

Syracuse University

SURFACE at Syracuse University

Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics

College of Arts and Sciences

Summer 6-15-2021

Destabilizing Gender and Genre: Queering the Body in Libertarias and Land and Freedom

Kathryn Everly

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/III>



Part of the [Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Everly, Kathryn. Destabilizing Gender and Genre: Queering the Body in Libertarias and Land and Freedom, *Journal of Gender and Sexuality Studies / Revista de Estudios de Género y Sexualidades*, 2021, Vol. 47, No. 1, El género ilimitado: Márgenes, rupturas y transgresiones en el cine luso-hispánico, pp. 135-154

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE at Syracuse University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics by an authorized administrator of SURFACE at Syracuse University. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Destabilizing Gender and Genre: Queering the Wartime Body in *Libertarias* (1996) and *Land and Freedom* (1995).

Abstract:

Libertarias (1996) and *Land and Freedom* (1995) explore the complex situation of women militia during the Spanish Civil War. A queer reading of the female body in these films highlights wartime female masculinity (Halberstam) and female solidarity. In renegotiating worn expectations of sexuality and gender, the films question and ultimately redefine the wartime docudrama genre. The queering of gender and genre leads to alternative versions of history that upend the very idea of historical accuracy. The female bodies in the films transgress entrenched binary gender norms, thus creating a uniquely queer representation of female solidarity in the docudrama genre.

Vicente Aranda's *Libertarias* (1996) and Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995) explore the complex situation of women fighting in the militia at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. In this article, I propose a queer reading of the militarized female bodies in these films that decenters and questions the wartime docudrama genre. The analysis pairs Jack Halberstam's lucid articulation of female masculinity as a mode of challenging the strict male/female binary prevalent in wartime docudrama with Linda Williams's idea of cinematic body genres. I also draw on Gayle Rubin's model of a sex/gender system that explains the important relational aspects of social and socialized bodies. Within this framework, the films at hand, which may at first appear very traditional and even dated, can be understood as portraying a queer female body that in turn queers the wartime film genre. The importance of relational gender identity, that is

how bodies relate to one another within a given socio-political system, reveals how masculine women fit into or defy such a system. This also relates to a cinematic genre system and specifically how Williams considers the female body as intrinsic to certain generic definitions. A close analysis of specific scenes and shots highlights the subversive nature of how masculine women are perceived and presented in the films pointing to new and innovative ways to think about female solidarity and historical war film.

An important aspect of both films focuses on women's movement from the private, domestic sphere of the home to the dynamic public space of political fervor that allowed them to reimagine their role within the strictly ordered sex/gender system. This system is defined by Gayle Rubin as: "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (159). The transformation of biological sexuality into socialized notions of gender exemplifies the constructs, labels, categories, and margins established by systemized forms of interpersonal relationships. It becomes evident in both films that the patriarchal hierarchy of the seemingly egalitarian anarchist workers' revolution emphatically reinstates the "empirically oppressive ways in which sexual worlds have been organized" (Rubin 168). One way to critically approach the inequalities of the sex/gender system is to theorize the body as a queer space, understood as a sign or symbol that rejects heteronormativity and specifically explores the blurring of masculine and feminine lines using "female masculinity to explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity" (Halberstam 9). In both *Libertarias* and *Land and Freedom* women's bodies are transformed from the feminine archetypes of nun, homemaker, and prostitute through the incursion into the public wartime sphere, which presents a unique opportunity for women to exhibit traditionally male

characteristics attributed to soldiers, political activists, and sexually active men.

Jack Halberstam argues against the idea that masculine women are merely imitating men's behavior and efficiently breaks down the binary discourse of gendered characteristics such as bravery, valor, or power (masculine) contrasted with fear and weakness (feminine). When we look at images of women during the civil war in Spain it is important to think beyond the confines of biological bodies performing gender. As both Rubin and Halberstam insist, it is the relationship *between* bodies that creates a system of gendered and sexual interaction and not the body itself. A body does not exist in isolation so consequently gender cannot exist without a system in place that is constantly interpreting and defining gender and sexuality based on relationships to other bodies. "Precisely because virtually nobody fits the definitions of male and female, the categories gain power and currency from their impossibility. In other words, the very flexibility and elasticity of the terms "man" and "woman" ensures their longevity" (Halberstam 27). The films at hand confront the challenge to think beyond these definitions, not only of the body but also of socialized sex/gender discourse that incessantly pushes meaning into categories based on compulsory Western white heterosexual practices.

