



European Cinema Education  
for the Youth

# El verdugo

Luis García Berlanga

SPAIN, 1963

PEDAGOGICAL PACKAGE



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CinEd has joined a mission of transmitting the 7th art as a cultural object and as a support to understand the world. For that reason it was elaborated a common pedagogy, starting from a collection of movies produced in the European countries, partners to this project. The approach intends to be adapted to our era, marked by a rapid, major and continuously change, regarding the way of seeing, receiving and producing the images. These last are viewed on a variety of screens: from the biggest – those in the halls, to the smallest – (to smartphones) ticking, of course, TV sets, computers and tablets screens. The cinema is still a young art whose death has been predicted many times. It is very clear that this didn't happen.

These changes affect the cinema, transmission must seriously take into account the manner increasingly fragmented of viewing movies, starting from this screen diversity. CinEd publications propose and talk about a sensitive, inductive, interactive and intuitive education providing knowledges, analysis tools and dialog between image and film possibilities. The works are described on different levels, of course, viewed in entirety and in pieces, according to different temporality, fixed image, plan and sequence.

Educational brochures invite us to take the movie with freedom and suppleness. One of the major challenges is to intelligently get the movie open – mindedly: description, essential step of any analytical enterprise, the ability to extract, select, classify, compare, confront the images between movies and with the images of other performing and exposure arts (photography, literature, painting, theatre, comics...) The purpose is images not only to run but to create emotions ; cinema is an artificial art, extremely valuable for build and consolidate the vision of the young generations.

**Dossier designed by A Bao A Qu**

**Fernando Trueba** *Historical and cultural context; That happy couple and Two happy couples (or the bilingual bigamist); Reception of the film*

**Javier Rebollo** *Cinematographic influences; Comparative images; Connections with other arts*

**Pep Garrido** *Questions of cinema. The script: structure and the Berlanguian arch, motives and themes*

**Bernardo Sánchez** *Questions of cinema. The value of spaces: highlighting anguish; Selection of texts for 'Thoughts'*

**Núria Aidelman and Laia Colell** *Editorial; Cinematographic considerations for a screenshot; Analysis of a screenshot, a frame and a sequence; Comparisons with other films; Learning activities*

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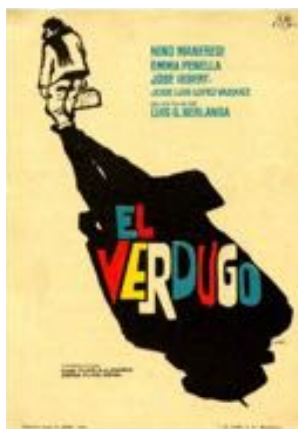
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## EDITORIAL

*El verdugo* [The Executioner] is one of the most renowned films in Spanish and European cinema. It presents the unmistakable work of Luis García Berlanga at its best, and his collaboration with Rafael Azcona, with whom he wrote many film scripts. Costumbrist in genre, with noisy, crowded scenes, brilliantly ironic dialogue, characters bordering on loveable yet grotesque, and situations that flirt with the absurd, Berlanga's films broach the most serious subjects with a unique brand of sarcasm, achieving insightful and hard-hitting social criticism with a deceptively light touch.

As with all great works of art, *The Executioner* goes further than its characters and situations, its dialogues and memorable *mise-en-scène*, providing endless food for thought. Moreover, it shares with the classics a profound universal value while managing to remain firmly rooted in its historical context – Spain in the early 1960s, already twenty years into Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship, with economic development in full swing. The film is a denouncement of the death penalty, but, as Berlanga himself said, it is much more than that. It is a film about freedom and the absence of freedom; about individual choice and conformism; about the violence and oppression society inflicts on individuals; it is almost a dissection of what Hannah Arendt called 'the banality of evil'. Ultimately, it is a savage, relentless reflection on the human condition. For all of these reasons, it is an absolutely necessary film today – beyond the fact that the death penalty has been abolished in Europe – of particular relevance for younger audiences who can use it to ponder on other less visible forms of punishment and death, individual responsibility and our duty to exercise it.



Spanish, Czech and Italian posters

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Original title:** El verdugo

**Original Italian title (co-production):**

La ballata del boia

**Year:** 1963

**Duration:** 87 min

**Format:** 1:1,66

**Country:** Spain / Italy

**Director:** Luis García Berlanga

**Assistant director:** Ricardo Muñoz Suay

**Screenplay:** Luis García Berlanga and Rafael Azcona

**Screenwriting assistants:** Ennio Flaiano

**Production company:** Naga Films S.A. (Madrid) / Zebra Films S.P.A. (Roma)

**P.C. Line producer:** José Manuel M. Herrero

**Photography:** Tonino Delli Colli

**Second operator:** Miguel Agudo

**Artistic director:** José Antonio de la Guerra

**Editing:** Alfonso Santacana

**Music:** Miguel Asins Arbó and Adolfo Waitzman  
(Twist *El verdugo*)

**Sound effects:** Felipe Fernández

**Cast:** Nino Manfredi (José Luis), José Isbert (Amadeo), Emma Penella (Carmen), Ángel Álvarez (Álvarez), José Luis López Vázquez (Antonio), María Luisa Ponte (Estefanía), Guido Alberti (director de la prisión), María Isbert (Ignacia), Alfredo Landa (sacristán), Chus Lampreave (visitante del piso en construcción), Manuel Aleixandre (condenado)

Takes and cuts

Social criticism

Composition

Spaces



Sound as a form of expression

## CINEMATOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR A SCREENSHOT

### COMPOSITION.

The framing in *The Executioner* is extremely complex and is achieved with masterful precision. Take, for example, the perfect symmetry in this shot. Depth and movement are recurring features of crucial importance. Every element in the shot is significant, constantly modified through each frame as a result of multiple changes in the position of as well as the relationship between the characters and the almost continuous movement of a camera that is perfectly in sync with the characters. We see the protagonist José Luis in the background, much reduced in size, while the executioner father-in-law is foregrounded, yet it will be José Luis later on who moves to the foreground when he sits at the table (symbolically taking Amadeo's place).

