning he usually got away with the first two. The film shows his last fraudulent venture, selling fake *bons de Bayonne* and the uncovering of this plot that leads to his death and the unravelling of the French state.

*Z* is based on the real-life murder of deputy Gregorios Lambrakis, a charismatic socialist member of the Greek parliament killed in 1963 by thugs associated with the police of the city of Thessaloniki. In the film, the murder and the elaborate cover-up by the authorities are all haphazardly brought to light by an interfering photojournalist looking for a story, and a determined magistrate trusted by the regime. Instead, the law official exposes the government and, while justice is done and the regime falls, it is replaced by an oppressive military junta. The closing credits display a rolling list of all the things banned under new rule.

Despite the obvious historical roots of these three films, they all offer ambiguity and a means of distorting our assumed view of history. The title of *La Guerre est finie* is itself taken from the name of Franco's famous document declaring, on April 1 1939, that the civil war was over, and the script clearly marks specific dates and times, adding to the perceived factuality of the film. Moreover, the biography of the scriptwriter, Semprun, reflected almost exactly in the character of Diego, should allow the audience to immediately identify the accuracy and truth of the events in the film.

Yet the film is arguably not truly about any of these events: the central narrative of the film is not about Diego/Semprun's disillusionment with Communism, nor about Franco, nor even about the uprising of anarchic youth and terrorism. The central plot of the film is instead dedicated to women and to sex: the young impulsive Nadine, herself part of the student movement inciting the use of explosives, and Marianne, a long term partner who wants Diego to leave the party so that the two can live together happily without him constantly disappearing abroad.

Arguably, politics and history become more easily relatable if depicted as sexual relationships. Several years earlier, in 1959, Resnais collaborated with Marguerite Duras on the project *Hiroshima mon amour*. Of her script for the film, and its questionable title, Duras famously said that it was: 'Impossible de parler de Hiroshima. Tout ce qu'on peut faire, c'est de parler de l'impossibilité de parler de Hiroshima' (Duras, 1960: 10). [It is impossible to speak about Hiroshima. All that we can do is speak about the impossibility of speaking about Hiroshima.] In other words, Duras and Resnais made a film that wasn't about Hiroshima; that merely used the atomic bomb as a background to the events that would unfold. The unrepresentable catastrophe of the atomic bomb is realised and transferred to the narratable and understandable loss of first love through the relationship between 'Lui' and 'Elle'.

In *La Guerre est finie*, Semprun and Resnais do the same thing. Concentrating the script just to one side of the political battles being waged between Communism and Fascism and between Stalinism and new anarchy, the political situations become emotional and understandable. What appears initially as a distancing from the event: that is, a film that is *not* about Franco, a film that is *not* about Communism, is actually a means of creating proximity through emotion and sentimental attachment between the protagonists and the audience.

Yet *La Guerre est finie* ends on an inconclusive ambiguity that inverts this assumed proximity. As Diego returns to Spain to try and warn Juan, the party learns that Diego too is in danger of arrest. Recruiting Marianne, she follows Diego to Spain in order to warn him of this new threat. The film closes as we see Marianne's face merge with that of Diego, and the camera vacillates between the two, as she appears to run towards him. There are unanswered questions: will Marianne get there in time? Will Diego and Juan return safely? Will the students go ahead with their terrorist plans? Will Diego ever leave the Party?

Ending on a similar shot to that which opens the film – Diego in a car, attempting to cross the border – the film becomes clearly cyclical, evoking a constant repetition, and linking the beginning to the end and back again. What we assume as proximity generally gained by the conclusion of most films is now cast out into the future, unattainable. The end is transposed to become the beginning and creates further distance at the very point where we should have gained proximity.

Indeed, some of the final words of the film, 'qu'ils reviennent' [that they return] elaborate this spectral play on temporality (Resnais, 1966).<sup>1</sup> Jacques

Derrida claimed that *revenants* should perhaps be named *arrivants*, and his work focusses on the theory that ghosts do not come from the past but from the future; waiting to 'come or come back; in the future' (Derrida, 1994: 39). This closing line inherently implicates the future, and the inconclusion that is only resolved by the opening of the film, a constant eternal cycle of clandestine voyage, never achieving any solution; a haunting reminder of successive political situations in Europe.

Eight years later, Semprun and Resnais' next collaboration perhaps even more obviously demonstrates the possibility of spectral futurity and of distance at the point of perceived proximity. Certainly, the two once again set up the precedent of personal relationships as the demonstration of political turmoil. Despite his womanising, Stavisky's relationship with Arlette seems to be the focal point of the film and of his life, as Baron Raoul claims at the end of the film: 'le seul vrai secrète d'Alexandre, c'était elle, c'était Arlette' (Semprun, 1974: 189). [Alexandre's only true secret was her: Arlette.]

However the whole film sets itself as 'the beginning of the end'. While it ends with the death of Stavisky, the famous scandal that bears his name was only just beginning. As Frederick Busi writes: 'Whatever the multiple causes of France's decline were, one thing is certain: the country began to break apart in 1934. The Stavisky affair was the agent of that deterioration' (Busi, 1975: 806). As the narrative ends, the Baron Raoul laments: 'Je l'ai compris trop tard, mais Stavisky nous annonçait la mort... Pas seulement la sienne, pas seulement celle des journées de février: la mort d'une époque' (Semprun, 1974: 190). [I realised too late, but Stavisky predicted death... Not only his own, not only the crisis of February, but the death of an era.]