Feminist film critic Linda Williams dismantles patriarchal hegemony by revisiting canonical film genres with a critical eye focused on vindicating the subjugated female body. In her landmark essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," Williams explores how sensations such as arousal, fear, and emotion are not gratuitous if we consider them fundamental aspects of genre film: pornography horror, and melodrama respectively. She explains "in each of these genres the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain (italics in original 4). Akin to Rubins's sex/gender system and Halberstam's female masculinity, Williams argues that the female bodies

in these film genres represent gender fluidity identified as passive and active actions and reactions. For example, “when the girl-victim of a film like *Halloween* finally grabs the phallic knife, or ax, or chain saw to turn the tables on the monster-killer, that viewer identification shifts from an ‘abject terror gendered feminine’ to an active power with bisexual components” (Williams 7). The same can be said for the docudrama war films in which the young women initially presented in traditional roles take up arms and head to the front lines of battle shedding their ultra-feminine garb, attitudes, and decorum revealing brazen military fearlessness. The transformation of the female bodies in these war dramas is simultaneously sexual, empowering, and emotional drawing on all three of Williams’s body genres (pornography, horror, and melodrama). The female body becomes a space unidentifiable by socially constructed binary gendered norms: in queer war cinema the genderless body becomes the locus of violence (sexual, physical, and emotional) that is not gratuitous because it is fundamental to the exposure of compulsive heteronormativity. The advantages of using the term queer to describe the variations and ruptures of these films lies in its ability to suggest “a double emphasis —on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences” (de Lauretis iv). The following analyses of *Libertarias* and *Land and Freedom* focus on both the visual transformations of the female bodies and on the transformation of the filmic gaze that proposes a queer reading of both gender and genre.¹

Libertarias tells the story of female solidarity during the early months of the war by weaving together very distinct examples of women’s experience.² María, played by Ariadna Gil, is a devout nun thrown out onto the streets and into the chaos of secular life when Republican troops storm the convent where she lives. After roaming the city, she finally finds a house with a

picture of Jesus on the door and eagerly pounds the door seeking refuge. She is welcomed into the house that ironically turns out to be a brothel and she is immediately sexualized, stripped of her religious clothing, and forced into bed with a customer. Fortunately, María is saved from performing sexually as militiawomen enter the brothel by force, kick the men out, and convince the prostitutes to join the anarchist cause and head to the front. What ensues is a series of difficulties for the women including sexual harassment, political turmoil within the party, the eventual order from Republican authorities to abandon the trenches, and ultimately death. The film certainly favors the Republican fight against fascism and avoids a nuanced explanation of the complicated hostilities and tensions between the Marxist anarchists and Communists.³ However, Aranda's vision of the civil war puts women at the forefront of the narrative and cinematic structures; the differences among women are celebrated as a queer female solidarity most notably between María, the nun, and the leader of the women soldiers, Pilar, played by Ana Belén. Nevertheless, the film ends with the brutal annihilation of the militiawomen that fittingly symbolizes both the defeat of the Republic and the eradication of women from war history. The women's bodies are sexualized in a highly emotional atmosphere of political camaraderie and end up suffering graphic violence from Nationalist troops, following Williams's three modes that female bodies represent in genre film (pornography, melodrama, and horror).

Some critics point out the demonization of the Nationalists in the film that presents an idealization of utopian Republican ideology, yet at the same time praise the film as a vindication of women's wartime participation, previously under-appreciated and even forgotten (Jünke, Corbalán). María Asunción Gómez is more critical of the film and explains a "predominantly nostalgic vision of anarchism and the strongly melodramatic and sentimental component of the film undermine the political message and distort the historical reality" (297). The film also relies

on the age-old virgin/whore dichotomy to establish female identity within the radical political system and the militiawomen are constantly at the mercy of the patriarchal establishment in terms of seeking permission to actively participate in the war effort. Nevertheless, if we view *Libertarias* through a queer lens that shifts the expectations of historical accuracy to an active reading of women's bodies as sites of feminine, masculine, and transgendered expression, we begin to understand the innovative way the film reinvents the docudrama and historical "truth" in general.

The quiet, mousy, frightened nun, María, undergoes the most striking transformation in the film. María Van Liew suggests that as María is forced into military action against her will and observes the violence alongside the political zeal that unites the anarchists; she and the viewer of the film share the same distanced perspective. The nun's outsider view of the war machine reflects the viewer's relationship to the historical material in the film and our own involvement as spectators of the film's action mirrors María's observations of the killing and destruction of war (232). This presence from the sidelines that allows for intimate observation of the events also incites an intellectual criticism not readily apparent in the passionate participation of the fighters. The idea of being there as an observer and not being completely involved in the action allows for a contemplative approach to the material, reflected in both spatial and temporal distance. As María sheds her religious attire that symbolizes the narrow definition of female within church dogma, she emerges as a genderless, queer body, unrecognizable as female or male and, if we spectators are aligned with María's perspective, this reflects the queer spectator or the queer perspective the viewer adopts and brings to an analysis of the film.

In the film, the construction of a female masculinity has two parts: first is the visual incongruity of women dressed in military clothing. They wear pants, work shirts, and red

bandanas while handling guns and rifles that puts them on an even symbolic playing field with men. The second aspect of female masculinity is the striking success of female solidarity exhibited by interpersonal relationships between women of differing classes and professions. In the film, guns and rifles are symbols of power and independence for the women characters as well as for the men. In the scene where we meet Victoria Abril's character, Floren, Pilar and María deliver smuggled arms which the women hold and caress while marveling at their liberating abilities. Floren claims at one point while admiring a rifle that the weapons are "poder para las mujeres" (31:00-31:10).