### TAKES AND CUTS.

*The Executioner* could be seen as a film about taking decisions, and as with every decision, it is always at the expense of something else that is cut out, traded off, excised. The protagonist seems to condemn himself to playing the role of executioner, taking decisions almost against his own will or, perhaps, from a lack of conviction (several times throughout the film he repeats the phrase, "yo no quería... [I didn't want to]" or, as he has just done in the frame immediately before the one above, "I always get the worse jobs"). Doorways and their thresholds are an incredibly effective visual metaphor for the dilemma of having to choose one course of action over another: José Luis always starts out refusing to enter spaces that lead him to the role of executioner, but he invariably ends up entering them, crossing the threshold, ignoring the boundaries that his own values should impose on him. He does it twice in this frame: first by entering the house, and then by going into the kitchen.

### SPACE.

Each of the spaces has been carefully chosen and arranged in at least two ways. On one hand, space contributes to how the characters are portrayed and, more generally, to how Spanish society of the time is portrayed.

On the other hand, it plays an important role in the mise-en-scène, allowing for many variations to the position of the characters as well as to the relationship between them. In Amadeo and Carmen's apartment, for example, there is ample potential for movement from the door, through the hallway, into the living room with the table in the foreground, to the kitchen in the background, and even to the window that opens onto the neighbours' yard. Every element of the set also has a function, such as the hand towel emphasising the washing of hands, and the lamp that provides a comparison with the electric chair.

### SOCIAL CRITICISM

Berlanga and Azcona, who co-wrote this and many other of Berlanga's films, are adept at dealing with the most serious of issues in a scathing and caustic manner, with only occasional flashes of levity. In a matter of seconds, any smiles that appear on the viewers' lips are replaced by stunned chills. Berlanga's and Azcona's cinematic craft was inherited from a well-established literary and artistic tradition in Spain, one which they continued, in which writers such as Quevedo and Valle-Inclán, and artists such as Goya made use of satire, esperpento (or the grotesque) and the macabre to create a jocular, irreverent picture of social and political reality.

### SOUND AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION.

Berlanga also uses sound to convey his satirical intent. The choice of automated dialogue replacement, recorded after filming, offers great technical and creative freedom. Berlanga preferred to dub dialogues, for example, so as to be able to rewrite them during the editing process. He builds up an audio leitmotif of metallic sounds which, like a basso continuo, remind us in the background of the mechanisms of the garrotte. Sometimes they are associated with the executioner's bag of implements, but on other occasions their source is more varied, such as the sliding of a door lock, chains, or even kitchen utensils.

## SYNOPSIS

### by Luis García Berlanga

José Luis is a young funeral home employee who meets an executioner called Amadeo during a service in a prison. When he returns the bag of equipment that Amadeo had left behind in the van, José Luis meets the executioner's daughter Carmen. A romance quickly blossoms, but Amadeo catches the couple in bed and they are forced to marry.

As these events unfold, Amadeo is granted an apartment for himself and the married couple, who are expecting a baby, through a state housing scheme. It comes with one condition: once he retires they must all leave the apartment unless his son-in-law inherits his position and is appointed executioner. While initially against the idea, José Luis eventually accepts the post, convinced he'll never have to carry out any execution given that the death penalty hasn't been applied in many years. However, the day comes when he is ordered to do just that. The family goes with him to Palma de Mallorca, where he must execute a prisoner. They try to make the most of their time there, treating it as a holiday, sure that a pardon will be granted. But José Luis is summoned by the police to attend the prison and has to be virtually dragged by two prison guards towards the scaffold where the prisoner is to die.

## II – THE FILM

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE FILM by Fernando Trueba

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE FILM,

A friend of Berlanga's told him the story of Pilar Prades's execution. Known as the 'poisoner of Valencia', she was the last woman to go to the garrote in Spain, in 1959. Apparently, when the executioner learnt he had to execute a woman, he was panic stricken and the competent authority had to inebriate him ('sedate him' according to the official version) to persuade him to do his job. So thoroughly was he intoxicated that he literally had to be dragged to the scaffold.

Almost at once, an image came to Berlanga of a large white room with the prisoner walking through it, accompanied by the usual cortège, followed by the executioner, who has fainted and is being carried by two guards. The image haunted Berlanga for several years until he and his co-writer Rafael Azcona set about writing the story that would culminate in that image and become the script of *The Executioner*. Berlanga used to say it was the only time in his entire career that an image had come to him first, before the idea or the story.

If a survey were done among cinema critics and historians asking which is the best film in the history of Spanish cinema, they would almost certainly be unanimous in nominating *The Executioner*. Such a survey among the general public would probably produce the same result. Despite the unanimity, however, this is a risky film rather than an academic film. Literally risky because of its subject matter and the political climate in which it was produced, which created obstacles that had to be overcome. Risky too because of the way the dramatic and painful nature of the subject was dealt with in a comical context.

*The Executioner* was filmed in 1963. The Francoist dictatorship, which lasted for almost forty years (1939-1975), had been in power for two thirds of its total duration and was preparing major celebrations for its misleadingly called '25 years of peace' the following year. Two salient crimes perpetrated by Franco's regime are relevant to the historical context of *The Executioner*.

