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Crime scenes: landscape, memory and atrocity in Jorge Barbi’s *El Final, Aquí*

On first impression, the image is marked by ambiguity. It appears to be a painting of small fluffy clouds, scattered across a blue-grey sky. The soft and indistinct edges of the clouds seem to bear the marks of brush strokes. But the object at bottom left, captured in much clearer focus, presents a puzzle: is it an odd stone roof, or something else? On further scrutiny the roof resolves itself as the foot of an ancient bridge, and at the same moment the view becomes inverted, now angled down rather than up, the cloudy sky revealed as a reflection in the water below. Finally, what first had the appearance of a painting becomes legible instead as a photograph, taken from a perspective looking over the bridge at the river beneath. But this is only the beginning, because there is much more to Jorge Barbi’s ‘Puente de Almaraz, Cáceres’ than the formal play of an optical illusion.

The photograph is one of 60 published in Barbi’s book *El Final, Aquí* (The End, Here), a collection of beautifully composed, predominantly rural and always uninhabited landscapes taken throughout Spain. All the images share a common secret, which is clarified in the brief commentary at the start of the book (Barbi 2008, 7-8). These remote locations are crime scenes, out of the way places where Republicans were executed by Francoists during or after the Spanish Civil War. From the autumnal bracken and eucalyptus plantations of Galicia, to the windswept green wheat fields of Palencia, to the sun-baked tracks of Sevilla, Barbi’s photographs are of places that have witnessed atrocities yet remain inscrutable, bearing no visible scars.

In many of the images, the beauty of nature belies the violence that occurred. But once alerted to the hidden significance of Barbi’s photographs, the reader/viewer becomes more attuned to key tropes. For instance, the pressing weight of past crimes might be inferred from the lowering skies over flat green fields in ‘Montetorozos, Valladolid’, in which purplish grey rainclouds mass above a strip of sunlight on the horizon. The composition of the image also calls attention to the line of a puddled track extending from the foreground to a vanishing point where the fields end at a line of trees. Is this muddy path a dead end or the symbol of a difficult but necessary journey from the past to the present and the present to the past? A very similar diagonal from left foreground to right background is traced by the stream in ‘Pozon Fortuna, Turón Asturias’, and again in the wooded scenes of ‘Cortapezas, Lugo’, and ‘La Pedraja, Montes de Oca, Burgos’. In the latter image, a dry track of orange-grey cuts like a scar across dark green foliage, but vanishes at the crest of a wooded hill in the centre of the picture.

However, as possible indices of murder, the scenes remain opaque. *El Final, Aquí* makes clear that it is only through ongoing and repeated acts of remembering and memorialization that such silent scenes of atrocity can be rendered meaningful.

The necessity of active remembering in the face of institutionally endorsed amnesia is summarised in the childhood memory that Barbi recounts at the start of the book (2008, 7):

> One evening in 1962, while returning with my father from Vigo to A Guarda along the road that leads to Baiona, and following the indications of a friend who came with us that day, we parked on a curve cut into the side of the mountain by the sea and we crossed the road to the verge above the rocks. At our feet were nine crosses drawn into a line on the earth. I could not understand the explanation that Luis, secretly, gave my father; I only learned that even if they were erased, those crosses would appear over and over. [...] Luis erased the crosses with his foot and
we left. I imagined the person who with determination, and dodging all surveillance would draw them again, always in the same place.

This account serves as a metonym for Barbi’s larger project. Opacity, whether of a childhood memory or an unremarkable landscape, is made legible, and in the process instantiates a call to action. The politics of remembrance and the aesthetics of a now-clarified ambiguity coincide, urging the reader / viewer to join the collective task of re-inscribing the crosses, of reasserting their mnemonic function.

*El Final, Aquí* thus constitutes not just a symbolic exhumation of a long neglected past, imperfectly buried by the 1977 Amnesty Law, part of a “pact of forgetting” that followed Franco’s death in 1975. It is also an urgent exhortation of further efforts on the part of readers and viewers of the project to actively recall and go on re-calling memories of the Franco dictatorship, even if many of these are reliant on mediations. In its refusal to acquiesce in state-sanctioned amnesia, Barbi’s intervention parallels the films of Patricio Guzmán on the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, John Gianvito’s *Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind* (2008), which resists the erasure of the many acts of violence that have shaped the history of the USA, or the recent Spanish documentary *The Silence of Others* (2018), which tracks the attempts of victims of the Franco dictatorship to gain recognition and justice. The latter, like *El Final, Aquí* itself, should also be seen as part of Spain’s ‘memory movement’ of the past two decades, which has challenged the narratives of official history. As Sebastiaan Faber (2018, 2) summarises:

> Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, this grassroots phenomenon spawned a broad set of initiatives ranging from political rallies to volunteer-led exhumation projects, court cases, and formal appeals to the United Nations. In its wake rose a tidal wave of media productions about the Civil War and Francoism: novels, documentaries, history books, photography exhibits, feature films, soap operas, drama series, and thousands of articles in newspapers and magazines.

The memory movement slogan ‘El pasado es de todos - the past belongs to everyone’ (Faber 2018, 4), is echoed by Barbi himself, who states (2008, 8, 7): ‘Places are not witnesses of anything, places do not see us; we recreate them [...] common places where apparently nothing ever happened, until the invisible memory they contain fills them with uniqueness.’ The function of Barbi’s photographs in *El Final, Aquí* is to precipitate such a shift, to actively recreate overlooked places as abiding sites of memory.

**References**