



MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO VS. ALEJANDRO AMENÁBAR

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After two box office successes, [The Sea Inside](#) and [The Others](#), followed by two commercial failures, [Agora](#) and [Regression](#), and a series of advertising films, notably for La Loteria Nacional, the Spanish director of Chilean origin, [Alejandro Amenábar](#), returns in cinematographic news with a feature film about the start of the Spanish Civil War. [While at War](#) (in French release, [Letter to Franco](#)), is a film well put together and remarkably well-served by the performance of the main actor, [Karra Elejalde](#), but whose crippling defect is to claim to be based on works of serious historians when it is pure fiction.

Centered on the figure of [Miguel de Unamuno](#) (1864-1936), an illustrious Basque-Spanish philosopher, linguist, poet and playwright of the Generation of 98, whom some consider to be the most significant Spanish intellectual of the turn of the 20th century, the film strives to show that the rector of the University of Salamanca was unable to understand the military coup of July 18, 1936 correctly, that he lacked foresight, and that he did not understand the real intentions of the insurgents.

According to Amenábar, Unamuno was saved *in extremis* for posterity, thanks to his late realization and then enormous courage during the critical speech against the national camp given at the [Paraninfo](#) (large amphitheater) of the University of Salamanca, in front of [Brigadier-General Millán-Astray](#), the famed founder of the [Spanish Foreign Legion](#), a war cripple (one-eyed, one-armed and lame), and a luminary among university and military officials.

The incident occurred on October 12, 1936, Columbus Day, or [Día de la Raza](#) (a day marking "Hispanity"), a holiday that commemorates the discovery of America and the birth of the new cultural identity born from the fusion of indigenous peoples of the New World and peoples of Spain. Miguel de Unamuno was, it should be remembered, the first author to suggest using the word "Hispanity" (Hispanitatem) in an article entitled, ["Sobre la argentinidad"](#), published by *La Nación de Buenos Aires*, March 11, 1910.

The highlight of the film is obviously the mythical version of the incident when the philosopher and the general met. Amenábar largely, if not almost exclusively, bases his view on the [Biography of Miguel de Unamuno](#) that the French Hispanists, Colette and Jean-Claude Rabaté, published in 2009 at Taurus (a publishing house which is part of the Santillana Group, itself close to the newspaper [El País](#), one of the most loyal supporters of the [PSOE](#) governments).

From their account of Unamuno's speech, Amenábar retains, adds or moves a few sentences, no doubt in the name of artistic freedom. According to the two French Hispanists on whose work the film is

based, Unamuno declared on this occasion: "We talked about international war in defense of Western Christian civilization; a civilization that I have defended myself on many occasions. But today it is only an 'uncivil' war ... (between the supporters of fascism and bolshevism, Amenábar here adds)."

Directly referring to the words of one of the speakers, the professor of literature, Francisco Maldonado, Unamuno also said: "I take it personally when it is assumed that the explosion against the Basque and Catalans qualifies as anti -Spain; with such reasoning they could also say the same thing about us... Spain is nothing more than a madhouse."

Foaming with rage, in particular after Unamuno's allusion to the Filipino national hero, [José Rizal](#), against whom General Millán-Astray had fought in his youth, the founder of the Spanish Legion ([Tercio de Extranjeros](#)) got up, shouting "Long live death! Death to intellectuals!"

And, ever-unflappable, the old philosopher replied at once: "Here, it is the temple of intelligence and I am its high priest. You desecrate this sacred place. You may win because you have the necessary brute force, but you will not win. To convince, you have to persuade, and to persuade you need something you don't have for the fight: reason and being right... I have said what I came to say!"

This admirable and courageous speech in the film, however, is pure literary invention. Obviously, Amenábar did not bother to read a small footnote included in the book by Rabatés, which says the following: "There is no written or engraved record of this famous exchange. We took the liberty of reconstructing Unamuno's possible speech from notes scribbled by him."

The primary source is about thirty words feverishly penciled by the philosopher on the back of an envelope: "international war; western Christian civilization, independence, overcoming and convincing, hatred and compassion, Rice Rizal, concave and convex, struggle, unity, Catalans and Basques, language imperialism, hate intelligence which is critical, which is examination and differentiation, investigative curiosity and not being inquisitive."