Writing a film that would only ever implicate events that were still-to-come, Semprun clearly demonstrates the anticipation of the future. Indeed, the circularity seen in *La Guerre est finie* and the open-ended conclusion offered by the famous story of the downfall of France, beginning with the death of Stavisky, refuse the closing off of the past from the present, allowing a complete disintegration of the past, present and future into one film.

Z too achieves a sense of inconclusion and an anticipated unattainable future through the death of the politician and eventually through the uprising of the military state. As the journalist says to Hélène, the protagonist's widow, as they see a group of young activists paint the letter 'Z' outside her window: 'Ça ne fait que commencer' [It's only just beginning]: the politician's death is only the beginning of the movement (Costa-Gavras, 1969).<sup>2</sup>

In the final minutes of the film, as we learn the fate of the generals from the journalist, his voice is eventually replaced by that of an anonymous woman, who informs us too of the journalist's arrest and imprisonment. The original assassination proves to have an ever widening circle of influence and the voice-over continues to tell the viewer of the oppressive measures brought in by the successive regime. The film once again demonstrates the end as only the beginning of the end, with a rolling screen listing what has been banned by the new military rule: long hair, miniskirts, The Beatles, Tolstoy, freedom of speech,

Beckett, music, maths, and 'la lettre "Z", qui veut dire "il est vivant" en grek ancienne' (Costa-Gavras, 1969). [And the letter "Z" which means "he is alive" in ancient Greek.]

There is an inherent futility to Semprun's films, an inevitability of repetition and a refusal of progression. Yet this claustrophobic entrapment is an intentional feature of these films. Indeed, the creation of a topically accurate and hard-line political affinity would encourage rapid degeneration into dated irrelevance, and *Z*, more than any other of these films, purposefully refuses any alignment with verifiable historical accuracy.

While certain characteristics of the film allow for the assumption that it is set in Greece, the contemporary Greek political situation forced filming to take place in Algeria. The main language of the film is French, while certain references and in particular the music still refer back to Greece. There are obvious links to anti-Semitic states such as Nazi Germany, and also to Spain's Franco regime, Mussolini's Italy, and Stalin's Communist Soviet Union. Semprun's script gives no dates, and yet the film's opening credits are punctuated by the on-screen words: 'Toute ressemblance avec des événements reels, des personnes mortes ou vivantes n'est pas le fait du hasard. Elle est VOLONTAIRE' (Costa-Gavras, 1969). [Any similarity to actual persons or events is not an accident. It is DELIBERATE.] [Capitals in original.]

But exactly who or what is supposed to be referred to or remembered is never explicitly relayed to the viewer. Indeed, this level of cinematic ambiguity suggests a complete lack of relevance to true history or politics, and serves to distance the viewer from the events in the film since we do not know what these events are. Yet, this factual uncertainty allows Semprun to hold the film open to future interpretation. Rather than attempt to convey one specific event in history, Semprun and Costa-Gavras instead choose to convey an assortment of ideas and conflicts, in order for the audience to apply their own political or historical agenda, and make the film entirely relevant to them. Unlike *La Guerre est finie* and *Stavisky*, in which the filming takes place just to one side of the political agenda, here the political and historical event is entirely missed, allowing for its constant reinterpretation and revision over time. This re/vision; both a re-seeing and a re-making, enables *Z* to remain relevant over time.

Yet these films offer even more: the unattainability and futility of conclusion in Semprun's cinematographic works demonstrates his concern with the eventual forgetting of Europe's political and historical past, and the possible constant repetition of its failures. Remembering and forgetting are inherently entwined with one another, and Semprun knows this. In conversation with Elie Wiesel in 1995, he claimed:

[P]lus j'écris, plus la mémoire me revient. C'est-à-dire qu'après ce dernier livre, j'ai encore plus de choses à dire qu'avant de commencer le premier. [...] De là ma théorie que c'est une écriture inépuisable, à la fois impossible et inépuisable. On ne peut pas dire, mais on n'aura jamais tout dit. On peut dire à chaque fois davantage. (Semprun and Wiesel, 1995: 18).

[[T]he more I write, the more my memory returns. In other words, even as I finished my last book, I still had more to say than before beginning the first [...] Hence my theory that the process of writing is inexhaustible, at the same time impossible and inexhaustible. We cannot say it, but we will never have said it all. Each time there is more to say.]

Forgetting can only take place at the moment of complete remembering. Semprun and Resnais, and Semprun and Costa-Gavras, attempt to overcome the inevitability of forgetting by preventing the realisation of something that can ever be fully remembered and therefore that can ever be fully forgotten.

All of Semprun's films are spectral, that is, never fully absent nor fully present. They convey bits of the story, some of the facts, some of the emotion, but always stop short of conclusion or catharsis. By refusing to fully construct the past, Semprun creates a sense of expectation, of futurity, of waiting for something to arrive, to come or come back from the future: refusing the possibility of remembering, Semprun enables the denial of forgetting.

The binary between distance and proximity never truly exists in these films, dissolving through the spectral dismemberment caused by constant repetition and inconclusion. Juxtaposing both distance and proximity through the assumed proximity of image and the implied distance of the events, these films remain entirely open, hinting at the past, at the events, and at the truth behind them, but never fully allowing for them to be seen or understood. Preventing the present from ever being truly present, the viewer is left with questions; and the answers, just like ghosts, cannot be seen, and so we continue to look for them.

## Endnotes

- 1 All citations from *La Guerre est finie* are direct transcriptions from the film.
- 2 All citations from *Z* are direct transcriptions from the film.

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### **Biography**

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