[Insert: Figure 1: *Libertarias*. Dir. Vicente Aranda, Academy Pictures, 1996.]

The scene frames the characters in a way that establishes their relationships to one another and creates a certain female solidarity founded in the power and independence warranted by the guns. The display of masculinity takes the form of power and protection suggested by the weapons that liberate the women from the need of a male presence and are reminiscent of Williams's observation of the pursued female in horror films finally turning the tables by grabbing the phallic weapon to protect herself. The medium shot frames Pilar, María, and Floren in a triangular composition with María in the middle looking on warily at the weapons and literally caught between the two other women bearing arms. Her fate is sealed with this image that suggests she cannot escape the violence of war as the rifles cage her in, but the shot also suggests that she will be protected by Pilar and Floren as they are two capable women well aware of the authority the weapons give them in the arena of battle.

Also, in this medium shot we see the evolution from feminine domesticity to masculine public presence evidenced in the different clothes the characters wear. María Fernández Martínez has written about María's transformation from nun to militiawoman as she is stripped of her

nun's habit and re-clothed in a flowery dress that in its femininity is out of place among the other women in military uniform (257). Eventually María dons drab pants, a collared shirt, and jacket that make her indistinguishable from a young boy. However, in this shot, Floren's dress and pulled back hair style place her in the role of the domestic female, which is a necessary contrast to her handling and admiring the weapon that affirms the fluidity of gender performance. María stands in the middle of the frame at a distance in her dress but with a red and black militia bandana covering her head. We see her here in the middle of her ideological transformation from devout Catholic to text quoting anarchist and her position between Floren and Pilar suggests that her comrades will be crucial in this development. Pilar faces away from the camera but we clearly see her military stance and uniform: the rifle across her back and red and black militia cap. Pilar is the embodiment throughout the film of the female fully incorporated into the male world of the militia signaled by her clothes but also by her brusque, aggressive attitude toward the other characters. Nevertheless, she is also more protective of María than of the other militiawomen and the two form a special bond during the course of the film.

A particular scene that emphasizes the female solidarity represented by Pilar and María's relationship takes place after a long night of drunken celebration. Pilar, obviously inebriated, summons a young English reporter to accompany her back to her room and he willingly complies leaving María alone with the communist secretary played by Miguel Bosé who has been relentlessly pursuing her throughout the film. Instead of falling into the typical pattern of pairing off with the available men, María runs after Pilar, interrupting her as she embraces the Englishman. She pleads with Pilar not to leave her alone and declares that she wants to be with Pilar and not left with her assigned male companion. Pilar pushes the Englishman away, throws her arm around María's shoulders, and they head down the street together, leaving the two men

somewhat baffled in their wake. This scene dismantles cinematic expectation of the melodrama that usually pushes the narrative toward a heterosexual reconciliation of a love interest. The homosocial bond between the women proves greater than the compulsive heteronormativity that demands women be paired with men. The pseudosexual nature of the female relationship is played out during the rest of the film and particularly in the final sequence when María lovingly cradles Pilar after she has been fatally wounded. Stephen Schwartz jumps to the conclusion that Pilar is a lesbian because she rejects the man, however, the scene reads more as a show of female homosociality and a testament to the value and power of all female relationships: while the male/female relationships in the film often turn sexual, the women's friendships do not, nor do they have to in order to be intimate. This scene explores an alternative form of same sex camaraderie and friendship that avoids the "rigid insistence that some form or another of female masculinity indicates prelesbianism" (Halberstam 52). In other words, desire and sensuality between women have many different kinds of manifestations and do not necessarily fall into the category of same sex desire (52). In this way, the relationship between Pilar and María is queer in that it rejects the cultural (patriarchal) insistence on the hypersexual activity of the single, unattached female. As previously mentioned, the fluidity of the female friendships is evidenced at the end of the film when María cradles Pilar as she is dying, echoing the Pietá tableau and positioning Pilar as the sacrificial lamb. As Fernández Martínez points out, this subversive image feminizes the mother/son relationship between the Virgin Mary and Jesus and in doing so suggests that women too can sacrifice themselves and die for a cause (257).

In fact, the desexualization of the relationship between the women elevates and separates their intimacy from the highly charged sexual nature of the relationships between the former prostitutes and soldiers. The militiamen constantly grope the women and ex-prostitute Charo

(Loles León) resigns herself to a quick sex session with Faneca (Antonio Dechent) out of frustration and pity. In the scene, we see her bored expression as she completes her duty with an ecstatic Faneca. Given that the Communist secretary (Bosé) cannot even look at María without longing and after forcefully kissing her in a bombed-out church to stop her from praying in public and drawing unwanted attention, we realize the nature of male/female relationships in the film is necessarily sexual and contingent on plays for power and authority. When María and Pilar pair off leaving the men rejected our notions of historical accuracy and melodramatic structure become disturbed and unstable. Marcia Landy confirms that “melodrama and history feed on familiarity, ritualization, repetition, and overvaluation of the past to produce a *déjà vu* sense of ‘yes, that is the way it was and is’” (19). By not adhering to socialized sexual behavior that runs throughout the film, Pilar and María carve out an alternate space of intimacy based on mutual respect and affection. It is the luxury of narrative film, especially docudrama, to speculate and suggest that our expectations of how things were may be erroneous or convoluted and this misconception or assumption of the past shades our compliant acceptance of how things are in the present.