If Amenábar had been more rigorous and better informed, he would have compared the mythical version with the most balanced testimonies of the academic personalities then present. There could also have been a warning before the credits. The personalities present in the audience, such as the writer, [José Maria Pemán](#); the deputy of the Republic, future Minister of Education of Franco, [Pedro](#)

[Sainz Rodríguez](#); the jurist and political theorist, [Eugenio Vegas Latapié](#); the psychiatrist, [José Pérez-López Villami](#); and the vice-rector, [Esteban Madruga](#), along with the writers, journalists and historians, well-known throughout Spain, such as, [Emilio Salcedo](#), [Ximénez de Sandoval](#), [Victor Ruiz de Albéniz](#), [Alfonso Lazo](#), [Luis E. Togores](#) and [Guillermo Rocafort](#), to name a few. All of them stressed the fallacious character of the remarks put in the mouth of Unamuno.

But it is even more regrettable that Amenábar did not deem it useful to refer to the final works of the librarian of the University of Salamanca, [Severiano Delgado Cruz](#), published in 2019, under the title, [Arqueología de un mito: el acto del 12 October in el paraninfo de la Universidad de Salamanca](#). And all the more so since the main Spanish media (including the newspapers *ABC* and *El País* in their editions of May 7-8 and May 27, 2018) have largely echoed the filmmaker.

At the end of a long and patient research, Severiano Delgado Cruz was able to clearly affirm that Millán-Astray never said, "Death to the intellectuals" – but rather, "*Muera la intelectualidad traidora*" (Death to traitorous intellectualism) and that Miguel de Unamuno, who focused his brief speech on compassion, did not answer him in such an indignant and haughty tone.

It was, according to Delgado, a mundane exchange, followed by the usual uproar that accompanied speeches of the 1930s during which people were easily fired up. There was no solemn retort or arms brandished to threaten the rector. "The meeting was dissolved in the midst of shouts and bluster." Nor were there "the cries of harsh severity" of Francoism, such as, "*Arriba España*," ("Spain over all"), "*España, grande*" (Greater Spain), and "*España, libre*" (Free Spain). Millán-Astray asked the old professor to go out on Madame Franco's arm (and not by taking her hand as in the film).

The philosopher and [Carmen Polo Franco](#), accompanied by [Mgr Pla y Deniel](#), Bishop of Salamanca, and three soldiers from the general's personal guard, then headed for the door. Before getting into the official car, in which Madame Franco was already seated, Unamuno shook hands with Millán-Astray and the two men took leave of one another. (A [photo published](#) in *El Adelanto de Salamanca* dated of October 13, 1936 attests to this fact).

It also appears that Unamuno did not attach any particular importance to this incident because he did not change his routine. As usual, after his meal, he went to the "Casino" for coffee. And it was then that members and adherents of this cultural club – civilians and not soldiers – insulted and booed him.

The legend of the "Paraninfo Incident" came into being, as Delgado demonstrates, in 1941, when Luis Portillo wrote a fictional narrative entitled, "[Unamuno's Last Lecture](#)," for the London magazine, *Horizons*. This young teacher from Salamanca, who was employed by the BBC, had worked in Valencia on behalf of the Information Office of the Government of the Spanish Republic.

In his literary recreation, Portillo voluntarily emphasized Millán-Astray's brutality towards Unamuno, extolling the dignified and courageous attitude of the intellectual, who dared to oppose the infamous military leader. But the myth did not really take hold until later, when Portillo's account was taken up, uncritically, by historian, [Hugh Thomas](#), in his world-famous book, *[The Spanish Civil War](#) / La guerre de Espagne* (1961).

Unamuno's enormous international prestige protected him from any repressive or coercive measures. But the brief quarrel was not without consequences. The Municipal Corporation of Salamanca met the same day to propose that his duties as a municipal councillor be terminated. On October 16, the Governing Council of the University of Salamanca asked for his dismissal from the rectorate. General Franco announced his dismissal on October 22.

Ironically, Unamuno had also been successively dismissed from the vice-rectorate for antimonarchism and insults to the king in 1924, then appointed rector by the Republic, then dismissed again by the Popular Front government for joining the national uprising (this was the purge of university professors ordered by the decree of 23 August 1936 by Manuel Azaña) – and then finally he was quickly reappointed by the National Defense Committee, but again dismissed on October 16.

The institutional vacuum having been created around him, Unamuno, whose precarious health became increasingly shaky, then lived on as a recluse, until his death on December 31, 1936, at the age of 72.