Filming had begun on April 15th, 1963. It was a Monday. Three days later, on the 18th, a military tribunal sentenced Julián Grimau, a clandestine communist leader, to death. Two days after that, having been brutally tortured and put on trial without any guarantee of exoneration, he was shot by a firing squad of conscripts after the police and the military refused to carry out the execution. The execution was botched. After twenty-six shots, Grimau was still alive and had to be finished off by the lieutenant in command of the firing squad, a man who was haunted by the incident for the rest of his life and died in a psychiatric unit. Whatever about Berlanga's

**Fernando Trueba** : Director, scriptwriter, editor, film and music producer. His films include *El año de las luces* [The Year of Lights] (1986), *Belle époque* (1992) and *La niña de tus ojos* [The Apple of Your Eyes] (1998), co-written with Rafael Azcona. His first feature film was *Ópera prima* (1980) and his most recent production is *La reina de España* [The Queen of Spain] (2016)..

and Azcona's portrayal of society, these particular events could only be attributed to Franco. The film was to be premiered at the Venice Film Festival on August 24th when, one week earlier, Franco's government sent two young anarchists, Joaquín Delgado and Francisco Granados, to the garrote. Unsurprisingly, Franco was known as 'the executioner' in many countries. In Italy, Berlanga's film, which was a Spanish-Italian co-production, was called *La ballata del boia* [*The Executioner's Ballad*]. International protest against the executions carried out by the regime at that time was intense.

#### CINEMATOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE FILM

The cultural context of *The Executioner* is solidly established within the film itself in the scene at the book fair in Madrid when the protagonists visit the academic Corcuera. He is the perfect embodiment of the Francoist intellectual, signing his most recent book. Completing the scene is a trendy young couple who approach the book stand to ask about books by Bergman and Antonioni (whom no one has ever heard of, needless to say), and the boy who wants the leaflets (the only free reading material available, that we children always tried to get our hands on so we could dream about the books we couldn't afford). It would be hard to paint a better picture of the cultural climate of the time.

Historically, the 1950s saw the end of the international boycott against Spain with pacts between Franco and the United States, and Spain's membership of the UN. In the following decade, Spain became the location of choice for Samuel Broston's epic productions: *John Paul Jones* (1959), *King of Kings* (1961), *El Cid* (1961), *55 Days at Peking* (1963), and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). One year prior to *The Executioner*, David Lean had filmed much of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) in Spain, with *Doctor Zhivago* soon afterwards in 1965.

The Venice Film Festival of 1963, where *The Executioner* was premiered, showcased a new generation of British film that included *Billy the Liar* by John Schlesinger, *Tom Jones* by Tony Richardson, and in particular *The Servant*, scripted by Harold Pinter for director Joseph Losey, a masterwork that pre-empted the cinematic developments of 1968 and later.

Nineteen sixty-three also saw the publication of Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* [*The City and the Dogs*] and Julio Cortázar's, *Rayuela*. That same year Bob Dylan released his first album as an original composer: *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*.

This all came on the back of the revolution in European cinema that had started in 1959. It was an aesthetic revolution and the rise of a new generation. The French Nouvelle vague and British Free Cinema were its most obvious manifestations. Spain followed some years later with what became known as 'new cinema', some of whose most notable films were *La tía Tula* [*Aunt Tula*] by Miguel Picazo (1964), *Nueve cartas a Berta* [*Nine Letters to Bertha*] by Basilio

2 See Luis García Berlanga reflexion (p. 15).

Martín Patino (1965), *La caza* [The Hunt] by Carlos Saura (1965), and *La busca* [The Search] by Angelino Fons (1966).



*Billy liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963)



*Tom Jones* (Tony Richardson, 1963)



*The servant* (Joseph Losey, 1963)



*La tía Tula* (Miguel Picazo, 1964)



*Nueve cartas a Berta*  
(Basilio Martín Patino, 1965)



*La caza* (Carlos Saura, 1965)

In parallel with the new waves, Italy's jaded neorealism rose from the ashes in the form of the commedia all'italiana, resulting in such masterpieces as *The Usual Suspects* (1958), *The Great War* (1959) and *Comrades* (1963), by Mario Monicelli, *A Difficult Life* (1961), *The Easy Life* (1962) and *March on Rome* (1962), by Dino Risi, *Divorce Italian Style* (1962) and *Seduced and Abandoned* (1964), by Pietro Germi, *Everybody Go Home* (1960), by Luigi Comencini, and *Mafioso* (1962), by Alberto Lattuada. Although ignored by critics and the trends of its time for not being sufficiently innovative, the commedia all'italiana is one of the genres at the pinnacle of European cinema and comedy. Its blend of humour and drama, coupled with brutal realism, offers a rich, profound view of life and human beings that is closer to the truth than other genres. Apart from neorealist influences, its roots go back to the Spanish picaresque novel, as Monicelli himself repeated on numerous occasions.

It was during those years that Spain produced its own version of the comedic genre, a Spanish commedia, so to speak. We can, therefore, say that Spanish cinema developed not just under Italian influence but as two branches of the same tree. The Francoist dictatorship alone can be considered responsible for a quantitatively reduced output. The masterpieces of Spanish cinema are *El pisito* [The Little Apartment] (1959) and *El cochecito* [The Little Car] (1960), by Marco Ferreri, *Plácido* (1961) and *El verdugo* [The Executioner] (1963), by Berlanga, and *El mundo sigue* [Life Goes On] (1963) and *El extraño viaje* [Strange Voyage] (1964), by Fernando Fernán-Gómez. It is striking that the first two films were directed by an Italian, but even more curious (and significant) is that the first four films were written by the same person, screenwriter Rafael Azcona.