A scene in the brothel establishes the gendered relationship between masculine and feminine attitudes that plays out between the female characters. Gendered stereotypes are written across the female body in clear evidence that biological sex assignment is indifferent to socialized displays of power and weakness. Laura Maña as Concha stands to the left of the seated prostitutes in a clear visual display of superiority. Her military dress, ammunition boxes strapped at her waist, and rifle protruding ominously from behind her back speak directly to the masculine power and authority warranted women fighting for the cause. The prostitutes pay close attention and as their lingerie reveals their bodies their expressions reveal their fear and

wonder at Concha's words that encourage them to leave the brothel and join the militia. This scene that occurs at the beginning of the film sets the tone of female evolution evident in the prostitute/militiawoman dichotomy. It is interesting to note that neither the prostitutes nor María the nun are given a choice to join the militia or not. María is thrown out on the street after her convent is overtaken by the militia and the prostitutes are scolded and humiliated into joining the cause. The framing of the scene with Concha lecturing the scared prostitutes transfers authority to the female figure of the militiawoman and disempowers the sex worker in a typical critique of the publicly sexual female. The codes in this scene remain the same as in a sex/gender system based on male domination where military power and violence oppress and coerce the hypersexualized female. However, there is a difference, in that Concha invites the prostitutes to form part of the militia, to leave the brothel as a place of symbolic incarceration, and to be "free." The fact that the scene plays out among women in a homosocial upending of the brothel, traditionally a heterosexual space of commerce, calls attention to the ideological restructuring of gender taking place in the film. The political ramifications of joining the militia are played down in this scene with the prostitutes as they join up primarily to appease the militiawomen aggressors. However, leaving the brothel does not end their experience as sexually available objects desired and controlled by men as detailed in the aforementioned scene with Charo and Faneca.

Nevertheless, an image near the end of *Libertarias* is striking because of the radically conflicting gender message it sends and how the absence of sexualized bodies in the scene dismantles the objectification of women. Here we see María who has made her complete transformation from nun to scared novice in her flowery dress to incorporated member of the militia. Her appearance here is stereotypically unfeminine: from her short-cropped hair, to her

boyish physicality (a trait she maintains throughout the film in the way she speaks and walks) to her buttoned-down shirt and coat. Her expression is neutral and she seems unaware of the officer's presence behind her.

[Insert: Figure 2 *Libertarias*. Dir. Vicente Aranda, Academy Pictures, 1996.]

In this scene at the funeral of a fallen militiaman, Bosé's character sidles up to her and tries to hold her hand, which she refuses in yet another gesture rejecting his romantic advances. But here the gender non-conformity is refreshing both visually and narratively. María rejects his advances but also rejects succumbing to prescribed ideas of feminine behavior and appearance. Her collared jacket is the same style and design as Bose's communist secretary jacket and the repetition of the military (masculine) clothing worn by both the man and woman in the shot establishes a common gender neutrality between the characters. The androgynous look of both characters in this scene adds to the dismantling of compulsory visual heterosexual norms, for example certain feminine physical attributes such as softness and submission are manifested in Bosé's character with his clean-shaven face and stylishly groomed hair. He timidly tries to hold María's hand, which she sternly rejects in an assertive act of self-determination that can be seen as retribution for his forceful, violent kiss earlier in the film. As Halberstam confirms: "[w]here sex and gender, biology and gender representation, fail to match (female body and masculine self), where appearance and reality collide (appears masculine and constructs a real masculinity where there should be a 'real' femininity)" (126) is where alternate, fluid, and radical concepts of gender are accepted, promoted, and celebrated. It is in the difference that is labeled odd or non-normative or queer where liberation exists.

The neutral gender coding of María's character radicalizes what filmic language (the male gaze) has traditionally valued as female beauty and sexual allure. While the prostitutes in

the film represent the epitome of sexual desire in the way they dress, the care given to hair and make-up, and exhibitionist body language, María never performs any act of seduction and therefore compared to the sexual prowess of the prostitutes comes across as an innocent, naïve character in the film. However, this reading does not do her justice in the sense that she undergoes the most drastic transformation of all the characters in the film, evolving from a cloistered nun to a dedicated politicized sympathizer within the anarchist movement. Her stoic appearance in the scene with Bosé questions the comfortable gender binary of masculine and feminine, replacing it with an alternative visual display of sensuality. The relationship between María and Bosé's character is a minor subplot in the film but serves as the melodramatic romance element of an impossible relationship made probable as both were clergy members before the war and have since shed their religious frocks and vows. The tension created by the constant pursuit and rejection paired with the ambiguous and shifting gender codes on display disrupt our expectations of what a movie romance should be, especially within the wartime docudrama where the masculine and feminine are usually clearly defined and separated. Here, our attention shifts from the compulsive heterosexuality, exhibited by the prostitutes' relationships with men, to María's rejection of the handsome male to the homosocial, homoerotic bond between María and Pilar. It is not gratuitous that the film ends with the previously mentioned scene of two women tightly framed in an embrace as Pilar dies from wounds suffered in the ambush at the front. In this way *Libertarias* recasts the melodramatic love relationship as one of female solidarity, loyalty, and friendship.⁴

Land and Freedom: The queer gaze

Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom* also tackles alternative representations of masculine women confronting sexism and marginalization during the initial months of the war.