At the end of the film, Amenábar suggests that after his acquiescence, even his "redemption," the old philosopher at last and finally distanced himself from the National Movement, fiercely criticizing the actions of the military and their right-wing civilian supporters. But Amenábar's expeditious conclusion has nothing to do with historical truth.

The initial enthusiasm of Unamuno for the insurgent camp clearly cooled in the light of information that reached him about the repression exerted in the rear-guard, which was ultimately quite similar to that

which occurred in the camp of the Popular Front. Especially since close friends, like [Casto Prieto](#), Republican mayor of Salamanca; [José Manso](#), Socialist deputy; or [Atilano Coco](#), Protestant pastor and mason, had been victims.

But that said, with a spirit that was free, independent, stubborn, rebellious, fond of justice and reason, eager to reconcile progress with the best of tradition, Unamuno continued to oppose, head-on, the government of the Popular Front (and not to the Republic). He criticized very severely the extrajudicial executions of the two camps, the curse of *los (h)unos y los (h)otros* (the Huns and the [H]others, i.e., both sides), the lack of compassion of the parties of the Right.

But, contrary to what Amenábar suggests, Unamuno supported, justified and legitimized the National uprising until his death. His interviews, letters and other documents after October 12, 1936 leave no room for doubt (see in particular the interviews with [Jérôme Tharaud](#) and [Katzantzakis](#) on October 20 and 21; then with [Norenzo Giusso](#), on November 21; the letter to his translator, Maria Garelli, on November 21; the interview with [Armando Boaventura](#) at the end of December; or, the last lines of *El resentimiento trágico de la vida* (the *Tragic Bitterness of Life*), written three days before his death, which are notes that should not be confused with his famous book, *Tragic Sense of Life*).

The press favorable to the Popular Front poured out torrents of insults against Unamuno. He was for them the “mad, bilious, cynical, inhuman, mean, impostor, and great traitor,” and even, the “spiritual inspirer of fascism.” The question was nevertheless perfectly clear to the old rector – it was “a struggle between civilization and anarchy... not a war between liberalism and fascism, but between Christian civilization and anarchy. What has to be saved in Spain is Western Christian civilization and national independence.”

Shortly before dying, he described “the red hordes” as “pathological phenomena, criminals and former criminals,” as “ferocious beasts,” who conspired “the barbarity of the Popular Front.” He said, “Franco is a good man and a great general.” He prophesied, “internal or external exile which awaited many intelligent and pure-hearted Spaniards.” And he admitted “his discouragement... I am disgusted with being a man.”

He went on to explain: “In this critical moment of suffering in Spain, I know that I must follow the soldiers. They are the only ones who will bring us order... I have not turned into a Rightist. Pay no attention to what is said. I have not betrayed the cause of freedom. But for the moment, it is absolutely

essential that order be restored. After that, I can quickly rise up and get back into the fight for freedom. No, no, I am neither fascist nor Bolshevik. I am a loner."

There are so many other errors or untruths in *While at War*, which deserve to be corrected. Here are some of the more egregious:

1. The red and gold flag of the Spanish monarchy is associated with "fascism," while the red, yellow and purple flag of the Republic is associated with "democracy." In reality, in Salamanca, as in most regions of Spain, the insurgents left the barracks waving the tricolor of the Republic (except in Pamplona and Vitoria). The red and yellow flag became the official flag of the National zone only later, under decisive pressure from monarchical, [Carlist](#) and [Alphonsine](#) circles, and by decree of the National Defense Council of August 29, 1936.
2. At the start of the film, an officer declares a state of war "with the help of God" which is quite incredible. In the National camp, the combat did not initially have its religious character of a crusade. That only happened after the failed military coup, when civilians mobilized on both sides, and transformed the into a civil war.
3. Millán-Astray praises a Franco who is supposed to have had the luck to dodge all bullets during the African campaign. That is just ridiculous and grossly ignorant. Franco was seriously injured in the abdomen during a bayonet charge in June 1916. He was picked up from the ground and saved by a Moroccan soldier from corps of "regulars;" and for several days, his death was considered almost certain by his comrades in arms. Astray, who was a hothead and a fanatical patriot, was probably not as uneducated as they say. He wrote the prologue to the Spanish edition of Inazo Nitobé's *Bushido* and collected most of the essential samurai precepts to write a code of the legionnaires.
4. It is not clear if Unamuno gave 5,000 pesetas to finance the coup. The question is not clear.
5. At Paraninfo, Unamuno was not seated at the far right of the conference table but in the center because he presided over the gathering as rector with Madame Franco and the Catalan bishop on his right and Pla y Deniel to his left.
6. It was not the daughters of Unamuno who were present in the large amphitheater but his son, Rafael.
7. The ambiguity of the connection between the Falangists and Unamuno is completely overlooked. The Falangists, rightly or wrongly, believed that the regenerationist theses of Unamuno were close to their own ideas. But the film prefers to emphasize the confrontations between members of the Falange and Unamuno, rather than to show the subtle connections that existed between them. Unamuno severely criticized the "fascism" of the National Trade Unionists or Falangistas