*The Little Apartment* (1959) and *The Executioner* combine a dilemma over property – if we can call it that – with death. In the former, the protagonist must marry an elderly lady so he



*El cochecito* (Marco Ferreri, 1960)



*El mundo sigue* (Fernando Fernán-Gómez, 1963)

can inherit her apartment when she dies, while the protagonist of *The Executioner* marries the executioner's daughter in order to inherit his job and keep the apartment that his father-in-law has been granted. The theme introduced in *The Little Apartment* is intensified here, taken to an extreme level of moral corruption and social decay, without resorting to the grotesque or black humour of Ferreri's film. *The Executioner* is, in fact, a film of utmost realism, whose greatest achievement is in showing comedy as a product of reality, the laughter it elicits usually giving way to chilling realization.

Technically, *The Executioner* belongs as much to Spanish comedy as to the commedia all'italiana. Moreover, it could be said to be Spanish cinema's greatest contribution to the Italian genre, given that it is a Spanish-Italian collaboration, co-produced by the Real Madrid ex-footballer Nazario Belmar (Naga Films) and the Italian company Zebra Films. The main character is played by Nino Manfredi (fifth star of the commedia all'italiana, along with Alberto Sordi, Vittorio Gassman, Marcello Mastroianni and Ugo Tognazzi). In a supporting role as prison governor is the excellent Guido Alberti. Credited as screenwriter, together with Azcona and Berlanga, was Ennio Flaiano, who wrote all of Federico Fellini's work until they famously parted company in the mid-sixties, and who was an influence on, if not a role model for the younger Azcona. The photography is by Tonino Delli Colli, Pasolini's usual operator. Flaiano's name as co-writer in the credits is due more to the bureaucracy of co-productions than to any real involvement. Manfredi was also imposed on the production by the Italian side, his good looks being somewhat at odds with the character he plays. Both Berlanga and Azcona would have preferred José Luis López Vázquez.

## THE AUTHOR

Luis García Berlanga (1921-2010) is one of the leading figures of Spanish cinema, renowned and lauded the world over for *Bienvenido, Mister Marshall* [*Welcome Mister Marshall*] (1952), *Plácido* (1961), and especially for *El verdugo* [*The Executioner*] (1963). His acerbic, tragicomic costumbrism and his unique perspective on the habits and mores of Spanish society have given us the term 'Berlanguian' to describe situations in our everyday lives, much like the terms 'Goyesque' – from Francisco de Goya – or 'esperpéntico' (frightful), from Valle-Inclán. His semantic reach goes even further: a 'Berlanguita' is the small, folding camera crane that is easily manoeuvred in small spaces, and was used frequently by Berlanga for his incredibly mobile recurring sequence shots, often involving many actors.

Born to a middle-class Valencian family, at the age of twelve Berlanga was present for the filming of the first talkie in Valencian dialect, *El faba de Ramonet* (1933), based on a sketch by his uncle. When Berlanga was fifteen, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) broke out. Just months before it ended, he was called at eighteen years of age for service by the Republicans and served in what was nicknamed the 'Quinta del Biberón' (baby's bottle brigade). In 1941, in an attempt to save his father from the death penalty (he had been condemned for founding the Republican Union of Valencia and as a deputy in the Popular Front) and so as to attract the attentions of an unrequited love, he enlisted as a volunteer in Franco's Blue Division and left for Russia to join the German army.

On his return to Spain, he started painting, set up a cine club, wrote prose and poetry, worked as a film critic for several newspapers and started writing his first film script, *Cajón de perro* [*Dog's Drawer*].

In 1947, he enrolled at the Instituto de Investigaciones y Experiencias Cinematográficas, which subsequently became the Escuela Oficial de Cinematografía (Victor Erice was to study there many years later). Among his first year peers were Juan Antonio Bardem, Florentino Soria and Agustín Navarro, with whom he co-directed the collective project *Paseo por una guerra antigua* [*Stroll Through an Old War*] (1949). After that, he independently made the short documentary *El circo* [*The Circus*] (1950). These were his first steps in a career that spanned more than fifty years and included no less than twenty feature films, as well as television pieces, unfilmed scripts, and plays.

Berlanga had already written several film scripts when he and some colleagues founded Altamira productions, whose first film was *Esa pareja feliz* [*That Happy Couple*] (1951), written and directed with Juan Antonio Bardem. Ricardo Muñoz Suay – another of Berlanga's regular collaborators – joined the team as assistant director. The film premiered two years later, after the success of *Welcome Mister Marshall* (1952), the first feature film he directed on his own, co-written with Bardem and the playwright Miguel Mihura. Widely praised by directors such as Abel Gance and Jean Cocteau, it was screened at the Cannes Film Festival where it received the prize for best comedy and a special commendation for the script.

After that, Berlanga wrote many scripts that never made it to screen (one of them in collaboration with Cesare Zavattini, one of the fathers of Italian neorealism and the screenwriter of

such films as *Ladri di biciclette* [*Bicycle Thieves*] (1948), and *Umberto D* (1952) by Vittorio de Sica). Then, in 1956 he filmed *Calabuch*, a rural story with an environmental message, and in 1957, *Los jueves, milagro* [*Every Thursday, A Miracle*], where he denounces the commercial exploitation of religious apparitions. Two years later, in 1959, Berlanga met the writer Rafael Azcona. Their auspicious meeting led to a collaboration on *Se vende un tranvía* [*A Tram for Sale*] (1959), and a pilot episode for a series that never got final approval. They collaborated on all of Berlanga's films until 1987 (*Moros y cristianos*) [*Moors and Christians*].