Loach's film differs from Aranda's vision in that it presents the Spanish Civil War as a transnational political event from the point of view of a young man from Liverpool, David, played by Ian Hart. Similar to George Orwell's revealing testimony of the horrible conditions the Republican army faced during the war in *Homage to Catalonia*, *Land and Freedom* focuses on the frustrations many foreign militiamen faced in Spain ranging from unavailable and unsafe arms to political upheaval and tensions within leftist ranks.⁵ The international scope of the war is played out symbolically in the love affair between David and a young Spanish revolutionary, Blanca, played by Rosana Pastor. Symbolic of the failed anarchist and feminist revolution, Blanca's character experiences regression from active wartime soldier to submissive lover and eventually becomes the sacrificial lamb of the revolutionary movement. However, her case is interesting primarily because her character embodies both the prostitute (sexually available woman) and the staunch militant seen in various characters in *Libertarias*. In *Land and Freedom* Blanca's body is "read" by male characters as open and available sexually, yet she exhibits a similar appearance and attitude of female masculinity that we have seen in Aranda's film.

Film theories abound about the power of the gendered gaze, beginning with Laura Mulvey's seminal text "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" and from there developing into theories of visual reception that include multiple subject positions informed by intersections of race, sexuality, nationality, and queerness.⁶ Mulvey points to the Hollywood melodrama, and I would include wartime documndrama, as a prime example of the "male gaze" suggesting that women on screen are seen from an objectifying perspective positioning them as passive recipients of sexualized desire that alienates the female viewer. The Freudian castrated female, only representing lack that in turn produces the phallic presence, is the bearer of meaning but not a producer of meaning as her existence explains male fantasy and the symbolic order. What this

means for the female characters in *Land and Freedom* is that their agency is systematically overshadowed by their emotional and political dependence on men in the film, which in turn is represented visually by Loach's use of shots and counter shots. Even though the film showcases the political determination and participation of women in the war effort, they are not producers of meaning but are constantly interpreted as either romantic elements or brazen anomalies of wartime (male) reality. Nevertheless, they do represent a queer aesthetic both visually in their dress and use of weaponry as well as in their representation of a queer viewing perspective. In "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure" published six years after her original article, Mulvey argues for a kind of "transvestism" that occurs when women identify with action heroes and can experience a kind of male role-play that allows them to escape social norms through film.⁷ This idea of cross dressing is relevant in both films as the female body dons masculine attire defying socially structured stereotypes of appropriate dress, especially scandalous during the 1930s when both films take place. The idea of trying on men's clothes symbolically reflects the exploration of alternative identities, sexual freedoms, and political aggressiveness not readily available or acceptable for women in early twentieth-century Spanish society. This way of exploring gender neutral representations of women questions binary sexuality and leads to queering the gaze by challenging the objectifying authority of the male gaze, and in turn redefines the docudrama war film genre as not categorically masculine but rather appealing to a queer, non-binary gaze.

A unique and crucial element of *Land and Freedom* resides in the storytelling component that frames the narrative. The film begins in present day England where, upon the death of her grandfather, a young girl discovers a suitcase filled with letters and photographs from his time in Spain as a volunteer in the antifascist militia. Through the collected memorabilia hidden away for years we are launched back in time to 1936 Spain and the narrative unfolds

jumping back and forth from Spain to the present day (1980s) as David's granddaughter, Kim, reads his letters written from the Spanish front to his fiancée. We hear David in voice-over as Kim reads the letters and this framework of collection, memory, and reconstruction of the past highlights the transnational and transgenerational aspects of war and politics. David's story is filtered through Kim's perspective and ultimately it becomes her version of past events that leads to a strong familial bond based on political solidarity, only possible after her grandfather's death reveals the suitcase of memories. The final scene of the film solidifies the transgenerational importance of the Spanish Civil War while giving Kim's voice narrative authority as she pieces together the war story. Through Loach's lens and the perspective of Kim's storytelling we encounter a hybrid, non-traditional, or queer, reimagining of the war in Spain and the men and women who fought there. First, we will consider how Blanca's queer sexuality is constructed in the film and then consider how it is linked to the queering of the genre.

There are two parts to the scenario of David and Blanca's encounter. First, during downtime in the trenches at the front, David sees Blanca in the distance on the ground locked in a romantic embrace with another man. A fellow soldier who observes his curious gaze and voyeuristic pleasure says: "Hey David...look! The whores are also at the front" to which another soldier replies "Yeah, but the better-looking ones are at home" (16:57-16:59). David chuckles to himself and the scene cuts to the present day where his granddaughter reads one of David's letters describing the operations of the POUM militia. The voice-over of David reading is an important narrative tool that works well to connect the frequent jumps between 1936 Spain and 1980s England. We rely on the sound of his voice instead of pictures or images to relate the events and this brings a sense of immediacy and intimacy to the film that reflects the granddaughter's emotional involvement in reconstructing David's past. We empathize with

David's voice and share his sense of solidarity with the Spanish people when he claims the militia is "just ordinary men and women fighting for a cause" (17:19). The "ordinary" women fighting for a cause include Blanca, who David has assumed to be a prostitute, and the editing enforces this connection as we cut from Kim reading the letter back to the trenches.

