

Becoming Chump Nation: Imagining the United States in the Spanish Films “*¡Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall!*” (1953) and “*Buried*” (2010)



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Buna ziua tuturor din Craiova



Preface: What does “Chump” Mean?

- ~ “A stupid or gullible person”
- ~ “Someone who does not understand the basics of life on Earth. Confused easily.”
- ~ “A sucka that acts cool but is really a fool and tries to act tough, but really isn’t”
- ~ “Someone who is really thick [...], easily duped [and] tricked”



Introduction

In 2010, one of Spain's leading twentieth century filmmakers, Luis García Berlanga, passed away on 13 November. Berlanga's death, four months after the Sala Berlanga cinema named in his honor opened in Madrid, prompted intensive media coverage as the filmmaker was hailed for filmmaking that risked oppositional gestures during the repressive Franco era (Belinchón 2010). Notwithstanding the enduring accomplishments of *Plácido* (1961) and *El Verdugo* (1963), *¡Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall!* (*Welcome, Mr. Marshall!*) from 1953 is widely regarded as Berlanga's pinnacle as a director.





Six weeks prior to the memorialization of Berlanga at the end of 2010, the well-reviewed *Buried* (Director: Rodrigo Cortés) was released in Spain on 1 October. Despite the incongruous name, *Buried* is an international co-production led by Spain's post-millennial cohort of filmmakers.

What do these two events pertaining to *Bienvenido* and *Buried* have in common, aside from temporal coincidence surrounding 2010? We will examine the strikingly contrasting gazes that these two films assume with respect to Spain's ally, the United States. Whereas *Bienvenido* betrays awe at the United States' "mystique", *Buried* places the symptoms of the United States' military overreach into unsparing close-up

Calling out a Foundational Assumption before We Proceed ...



Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* was a seminal, highly influential theorization of the extent to which nationalism is dependent on imagined relations. We may personally know (more or less) 1,000 people in our country—an infinitesimally small number—but can imagine ourselves as part of a national collective by, for example, taking in the same news. Extending Anderson's logics in a more global era, the imaginary dimension of one nation's imaginings of other nations and the relations among them becomes a matter of heightened importance and even partly constitutive of reality.





Welcoming the Phantom Benefactors

Despite the stringent censorship during the Franco era in which the film was made (Triana-Toribio 2003, pp.95-107), *Bienvenido* channels scorching criticisms of Spain's situation in the 1950s. Fernando Rey's third person voice-over establishes the sardonic tone, setting of the film (fictional Villar del Río, characterized as a typical Spanish village), and principle players across the opening seven minutes. When a federal official arrives to announce an incipient delegation from the United States assumed to be distributing Marshall Plan largess, the sleepy *pueblo* becomes invigorated with a sense of purpose. Most of the film focuses on the (male) authority figures of the village as they enact a marketing plan. Under the confident but reckless *impresario* Manolo's direction, the plan to outdo other villages implicates retrofitting the central Castilian *pueblo* into a "Potemkin Village" version of Southern (Andalucian) Spain; in turn, Andalucía is the region that has long supplied the most tired mass tourism clichés about Spain. Under Manolo's direction, the streets of the "re-branded" Villar del Río are patrolled by folkloric flamenco *guitaristas* reinforced by traditionally-clad dancers.



After the plan to soak up Marshall Plan and tourist revenue has been hatched, each of the village's principal figures dreams nocturnally of what he imagines the United States to be—and draws upon tropes that reveal an admixture of awe, hope, fear and reverence. The reference points in the mayor's dream are, for example, borrowed from the US' "western" ~ genre films. Even in his imagination, *Bienvenido's* mayor is constructed as relying on tropes and visuals borrowed from the United States' mythology about itself.



What is the meaning of all this? By mid-twentieth century, the United States' "National Entertainment State" that radiated in celluloid and over the airwaves could claim impressive achievements in colonizing the imaginations of Berlanga's fictionalized Spaniards—and it, may be inferred, actually living Spaniards who could formulate and decode these reference points in a film that otherwise dwells on Spain's tattered condition at the time. In any event, what is perhaps most sublime about Americans as imagined in *Bienvenido* is that they exert all of this power and influence—deep down into private, nocturnal dreams—*without ever being seen on screen in the film*. Now that's mystique; a Wizard of Oz nation, but without a glimpse of the limitations of the shambling little man behind the curtain.