In 1961 they wrote the script for *Siente un pobre a su mesa* [*Sit a Poor Man at Your Table*], a critique of the hidden hypocrisy behind charity campaigns. Having been forced by the censor to change the title to *Plácido*, the film was selected by the Cannes Film Festival and won an Oscar for best foreign-language film. As a result, Berlanga went to Hollywood where he met directors of classical film, such as King Vidor, William Wyler, Josef von Sternberg, Frank Capra, Fred Zinneman, Rouben Mamoulian and Billy Wilder.

Following the success of *Plácido*, Azcona and Berlanga wrote *The Executioner* (1963), which was awarded the Critics prize at the Venice Biennale, in spite of attempts to ban it by the then Ambassador to Rome, Alfredo Sánchez Bella.

For almost six decades now, *The Executioner* has probably been the most celebrated and well-known of Berlanga's films among critics, filmmakers and audiences alike. For lovers of lists and categories, *The Executioner* is always top of the list when it comes to the best Spanish film and always features in world cinema listings.

Success for the Berlanga- Azcona partnership waned slightly with *La boutique* (1967) and *Vivan los novios* [*Long Live the Bride and Groom*] (1969), their first foray into colour. Both films were beset by production problems that derailed their original intentions for the films. After a short spell in Paris, Berlanga directed the French co-production *Tamaño natural* [*Life Size*] (1973), which was banned for several years in Spain. Returning to Spain, he directed *La escopeta nacional* [*National Rifle*] (1977), the first in the Leguineche family trilogy that gives a scathing portrayal of the Francoist political class and the decadent aristocracy, where a grandson of the dictator Franco is a consultant. Years later, the producer Alfredo Matas proposed a sequel which resulted in *Patrimonio nacional* [*National Heritage*] (1980), a comedy that follows the Marquis of Leguineche after the monarchy is instated. The third and final film of the trilogy was *Nacional III* (1982), a story of tax evasion.

It wasn't until 1984 that Berlanga directed *La vaquilla* [*The Heifer*] (1984), a script written with Azcona in the 1950s but that had failed to get past the censors at the time. During the eighties and nineties Berlanga's focus shifted to television and theatre, for which he directed *Moros y cristianos* [*Moors and Christians*] (1987), *Todos a la cárcel* [*Everyone Off to Jail*] (1993) and his last feature film, *París-Tombuctú* (1998).



## COLLABORATIONS by Fernando Trueba

Of particular significance throughout Berlanga's career was the work he accomplished with two other big names in cinema: filmmaker Juan Antonio Bardem and writer Rafael Azcona.

Bardem had been a fellow student for two years and they had teamed up for Berlanga's first film projects, setting up the production company Altamira and writing his first feature film *Esa pareja feliz* [*That Happy Couple*] (1951), while at the film institute.

With Rafael Azcona, he wrote the scripts (creating an entire universe of their own) between 1959 and 1987. *The Executioner* was the second feature film they collaborated on after *Plácido* (1961) and two episodes of a television series.

### 'THAT HAPPY COUPLE'

When *Esa pareja feliz* [*That Happy Couple*] was released in 1951, the title may well have referred as much to the couple in the film as to its co-directors: Luis García Berlanga and Juan Antonio Bardem. The film attempted to emulate the commedia all'italiana, incorporating influences from American cinema (*Christmas in July* (1940), by Preston Sturges), French cinema (*Antoine et Antoinette* (1947), by Jacques Becker), and British cinema (*Whisky Galore!* (1949), by Alexander Mackendrick). The most obvious influence is the Italian one (De Sica, Zavattini, Zampa...).



*That happy couple* (1951)

It would not be overstating matters to say that Spanish cinema came into its own in 1951 with *That Happy Couple*, launching the career of the most important director Spanish cinema has ever had (Luis Buñuel hardly ever made films in Spain). But some partnerships are short-lived and, after their next film, *Bienvenido, Mister Marshall* [*Welcome Mister Marshall*] (1953), Bardem and Berlanga went their separate ways. The direction Berlanga took was towards the anarchist dandy and humanist comedy, while Bardem followed the more militant communist path of social drama. In any case, both men spent the 1950s making the first films in Spanish cinema that can be considered classics.



*Welcome Mister Marshall* (1953)

### TWO HAPPY COUPLES (OR THE BILINGUAL BIGAMIST)

When Berlanga saw *El pisito* [*The Little Apartment*] (1958) and *El cochecito* [*The Little Car*] (1960) by Marco Ferreri, he knew that Azcona would make an ideal partner for his own films. He got in touch to propose a screen-writing collaboration on his next film, *Plácido*, which was presented at Cannes and nominated for an Oscar. Despite failing to win the award, it stands out with *The Executioner* as one of the crowning films of Spanish cinema.

It was also the beginning of Rafael Azcona's long and loyal relationship with each of the two directors, producing work with a costumbrist focus when he worked with Berlanga, and of a more apocalyptic style when he worked with Ferreri.

Azcona brought implacable rigour to Berlangas' scripts, and a degree of corrosive sarcasm bordering on bitchiness that had hitherto been absent from Berlanga's films. His inspiration came not just from the commedia all'italiana but from the Spanish picaresque and Chekhov. To these he added another no less important influence: Kafka's absurd as a key component of reality and existence.