Now Blanca is in the trenches with a rifle on watch duty and as David approaches Blanca for sex the voice-over of him reading the letter continues and he claims "It's strange to see women in the trenches fighting alongside the men. But no need to worry Kit, none of them could hold a candle to you" (19:54-19:55). The irony of David assuring his fiancée that there is no way he would cheat on her right before he solicits a woman he presumes to be a prostitute adds to the scene's irony while enforcing a double standard that permits free male sexuality and condemns women to either whore (Blanca) or obediently patient virgin (Kit). Before approaching Blanca, David discreetly asks his comrades about her sexual availability and soon the entire group of soldiers are on board with the joke, commenting how good and cheap she is. All of the other soldiers at the front know that Blanca is not a prostitute, but rather a dedicated soldier in a serious relationship, yet even the only other woman at the front, Maite (Iciar Bollaín), chimes in with the pun about how difficult Blanca's life is: "It's a hard life, very hard" (20:24-20:26) to which all of the men laugh heartily.

Visually the scene is constructed around David's initial gaze as he sees Blanca sprawled on her side in the trench, resting on her hip with legs extended and open suggesting sexual availability, and her gun poised ready to fire. This long shot of Blanca from David's point of view places her at the end of a tunnel structure as she seemingly awaits his sexual advances ready for action. He sees her from the waist down with her legs sprawled open in an exaggerated and what looks like incredibly uncomfortable and unnatural position to hold a rifle while

guarding the trench. This stylized posturing conveys female sexual availability and the visual implications of what David “reads” are obvious. In this instance, the director is guiding our eye to read the female body in a certain, sexualized way that becomes exaggerated with the tunnel vision through the barracks. This shot frames Blanca in a uterus shaped space overtly suggesting the sex of her character and further marked by her open legs and posture. The shot may be the opposite of a phallic symbol in that here the framing of the body deep within the walls of the trench suggests female anatomy, yet the figure does not “appear” female by way of dress, hair, makeup or any other prominent social or cultural markers. Blanca’s masculinity, accentuated by her clothes, hair, and rifle, suggests David’s queer sexual desire at the same time the framing of the shot suggests the militarized female anatomy of the trenches (the uterine tunnel) is a queer space not marked as either totally masculine or feminine.

[Insert: Figure 3 *Land and Freedom*, Dir. Ken Loach, BIM Distribuzione, 1995.]

As David gingerly approaches her, the rest of his comrades laugh and jeer, wishing him good luck. When he suggests to Blanca they “go for a walk” like she had done previously with Coogan, the battalion leader, she becomes quite offended and repositions her rifle to separate herself from David. She quickly explains that Coogan is “her man” and that they lived together before the war and joined the militia as a team. David is chagrined, suddenly aware of his sexist assumptions of a single women at the front, apologizes awkwardly, and stumbles off to rejoin the others. He chastises them for setting him up and they all share a good laugh at Blanca’s expense. It also reveals the double standard that instead of rejecting him outright, or questioning his inappropriate advances at the front, or even exercising her own sexual agency, Blanca tells him she has a boyfriend and is already sexually claimed. She does declare Coogan to be “her man,” thus inverting traditional female commodification by labeling the man as her property, yet she

remains “off limits” because she is involved romantically with someone else. Later, Coogan dies in battle and Blanca’s affections quickly shift to David in a narrative move that empowers the sexually adventurous woman and decenters traditional female notions of commitment, love, and mourning.

David and Blanca’s relationship progresses in the film along non-traditional storylines that involve repeated demonstrations of female masculinity. For example, David confesses his overwhelming guilt to the grief-stricken Blanca explaining that Coogan died in battle because David did not open fire on a group of civilians. In this intimate moment where David shows weakness and remorse as he begins to cry, Blanca comforts him with an embrace that signals the beginning of their romantic relationship. This scene serves as a counterpart to their first meeting in the trenches and blurs the lines between male stoicism and female emotion: David becomes emotionally distressed and Blanca comforts him dry-eyed in a gendered role reversal. David’s melodramatic show of emotion shifts the focus of the docudrama from stoic military performance to a type of male femininity, or masculine show of emotion.

