

## BOOK REVIEW

# *European Civil War Films: Memory, Conflict, and Nostalgia*

by Rania-Eleftheria Kosmidou

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Rania-Eleftheria Kosmidou's *European Civil War Films: Memory, Conflict, and Nostalgia*, published in September 2013, is a welcome addition to an increasing and much-needed output of monographs and anthologies, which center on the European film arena. Kosmidou's book – part of the series Routledge Advances in Film Studies – joins a significant group of titles, such as Daniela Berghahn's *Far-Flung Families in Film: The Diasporic Family in Contemporary European Cinema* (2013), Vangelis Calotychos's *The Balkan Prospect: Identity, Culture, and Politics in Greece after 1989* (2013), Gordana P. Crnkovic's *Post-Yugoslav Literature and Film: Fires, Foundations, Flourishes* (2012), and Matthew Evangelista's *Gender, Nationalism, and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen* (2011). These titles provide an indication of an academic turn towards the analysis of European films, and especially contemporary narratives, that mainly deal with conflict and post-conflict eras, trauma, and national identity.

In particular, *European Civil War Films* is placed in a cluster of titles that examine the representations of civil conflicts within the continent. Books such as David Archibald's *The War That Won't Die: The Spanish Civil War in Cinema* (2012), Mercedes Maroto Camino's *Film, Memory and the Legacy of the Spanish Civil War: Resistance and Guerrilla 1936-2010* (2011), Peter Mahon's *Violence, Politics and Textual Interventions in Northern Ireland* (2010), and Daniel J. Goulding's *Liberated Cinema, Revised and Expanded Edition: The Yugoslav Experience, 1945-2001* (2003) take an interdisciplinary approach in studying significant moments in European history and their cinematic depictions. Although the Spanish and the

Irish Civil Wars constitute the subject of many scholarly efforts, it seems that the Anglophone literature on the filmic representation of the Yugoslav wars and especially the Greek Civil War is still limited. Therefore, the publication of Kosmidou's study, which focuses on four civil conflicts (in Spain, Ireland, Former Yugoslavia and Greece), can be considered as a desirable addition to the existing literature.

Although it is not mentioned in the publication, a brief Internet research shows that Kosmidou's book must be a re-working of her 2010 Ph.D. thesis, entitled "Conflict, remembering and forgetting Civil Wars and memories in post-1989 European cinema," submitted to the School of Languages, Literatures & Film, at the University College Dublin. As such, the monograph benefits from treating a non-exhausted subject (in this case, the contemporary cinematic representation of four, specifically chosen, European Civil Wars), a sound methodology and theoretical anchoring, and the approval of a distinguished academic committee. On the other hand, a small number of dissertation traits which are present in the book version, namely the "isolation" of the theory from the analysis, the introduction of each section at the end of the previous one, frequent repetitions, and a language that betrays its post-graduate origins, interrupt the flow of the arguments at times. However, these are minor oversights that accompany almost every Ph.D. thesis that found its way to a wide readership and do not diminish the value of the monograph.

*European Civil War Films: Memory, Conflict, and Nostalgia* consists of 153 pages, divided into seven chapters: Chapter 1 is a brief Introduction, 2 is a theoretical contextualization on memory and postmemory, Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 examine specific film narratives in the context of the Spanish Civil War, the Irish Civil War, the Former Yugoslavian Civil War, and the Greek Civil War respectively, and Chapter 7 includes the author's concluding observations.

Given that the four-page Introduction is also the book's Chapter 1, and in essence presents the topic and the aforementioned outline, I consider Chapter 2, entitled "Collective and Cultural Memory and their Limitations: Postmemory and Cinematic Modes of Representation," as the first part of the monograph. In it, Kosmidou discusses the theoretical tools that assist the analysis of the films. The author theorizes the concepts of collective and cultural memory, and postmemory while also examining nostalgia, allegory, melodrama, the carnivalesque, and the gaze as "decisive modes of representation," which she applies to the film analysis in the ensuing chapters. The presentation of the above theoretical concepts is succinct and well-researched; yet, in less than fifteen pages, it is quite difficult to present an in-depth discussion of the various aspects of memory theory, not to mention the author's chosen "modes of representation."

Chapter 3 focuses on the Spanish Civil War through its representation in three films of the 1990s; two Spanish productions (*Belle Époque*, [Trueba, 1992] and *Butterfly's Tongue*, [Cuerda, 1995]), and the UK/Spanish/German/Italian co-production *Land and Freedom* (Loach, 1995). Chapter 4 examines *Michael Collins* (Jordan, 1996) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Loach, 2006) and the ways the narratives negotiate the Irish Civil War. Chapter 5 studies the Former Yugoslavian Civil War through its representation in *No Man's Land* (Tanović, 2001) and *Underground* (Kusturica, 1995), while Chapter 6 concentrates on the Greek Civil War and *The Travelling Players* (Angelopoulos, 1975). Each of these four sections follow the same structure; after a brief introduction, the author presents the historical background of each conflict and provides the reader with information on the political and social reasons that led to the hostilities, and the resulting impact the Civil War had on the people of each country. The brief historical contextualization the author provides is necessary and instructive for the reader that may not be as acquainted with the details of the political history of Spain, Former Yugoslavia, Ireland or Greece during specific time periods. In addition, this historical background enriches the film analysis that ensues having shed light to both major and more obscure events, and key players.