*The little apartment* (1958)



*Plácido* (1961)

Sometime in the late 60s and early 70s, Azcona's pessimism, which had become increasingly dark and desperate, ended up pushing him down a kind of existential dead-end. A hint of this foreboding was already evident in the virtually unknown *L'uomo dei cinque palloni* [*The Man with Five Balloons*] (1968), by Ferreri, but it reached its zenith in a new set of four films in which he collaborated: *Dillinger è morto* [*Dillinger is Dead*] (1969) and *La grande bouffe* [*The Big Feast*] (1973), both by Ferreri, *Tamaño natural / Grandeur Nature* [*Life Size*] (1974), by Berlanga, and *El anacoreta* [*The Anchorite*] (1976), by Juan Estelrich.

## FILMS BY LUIS GARCÍA BERLANGA

- *Paseo por una guerra antigua* [Stroll Through an Old War] (co-directors Juan Antonio Bardem, Florentino Soria and Agustín Navarro, 1949)
- *El circo* [The Circus] (1950)
- *Esa pareja feliz* [That Happy Couple] (co-director Juan Antonio Bardem, 1951)
- *Bienvenido, Mister Marshall* [Welcome Mister Marshall] (co-writers Juan Antonio Bardem and playwright Miguel Mihura, 1952)
- *Novio a la vista* [Boyfriend in Sight] (1953)
- *Calabuch* (1956)
- *Los jueves, milagro* [Every Thursday, A Miracle] (1957)
- *Se vende un tranvía* [A Tram for Sale] (pilot episode for the TV series *Los pícaros* [The rascals], co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1959)
- *Plácido* (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1961)
- *La muerte y el leñador* [Death and the Woodcutter] (episode from *Las cuatro verdades* [The Four Truths], co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1962)
- *El verdugo / La ballata del boia* [The Executioner] (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1963)
- *La boutique* (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1967)
- *Vivan los novios* [Long Live the Bride and Groom] (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1969)
- *Tamaño natural / Grandeur nature* [Life Size] (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1973)
- *La escopeta nacional* [National Rifle] (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1977)
- *Patrimonio nacional* [National Heritage] (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1980)
- *Nacional III* (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1982)
- *La vaquilla* [The Heifer] (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1984)
- *Moros y cristianos* [Moors and Christians] (co-writer Rafael Azcona, 1987)
- *Todos a la cárcel* [Everyone off to Jail] (1993)
- *Blasco Ibañez, la novela de su vida* [Blasco Ibañez, The Novel of His Life] (for television, 1996)
- *París-Tombuctú* (1998)
- *El sueño de la maestra* [The Teacher's Dream] (short film, 2002)

## SELECTED FILMS BY RAFAEL AZCONA

- *El pisito* [The Little Apartment] (Marco Ferreri, 1958)
- *El cochecito* [The Little Car] (Marco Ferreri, 1960)
- *Plácido* (Luis García Berlanga, 1961)
- *Mafioso / El poder de la mafia* [The Power of the Mafia] (Alberto Lattuada, 1962)
- *El verdugo* [The Executioner] (Luis García Berlanga, 1963)
- *Peppermint frappé* (Carlos Saura, 1967)
- *La boutique* (Luis García Berlanga, 1967)
- *Los desafíos* [The Challenges] (Claudio Guerín Hill, José Luis Egea and Victor Erice, 1969)
- *La madriguera* [The Burrow] (Carlos Saura, 1969)
- *Vivan los novios* [Long Live the Bride and Groom] (Luis García Berlanga, 1969)
- *El jardín de las delicias* [The Garden of Earthly Delights] (Carlos Saura, 1970)
- *L'udienza / La audiencia* [The Audience] (Marco Ferreri, 1970) [version of Kafka's *The Castle* that he had previously tried to adapt with Berlanga]
- *Ana y los lobos* [Ana and the Wolves] (Carlos Saura, 1973)
- *La grande bouffe* [The Big Feast] (Marco Ferreri, 1973)
- *Tamaño natural / Grandeur nature* [Life Size] (Luis García Berlanga, 1973)
- *La prima Angélica* [Cousin Angelica] (Carlos Saura, 1973)
- *El poder del deseo* [The Power of Desire] (Juan Antonio Bardem, 1975)
- *La anacoreta* [The Anchorite] (Juan Estelrich, 1976)
- *Mi hija Hildegart* [My Daughter Hildegart] (Fernando Fernán-Gómez, 1977)
- *La escopeta nacional* [National Rifle] (Luis García Berlanga, 1977)
- *Patrimonio nacional* [National Heritage] (Luis García Berlanga, 1980)
- *Nacional III* (Luis García Berlanga, 1982)
- *La vaquilla* [The Heifer] (Luis García Berlanga, 1984)
- *El año de las luces* [The Year of Lights] (Fernando Trueba, 1986)
- *Moros y cristianos* [Moors and Christians] (Luis García Berlanga, 1987)
- *¡Ay, Carmela!* (Carlos Saura, 1990)
- *Belle époque* (Fernando Trueba, 1992)
- *La niña de tus ojos* [The Apple of Your Eyes] (Fernando Trueba, 1998)
- *La lengua de las mariposas* [The Language of Butterflies] (José Luis Cuerda, 1999)

## CINEMATOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES by Javier Rebollo

Luis García Berlanga's films share common ground with that most brilliant genre of Italian cinema, neorealism, and take much inspiration from it. From Zavattini's humanism and his love of ordinary characters, to Luciano Emmer's vocal crowd scenes and vivid dialogues. From the emotion and moral angle of Rossellini – who used to say that “the only moral point of view is tenderness” – to his love of sequence shots, where the characters' movements are followed by a crane travelling in a very small, tightly-packed space (usually in a set with very neutral tones), to his belief in automated dialogue replacement and the characteristic Italian method of having actors dub their lines at a later stage in the studio. In fact, sound production was a notable point of difference between Berlanga and Jean Renoir, who was another freethinking humanist and a fervent defender of direct sound and words spoken at the time and place of filming. The latter's aesthetic was also shared by Ermanno Olmi, another great Italian filmmaker of the time, who defended the beauty of direct sound in such daring, political and humane films as *Il Posto*.