Later in the film, when Blanca and David are reunited in Barcelona, she orchestrates their first night together clearly taking on a sexually aggressive role that contrasts sharply with David’s fiancé, the Penelope-like Kit waiting for him at home in Liverpool. In Barcelona, David asks for a room at a hostel Blanca has suggested and is pleasantly surprised to find her there in the shower. She emerges in a towel and informs him that women are no longer allowed to fight in combat at the front but explains that women can nurse, drive, or cook but can’t shoot a weapon. Then she says ironically: “I must know my place as a woman” (1:08:31) as she orders him to take off his shirt and continues to seduce him steering him toward the unmade bed. They spend the night together but the next day she discovers he has joined the International Brigade-

Communist Army and she leaves him disgusted that he has abandoned the anarchist cause. This sequence confirms her dedication to the anarchist revolution as she places her political convictions ahead of her heart and rejects David on the basis of his political affiliation. David eventually tears up his Communist identification papers and returns to the anarchist front to join Blanca there, however, her loyalty to the anarchist cause turns out to be fatal as she is shot and killed in a dramatic standoff between the POUM militia and the Communist Popular Army.

Blanca's funeral serves as a counterpoint to Coogan's funeral earlier in the film and a foreshadowing of David's funeral years later in Liverpool during the 1980s. When Coogan dies the militia is at the height of their involvement in the revolution and at his burial the comrades join together to pay homage to his sacrifice and vow to continue to fight. Blanca helps carry his casket, a job usually reserved for a man, and she gives a rousing speech pleading for commitment to the cause and they all sing together shouting "¡Viva la revolución!" [Long live the revolution!] at the end of the scene (40:40-43:30). Blanca's funeral, however, comes at the end of the film at a more somber moment and only David is present from the battalion to witness her burial. In a parallel shot from Coogan's funeral, David carries Blanca's casket in the funeral procession. Instead of singing in solidarity, the townspeople at Blanca's funeral cry and wail at the loss of the young woman. David's voice-over of a letter read by Kim reveals the end of the revolution and the resulting desperation of the POUM militia who are now in hiding or on the run from Communist officials and labeled as traitors to the Republican cause. Blanca's death clearly symbolizes the death of the workers' revolution and the end of David's time in Spain. As Blanca's casket is lowered into the Spanish earth, we hear her voice-over repeating the speech she gave at Coogan's funeral pleading to never give up the fight for freedom from oppression.

This last ray of hope extends to the present with a cut from Blanca's casket to David's being lowered into the grave in modern day Liverpool.

This third funeral ceremony that ties together the narrative structure and brings closure to the film echoes the previous two funerals in both solemnity and political camaraderie. Mary Ann Doane has lamented that the melodrama depends on "the eviction of the female spectator from a discourse purportedly about her. . .-one which, in fact, narrativises her again and again" (77). Blanca has been narrativized by the filmic gaze, yet it is Kim who in turn narrates her grandfather's experience in Spain. She ultimately chooses what letters to read what details to include and it is her presence at the end of the film that solidifies the notion of transnational, transgenerational female solidarity. At her grandfather's funeral, Kim pauses the ceremony and asks to read aloud a poem she found among his collection of letters, clippings, and photos in the suitcase. She reads a stanza from William Morris's poem "The Day is Coming" and after rejoins the group of mourners who in solidarity raise their fist to signal the continued fight for leftist ideals affirming that none of the deaths in Spain nor David's fierce dedication to the Spanish cause were in vain.⁸ The red kerchief Blanca always wore around her neck is another visual code that connects the present to the past in this final funeral scene. Blanca's mother gave the kerchief to David as a token of her appreciation for escorting Blanca's body back to the town and as a symbol of their love. David fills the kerchief with a fistful of Spanish earth at Blanca's gravesite and it eventually ends up in the suitcase of memorabilia. Kim dutifully empties the red kerchief of Spanish soil onto her grandfather's casket thus bringing together the romantic elements of the film by uniting Blanca and David in death. Kim's narrative voice dominates the end of the film during the final burial scene, and it is her agency and decision to delve into David's past and reconstruct the events in Spain that ignite the film's plot at the beginning. Given Kim's authorial

role in composing the war experience, it is not surprising that Blanca takes center stage in her version of her grandfather's time in Spain. Kim's hand in narrating the past proposes an alternate approach to docudrama and specifically war history that underlines her fascination and respect of women at the front, of women with arms, of masculine females fighting for a cause.

Libertarias and *Land and Freedom* present women as queer, masculinized bodies that defy strict gender stereotypes. The words of Chris Perriam ring true when we think about the various modes of gender representation presented in the films: “[t]he several modes of engagement available to the participant in, and recipient of, these queer Spanish images reconfigure imaginations whether through a resistant and politicised viewing or film-making strategy, by identification with fictional and non-fictional personalities, or by rethinking (or simply extending) some older forms of identity. . .” (148). Through the narrative of agency and queer filmic discourse the female body defies the insistence of the male gaze and, in some cases, rejects the patriarchal domination of personal relationships opting instead for female friendship and homosociality. The traditional divisions erected by society that would separate these women into desirable and non-desirable are broken down and the female community of militiawomen encompasses a wide range of experience and behaviors. Our relationship to these images colors how we see history and what we consider to be relevant and truthful about the past. Women's presence in contemporary renditions of the war story begs recognition of their contributions during the war in Spain while queering the female body in the docudrama genre redefines our relationship to historical storytelling by questioning entrenched gender stereotypes. Both Aranda and Loach embrace female masculinity as a powerful visual tool that unsettles the viewer's preconceived notions about men, women, and war.