and their repressive actions during the Spanish Civil War. Nevertheless, he always held in high esteem the head and founder of the Falange, [José Antonio Primo de Rivera](#), who was then incarcerated in Alicante (whom he called "a privileged brain; may be the most promising in contemporary Europe," in a letter to [Lisandro de la Torre](#), August 1936). On February 10, 1935, Unamuno even received José Antonio at his home and went with him to that celebrated Falangist meeting held the same day in Salamanca. Some authors are also of the opinion that the controversies raised by this assistance caused him to be deprived of the Nobel Prize for literature the following year. On December 31, 1936, a young Falangist, [Bartolomé Aragon](#), while visiting the old master, received his last words, his last sigh and who then informed the family of his death. It was also a Falangist intellectual, [Victor de la Serna](#), who organized the funeral vigil at the University's Paraninfo (because, despite his dismissal, Unamuno was considered by them to have died in the exercise of his office). Finally, during the burial, the coffin was carried by four Falangists.

I understand that these facts are embarrassing for the image of the philosopher that Amenábar wants to give. The filmmaker is convinced that the Spanish Civil War can be reduced to the Democrats' struggle against fascism, to the people's struggle against the army, the church and the bank – an interpretation which, after all, is not very different from that of the Komintern of the 1930s. Everyone is of course free to have their opinions.

But was the Spanish Popular Front really democratic? Therein lies the heart of the problem. In truth, in Spain in 1936, no one believed in liberal democracy. And certainly not the Lefts. The revolutionary myth, which was shared by the entire Left, was that of the armed struggle. Liberal democracy was seen by the Bolshevized Socialist Party (whose leader, [Largo Caballero](#), was the "Spanish Lenin" for the socialist youth), by the Communist Party and by the Anarchists, only as a means to achieve their ends – "popular democracy," or the socialist state. The liberal-Jacobin Left, secularist, dogmatic and sectarian, dominated by the personality of [Manuel Azaña](#), had engaged in the Socialist uprising of October 1934 (against the government of the radical [Alejandro Lerroux](#), whose moderate party was supported by the a large number of Freemasons) – and it did not believe in democracy either.

It is not surprising therefore that the most prestigious Spanish intellectuals of the time, liberals and democrats, such as, [Gregorio Marañón](#), [José Ortega y Gasset](#) and [Ramón Pérez de Ayala](#), the "founding fathers of the Republic," who had founded, in 1931, the "Agrupación al servicio de la República" (a group of intellectuals who defended the Republic), rallied, like Unamuno, to the cause of the National camp.

In conclusion, being a supporter of a politically correct globalism, representative of a technically successful cinema but always more predictable and more conformist, Amenábar declared, during the presentation of his film, that he also wanted to refer to the present and call the attention of the viewers to the dangers of the resurgence of extremism, fascism and populism.

I bet that Miguel de Unamuno, both Basque and Spanish, a Christian philosopher, a liberal, democrat and a man with a big heart, would have called for more measure, nuance, rationality and mutual respect. He could thus have given Amenábar a few lines from his Tragic Sense of Life: "Every individual in a people who conspires to break the spiritual unity and continuity of that people tends to destroy it and to destroy himself as a part of that people... for me the becoming other than I am, the breaking of the unity and continuity of my life, is to cease to be he who I am—that is to say, it is simply to cease to be. And that—no! Anything rather than that!"

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Translated from the French by N. Dass.

The [image](#) shows, "Don Miguel de Unamuno (with a View of Salamanca), by J. Solana, painted ca. 1935-1936.