Berlanga's characters are never cynical, nor does he adopt a superior stance to them despite his humour. He owes these traits as much to neorealism as he does to Rafael Azcona (his wonderful screenwriter for this and other great films, such as *Plácido*). Azcona studied and worked extensively in Italy and, as well as being involved in several outstanding films, was responsible for the script of *Mafioso*, directed by Alberto Lattuada, a cult film whose influence would extend to *The Godfather*.

Thanks to its being an Italian co-production, *The Executioner* (Italian title *La ballata del Boia The Executioner's Ballad*) benefited from having Ennio Flaiano on board (he had collaborated with Federico Fellini and Antonioni) when it came to adapting the dialogue for the Italian screen. The director of photography was Tonino Delli Colli, who was Pasolini's loyal cameraman, and a Spanish protagonist was eschewed in favour of Nino Manfredi, one of Italian cinema's great actors and filmmakers, renowned for his roles in the commedia all'italiana along with Mastroianni, Gassman, Tognazzi and Sordi. Imagining what a film would be like with different actors is an entertaining exercise and was exactly what used to happen frequently due to problems with deadlines or co-productions, as in the case of *The Executioner*.

Berlanga was fortunate to count on the friendship and professional input of Marco Ferreri, from Italy but also in Spain. Ferreri was at that time filming *El pisito [The Little Apartment]* and *El cochecito [The Little Car]*, which Azcona had screen written. The friendship between the two directors was to be of mutual influence throughout their careers.

**Javier Rebollo** is a director and scriptwriter, author of the shorts *El equipaje abierto [Open Luggage]* (1999), *El preciso orden de las cosas [The Precise Order of Things]* (2001) and *En camas separadas [In Separate Beds]* (2002), among others. His feature films include *Lo que sé de Lola [What I Know About Lola]* (2006), *La mujer sin piano [The Woman With No Piano]* (2009) and *El muerto y ser feliz [The Dead Man and Being Happy]* (2013).

There is one particular scene in Italian cinema that proved to be seminal and key to *The Executioner*. It migrated from the film *Guardi e ladri [Cops and Robbers]*, directed by Mario Monicelli, and Berlanga, in his inimitable style, unconsciously made it his own. In the final scene of *Guardi e ladri* we see Totó, one of the robbers, with a cop played by Aldo Fabrizi. The robber is pleading with the cop to take him to the station and put him in a cell. It was this scene that travelled through time and through cinema, settling into the final scene of *The Executioner*.

Freedom of thought (that quintessentially French concept), along with imaginative freedom were introduced from France by Jean Vigo and René Clair, with whom Berlanga shared credits, mutual admiration and humour. In a parallel development, the Czechoslovakian New Wave of cinema brought the director Jiří Menzel to everyone's attention for his dazzlingly tender yet absurd humour and his humanity. Even though Berlanga claimed he was never a film buff and was proud of the fact (which, needless to say, can be taken with a grain of salt), he included jokes in *The Executioner* that would particularly appeal to film buffs, with Bergman and Antonioni as the targets of his jibes. He also mentioned the Czech director several times during his life, as he did Miloš Forman before he went to the USA.

As with other contemporary filmmakers, he was influenced and inspired in America by the viewpoint and mise-en-scène of vocal crowd scenes, as handled by four outstanding filmmakers: Frank Capra, John Ford, Charles Chaplin and Orson Welles. These directors, who had much in common, cast light on the best and the worst of America with equal measures of criticism and tenderness in their treatment of individual characters and vocal crowd scenes alike. It was something Berlanga used many times in his own movies. To that, he added depth of field, a technique he liked and that was also employed by Welles and Renoir. Under Berlanga's direction it was less dramatic but perfectly suited to what he wanted to achieve in his mise-en-scène.

Moreover, in 1962 while *The Executioner* was being filmed, another character appeared on the big screen, epitomising the ordinary man. He was a lonely, though generous, office drudge, an innocent who represented the dream of the average American, very similar to our Spanish executioner. His name was C. C. Baxter, played by Jack Lemmon in *The Apartment* by Billy Wilder.

## CINEMATOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES by Javier Rebollo

### KEY WORDS FOR THIS VISUAL MAP

THE EXECUTIONER – RENÉ CLAIR – FREEDOM – SEQUENCE SHOT – FIELD  
DEPTH – CAMERA – TRAVELLING – CRANE – VOCAL CROWD SCENE – ITALIAN  
CINEMA – NEOREALISM – SUPPORTING ACTORS – LONG SHOT – CZECH CINEMA  
– HUMANISM – HAPPINESS – AMERICAN CINEMA – FRANK CAPRA – FELLINI –  
JOHN FORD – FRENCH CINEMA – CHARACTERS – JEAN VIGO – ANARCHISM  
– ROSSELLINI – ZAVATTINI – ITALY – BUSY – POPULATED – ORDINARY  
CHARACTERS – DUBBING – MARCO FERRERI – GUARDIE E LADRI – CHARLES  
CHAPLIN – RAFAEL ZCONA – LUIS GARCÍA BERLANGA