The United States' daunting entourage of diplomatic cars blows right through Villar del Río despite the village's meticulous preparations—and, metaphorically, post-Civil War Spain is once again left out, marginalized and peripheral. A pathos-laden montage follows in which the village tosses off the (now found to be contrived) props it had gathered to seduce the visitors who never came, while Rey's voice over |denies any bitterness or defeat in sharp contrast with the imagery on-screen; a caustic commentary, one assumes, on the dictatorship's proclamations in the contemporaneous Franco regime-aggrandizing *Noticias y Documentales* (newsreels) that contrasted with the facts of Spanish life on the ground. Although the film implicates the Americans imagined as wealth-laden world-changers, *Bienvenido* starts and ends grounded in the troubles of



United States: *Buried* in Hubris?



A Spaniard born the day *Bienvenido* was released in 1953 would have been approaching retirement age by the time that *Buried* reached screens in 2010. What changed in the intervening 57 years? Following the aged dictator's expiration in his sleep in 1975, Spain's Transition to a mass republic was realized with remarkable swiftness, with a new constitution and competitive elections in short order. Spain joined the European Community (precursor to the European Union) in 1986, hosted the Olympics and the World Fair in 1992. By the new millennium, Spain became one of the world's leading tourism and immigration attractants. Simultaneously, Spain's profile shape-shifted from revanchist Catholicism and chauvinistic male privilege to one of the west's vanguards of social liberalism.

Not only did Spain change profoundly in recent decades; *Buried* demonstrates that its gaze onto the United States has also re-focused since the 1950s. At the same time, the United States as post-World War II global hegemon has crafted a record of outlandish military adventurism stretching from Vietnam to Iraq, while exhibiting the corrosive domestic impact of simplistic individualist ideology wedded to monopoly capitalism.

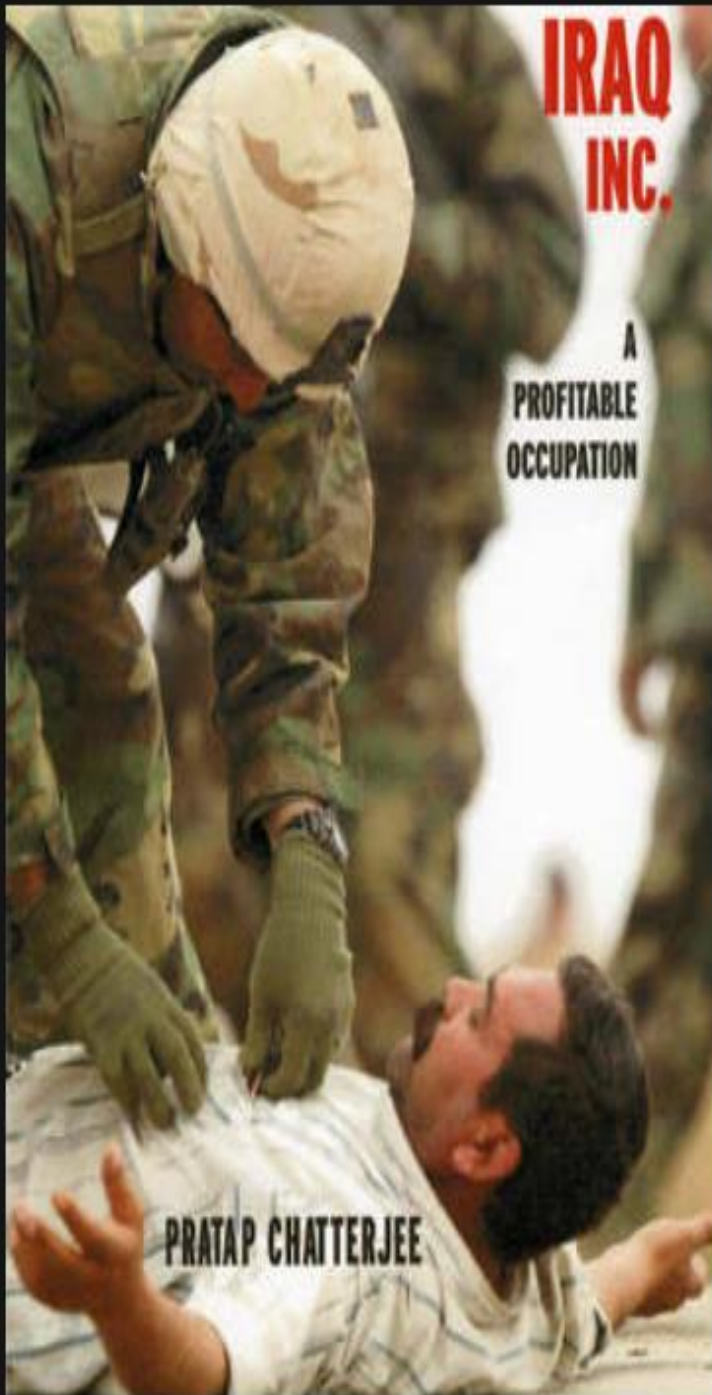


One of the striking aspects of *Buried* as a Spanish film is that it is not obviously a Spanish film; indeed, in the light of *Buried*'s North American trappings (language, casting), I only recognized it as a Spanish co-production from the pre-credit title cards *after* the film had begun during a first-run screening in Madrid.