Notes

¹ Chris Perriam discusses the use of the term queer as a catch-all phrase that lacks specificity, is “deliberately unfixed” (10), and problematic. For the purpose of this paper queer is understood as a theory that does not enable any one terminology but rather aims to both “transgress and transcend- or at the very least problematize” (de Lauretis v) the relationship between bodies that depends on non-binary sexual identities. See Pérez-Sánchez for a detailed discussion of the terminology and previous studies on the topic.

² Women’s participation in the Spanish Civil War as soldiers and the feminist revolution that went hand in hand with the workers’ revolution of the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) were two important milestones in Spanish history cut short in the early years of the war. Several excellent studies (Acklesberg, Lines, Nash) explore the complicated dynamics of women moving from the private sphere into a very turbulent, politically tense public sphere and analyze the role of militiawomen, highlighting the revolutionary, yet short-lived, moment of liberation for females.

³ The POUM militia tried to avoid hierarchical military structures and instead took an egalitarian approach in which both men and women served. The Republican Popular Army prohibited women from armed combat.

⁴ An image of Bosé and María in a dress and scarf standing side by side was used to promote *Libertarias* (released as *Juegos de guerra*) for foreign markets. The fact that producers and distributors thought this more traditional rendering of femininity would go over better with audiences reveals how marketing promotes gender expectations. Another promotional poster for the film shows the prostitutes in their lingerie from the short brothel scene at the beginning of the film instead of showing them in their anarchist blue overalls at the front.

⁵ See Richard Porton’s interview with Loach about literary and academic influences for the film.

⁶ An important contribution is bell hooks’s work on the “oppositional gaze.”

⁷ Mulvey reacted to the criticism of her tendency in “Visual Pleasure” to refuse women any kind of pleasure viewing cinema because, after all, millions of movie-going females have enjoyed great Hollywood cinema including action and war films.

⁸ Kim reads the penultimate stanza of the Morris poem: “Come, join in the only battle wherein no man can fail, /
Where whoso fadeth and dieth, yet his deed shall still prevail.”

Works cited

- Ackelsberg, Martha A. *Free Women of Spain. Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. Print.
- Corbalán, Ana. "Homenaje a la mujer republicana: Reescritura de la Guerra Civil en *La voz dormida*, de Dulce Chacón y *Libertarias*, de Vicente Aranda." *Crítica Hispánica* 32.1 (2010): 41-64. Print.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. "An Introduction." *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3.2 (1991): iii-xviii. Print.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator." *Screen* 23.3-4 (1982): 74-88. Print.
- Fernández Martínez, María. "The Heroic Figure of the Anarchist Miliciana in the Spanish Civil War: Vicente Aranda's *Libertarias*." *The Image of the Hero in Literature, Media, and Society: Proceedings of the 2010 Conference of the Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery* (2010): 255-58. Print.
- Gómez, María Asunción. "Feminism and Anarchism: Remembering the Role of Mujeres Libres in the Spanish Civil War." *Recovering Spain's Feminist Tradition*. Ed. Lisa Vollendorf. New York: MLA, 2001, 293-310. Print.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998. Print.
- hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze. Black Female Spectators." *Black Looks: Race And Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992, 115-31. Print.
- Jünke, Claudia. "'Pasarán años y olvidaremos todo': La guerra civil española como lugar de

- memoria en la novela y el cine actuales en España.” *Lugares de memoria de la Guerra Civil y el franquismo*. Ed. Ulrich Winter. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2006. 101-29. Print.
- Land and Freedom*. Dir. Ken Loach, BIM Distribuzione, 1995.
- Landy, Marcia. *Cinematic Uses of the Past*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- Libertarias*. Dir. Vicente Aranda, Academy Pictures, 1996.
- Lines, Lisa. *Milicianas. Women in Combat in the Spanish Civil War*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. Print.
- Morris, William. “The Day is Coming.” <https://www.bartleby.com/42/730.html>
Accessed 17 June 2020. Web.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema’ inspired
By King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946).” *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington:
Indiana UP, 1989. 29-38. Print.
- - -. “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-
18. Print.
- Nash, Mary. *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*. Denver: Arden Press,
1995. Print.
- Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. 1938. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1980. Print.
- Pérez-Sánchez, Gema. *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture: From Franco to La
Movida*. New York: SUNY Press, 2007. Print.
- Perriam, Chris. *Spanish Queer Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013. Print.
- Porton, Richard. “The Revolution Betrayed: An Interview with Ken Loach.” *Cineaste*
22.1 (1996): 30-31. Print.
- Rubin, Gayle. “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” *Toward an*

Anthropology of Women. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975.
157-210. Print.

Schwartz, Stephen. "The Paradoxes of Film and the Recovery of Historical Memory:
Vicente Aranda's Works on the Spanish Civil War." *Film History* 20.4 (2008):
501-507. Print.

Van Liew, María. "Witness to War: Virginal Vicissitudes in Vicente Aranda's *Libertarias*
(1996)." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 25.3 (2008): 230-240. Print.

Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44.4
(1991): 2-13. Print.