The study of the films in each unit takes the form of brief sub-sections that examine the theoretical issues put forward in the introduction. The films that center on the Spanish Civil War in Chapter 3, *Belle Époque*, *Butterfly's Tongue*, and *Land and Freedom* are examined through the main prisms of nostalgia, gender, postmemory, and the carnivalesque. Despite the shortness of the sub-chapters which by definition limit meticulous analysis, Kosmidou's cinematic examples are to the point and reveal sound use of methodology and theory. The concluding remarks underline the three filmmakers' common stance regarding the Spanish Civil War and link the represented events to the sociopolitical situation in Spain during the production of these narratives. In this way, the author demonstrates how the past impacts the present and how even period films can "use" historical events to comment on the present.

Similarly, in Chapter 4, Kosmidou argues that although *Michael Collins* and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* treat aspects of the Irish Civil War in the 1920s, they can ultimately be viewed as commentary on contemporary issues in Irish political life. The author also discusses the vehement reaction these two films received during their release in separate sub-chapters. In doing so, Kosmidou highlights the power of the medium and the effect cinematic narratives may have in the socio-cultural life of a specific country/region.

*Underground* and *No Man's Land* are the focus of Chapter 5. The author uses one film set in the past, and another set in the present, to examine how the Former Yugoslavian Civil War is negotiated. Kosmidou examines distinct aspects of each

film (i.e. the carnivalesque in *Underground* and the way the media is portrayed in *No Man's Land*) and concludes that both films are allegories that comment on "the absurdity of this Civil War."

Finally, Chapter 6 is devoted to the Greek Civil War. The well-researched and concise historical background the author provides sheds some light on a conflict that is largely considered "a forgotten war" by foreigners. Kosmidou follows this socio-political context with a careful examination of Theo Angelopoulos's *The Travelling Players*, a film which constantly figures in lists with the best Greek films in the country's history. The author concludes that the film represents "a loss of hope for the future and disillusionment with the potential of the Communist ideal" (p. 145). Kosmidou offers further insight into Angelopoulos's cinematic ideology as she argues that despite the Brechtian techniques the filmmaker interweaves in his *mise-en-scène*, he ultimately imbues *The Travelling Players* with his personal melancholy that derives from disenchantment. The author argues that unlike Brecht and his perception of history as a progressive process, Angelopoulos favours the cyclical model of history and is a pessimist regarding potential change for a better social future.

The monograph undoubtedly covers a lacuna in contemporary literature. Kosmidou's focus on civil conflicts and their cinematic representation enters the long discussion of the relationship between history/politics and film and thus contributes to an on-going and significant scholarly dialogue.

Nevertheless, a small number of omissions could have been avoided. First, the author offers no concrete criteria upon which the corpus of films was selected. If one pays attention to the author's Ph.D. title which states that the analysis focuses on films "in post-1989 European cinema," one criterion is the narratives' release date. However, this is nowhere articulated in the book. For instance, Kosmidou claims that she chose *Belle Epoque* and *Butterfly's Tongue* because they share both similarities and differences but this is quite a weak argument, especially when there is a significant number of films focused on the Spanish Civil War, such as *The Girl of Your Dreams* (Fernando Trueba, 1998) and *Soldiers of Salamina* (David Trueba 2003), to name just two critically acclaimed and multi-awarded films of the same era. Nor does the author mention that the films she analyzes belong to a quite impressive group that negotiate civil conflicts, with the exception of Chapter 6, where she does place *Underground* and *No Man's Land* in a cluster of similar themed narratives. Finally, while Chapter 3 examines three films and Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two productions, all post-1989 releases, Chapter 6 focuses on a single Greek production released in 1975. Kosmidou offers no explanation regarding this asymmetry. Although it is true that the Greek Civil War had stopped being a popular cinematic subject since the late 1980s, recent titles, such as *I Skoni pou peftei/Dust* (Psarras, 2004) and *Psyhi*

*Vathia/A Soul So Deep* (Voulgaris, 2009), could have found their place alongside *The Travelling Players* in order to balance out all of book's discussions and avoid this apparent "inequality."

In addition, the inclusion of brief discussions pertinent to a single Civil War discussion or a single film can raise a few questions. For instance, none of the fictional characters that appear in the analysis is accompanied by the name of the actor in brackets with the exception of Alan Rickman, who stars in *Michael Collins*. Kosmidou devotes a section to how Rickman's performance further underlines his character's "villainy." Although the argumentation is sound, the reader cannot help but wonder why none of the other actors are discussed in the book or the chapter on the Irish Civil War in particular. Doesn't Liam Neeson, as Michael Collins nonetheless, assist the "heroic" aspects of the role and attract sympathy from the viewers? Isn't Fernando Fernán-Gómez's portrayal of Don Gregorio in *Butterfly's Tongue* decisive in the interpretation of the Republicans? Finally, the existence of acronyms without explanation, some evaluative adjectives that betray the author's personal preference, and a couple of cases of argument contradiction, could have been avoided had the Publisher assigned a professional copy editor to assist the novice author.

These observations, notwithstanding – the unfortunate accompaniment of almost every book review –, *European Civil War Films: Memory, Conflict, and Nostalgia* remains a valuable study on an important topic. As was already mentioned in the introduction, Kosmidou's book enters an increasing number of titles that analyze cinema's undertaking of representing European civil conflicts with a view to potentially elucidate and/or heal collective traumas. *European Civil War Films* not only adds astute readings on cinematic representations of popular subjects, such as the Spanish Civil War, but also delves into less examined topics, such as the Former-Yugoslavian wars and the almost ignored Greek Civil War. In addition to contributing to this particular body of work, Kosmidou's contribution is also proof of the continuing effort in Film Studies to investigate the capabilities of the cinematic medium and/or its limitations as a tool for historical inspection. Finally, the author's accessible style of writing, fine analytical skills, and sound theoretical knowledge reveal a new, interesting academic voice in the field of Film Studies, which should ultimately place *European Civil War Films* in reading lists of several film and social sciences courses in the Anglophone world.