More specifically, the lead producers on the film were Barcelona-based Versus Entertainment with participation from two small US firms (Safran, Dark Trick) and a French company (Studio 37). While *Buried* is, strictly speaking a Spain-United States-France co-production, the director and most of the below-the-line labor on the film are Spanish; an observation that is further underscored on viewing the Spanish crew at work in the "making of" documentary *Unearthing Buried* on the Icon Film DVD.



Buried's narrative is very straightforward (cue spoiler alert). Paul is a truck driver working for the subcontracting firm CRT in Iraq in 2006. In an *in medias res* opening, he gains consciousness after having been ambushed, kidnapped, and buried alive in a coffin. A mobile phone is one of the very few props at hand and he uses it to frantically contact potential helpers. As sand begins to seep into the coffin, a State Department team led by Dan Brenner claims to be on the way to Paul's rescue. However, in the closing minute of the film, the intelligence leads the would-be rescuers to the coffin of Mark White, another hapless US worker who been kidnapped weeks earlier. Paul dies by suffocation with the final indignity of having had his hopes raised by Brenner's face-saving deception; and then end credits roll.



Even as the audience is readily recruited to sympathy for Paul, the series of phone calls that he makes and receives constitute a withering portrait of the US' society. Paul's employer, CRT, is the central agent of callous private sector corruption and American classism in *Buried*. The first question that CRT personnel chief Alan Davenport poses to Paul concerns not his well-being but whether he had spoken to the media, flagging the company's concern with control of the message environment as priority *numero uno*. In the recorded phone conversation between the home office and the man stuck in a coffin, Davenport methodically informs Paul that he had actually been fired on the morning of his abduction. The cause of Paul's sacking was alleged "fraternizing" (sexual relations) with co-worker Pamela Lutti. Putting aside the puritanical invasiveness into employees' lives, and despite no evidence for the allegation, CRT disposes of Paul in defiance of all standards of decency.

While this subplot may appear "over the top", *Rolling Stone* reporter Matt Taibbi (2007) discusses egregious treatment of private sector subcontractors in Iraq (also see Pratap Chatterjee [2004]'s book-length account of subcontractor corruption in the Iraqi theater). In this view, the Spanish film is not simply taking cheap shots at the behavior of the private sector that had been enabled by the United States' government indulgence of "klepto/crony capitalism".



Once again, far from the mystique of the world-altering Americans visioned by *Bienvenido*, *Buried* constructs the United States as lacking solidarity or even basic empathy, robotically abiding bureaucratic, bottom-line procedures. The point is underscored when Brenner sheepishly admits that United States military bombed the Iraqi city above Paul, further jeopardizing him as the rattled coffin begins to leak sand—and despite the fact that military forces were aware of the urgency of Paul's situation underground.

In a different register of alienation between Americans, Paul's call to his mother in a nursing home is at once poignant and also hints at an alienated society. It is apparent that Paul's mother suffers from dementia and has only a foggy idea of with whom she is talking. When Paul ventures, "Mom, I love you...do you want to tell me anything?", she rejoins, "Just that your father [apparently deceased] and me have been playing gin rummy every night". Paul is perhaps at his most gutted, alone in the coffin following this moment; in turn, the mother's obliterated memory may be taken as a metaphor of deracinating "presentism" in the United States with its attendant shadings of alienation from the world as it is.





The closing credits of *Buried* features a banjo-picking country music selection that chimes cleverly with the gravity Paul's situation as unredeemed working man. However, on examination of the credits, the song ("In the Lap of the Mountain") was not previously recorded but penned by the director Cortés and Víctor Reyes with mainly Spanish collaborators performing the selection. What might this spot-on mimicry of American musical idiom mean? One may take it as a final touch in castigating the United States' State/corporate power centers for crassness toward the working population through the famously defiant country genre. One may also take the song as an efflux of deep familiarity with American genres that radiate—*all day, every day*—out of the United States' "National Entertainment State".

However, even as the United States now has a face (indeed, the face of defeat) that it does not in *Bienvenido*, *Buried* also testifies to the United States' salience even for another nation's film industry. At the same time, the familiarity with American culture in *Buried* furnishes the tools with which to venture a perceptively critical appraisal of the United States that far exceeds what is inscribed onto *Bienvenido*—and, arguably, also far exceeds the critical reach of the overwhelming share of the United States' own domestically-produced and ideologically contained product.

The descent into chump nation can be perceived by those who are paying attention!



Thanks
for listening!
Bliss



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