1. René Clair, *À nous la liberté* (France, 1931)
2. Frank Capra, *You can't take it with you* (USA, 1938)
3. Federico Fellini, *I vitelloni* (Italy, 1953)
4. Vittorio de Sica, *Ladri di biciclette* (Italy, 1948)
5. Mario Monicelli, *Guardie e ladri* (Italy, 1951)
6. Milos Forman, *Horí, má panenka* (Czech Republic, 1967)
7. Roberto Rossellini, *La macchina ammazzacattivi* (Italy, 1952)
8. Jiří Menzel, *Ostre sledované vlaky* (Czech Republic, 1966)
9. Charles Chaplin, *Modern Times* (Estados Unidos, 1936)
10. Vittorio de Sica, *Il tetto* (Italy, 1956)
11. Jean Renoir, *La règle du jeu* (France, 1939)
12. Orson Welles, *The magnificent Ambersons* (USA, 1942)
13. Luciano Emmer, *Domenica d'agosto* (Italy, 1950)
14. John Ford, *The sun shines bright* (USA, 1953)
15. Jean Vigo, *Zéro de conduite* (France, 1933)
16. Ermanno Olmi, *Il posto* (Italy, 1962)
17. Marco Ferreri, *El cochecito* (Spain, 1960)
18. Alberto Lattuada, *Mafioso* (Italy, 1962)
19. Billy Wilder, *The apartment* (USA, 1960)





## THOUGHTS FROM LUIS GARCÍA BERLANGA

### Excerpts selected in collaboration with Bernardo Sánchez

#### THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY'S INVISIBLE TRAPS

I really want to make it clear that the film isn't just a statement against the death penalty. It is, of course, but it also tries to elucidate the invisible traps society sets for us to curtail our freedom. Sometimes, one decision can impact the rest of our lives. In this case, because the protagonist chose to make love in this scene, - and I agree with you that it changes the course of the story - he ends up in a series of events over which he has no control: he has to have a son, has to get married, and even has to kill against his will. Society keeps pushing him deeper into a process of absorption that reduces the scope of his freedom. He spends the rest of his life paying for the mistake of having made love in his future father-in-law's house..

Thoughts from *¡Bienvenido, Mr. Berlanga!*, by Carlos Cañeque and Maite Grau, Barcelona, Ediciones Destino, pp. 49-66

The other topic, the serious one [...] is commitment; how easily people and contemporary society make commitments, how easily they lose their free will, their absolute freedom, their deepest selves, and become part of a system – to use a foreign expression that basically means 'to do well for themselves'. In other words, it seems to be astonishingly easy for people to make the leap from freedom, the freedom to be themselves, to loss of freedom.

Thoughts from *Nueva entrevista con Luis G. Berlanga*, by Juan Cobos in *Film Ideal*, 1963, pp. 449-458

*The executioner* is always regarded with a certain amount of disgust when it is society, paradoxically, that has invented him and maintains a need for him. In one of the final sequences, the police won't even shake Manfredi's hand when he offers his to say goodbye. Society is capable of accepting the death penalty but, on the other hand, it shuns the executioner. This schizophrenia, this dichotomy, was something I wanted to reflect in the credits, where I split some drawings from *Le voleur*, a book by Georges Darien, in two.

[...] One of the most important themes in the film, in my opinion, is to show how an individual can fall into the trap set by society, how his need for some small measure of security in life can lead him into a death trap. There's no doubt the executioner is a victim, of course he is. Manfredi becomes an executioner so as to get an apartment, guarantee a future for himself, and ends up treading the most unsure ground of all, the territory of death, eliminating other human beings.

Thoughts from *El último austro-húngaro: conversaciones con Berlanga*, by Juan Hernández Les and Manuel Hidalgo, Anagrama, 1981, pp. 95-103 5-103

#### SPACE

*Question: Manfredi [José Luis] lives with his brother's family in a small, one bathroom apartment, where the couple have to leave their son sleep in his room when they want to make love.*

Lack of space makes everyone very uncomfortable. The pressure that comes from lack of living space is a recurring theme in my work and in Azcona's, maybe due to the influence of neorealism. Reduced living space – which we had already seen from Azcona in *The Little Apartment* and *The Little Car* – is a perfect setting for the type of films we wanted to make back then. Not only that, but the space becomes even smaller as you put more actors into the frame. I've been particularly aware of oppressive spaces in some of my films, where the heat, repeated takes of scenes, and the movement of the actors and the cast all confined in a small space can nearly drive us crazy.

Thoughts from *¡Bienvenido, Mr. Berlanga!*, by Carlos Cañeque and Maite Grau, Barcelona, Ediciones Destino, pp. 49-66



*The Executioner* filming.  
On the right, Luis García Berlanga.

## AZCONA: DEPTH, THE COLLECTIVE

The bare simplicity, the elimination of all that Mediterranean Baroque, is Azcona's doing. My own visual sensibility, my natural tendency to slide over the surface of things, as I did in *Novio a la vista* [Boyfriend in Sight] (1953), that some of you like so much, has now benefitted, thanks to Azcona, from a depth that wasn't there in my earlier films.

Thoughts from *El verdugo en coloquio*, by L.G. Berlanga, J. Cobos, R. Buceta, W. Leiros, J.M. Palá, J.A. Pruneda and G.S. de Erice, *Film Ideal* 141, 1964, pp. 237-24

What Azcona's collaboration brings to the table above all, is the non-presence of the character detached from his surroundings. Azcona always writes from a holistic point of view that takes the collective into account.

Thoughts from *Nueva entrevista con Luis G. Berlanga*, by Juan Cobos, *Film Ideal*, 1963, pp. 449-458

## THE SEQUENCE OF THE HUGE WHITE ROOM: AN IMAGE

Many directors say they can fully visualize what they're thinking, what they want to achieve... I've never visualized anything prior to filming. It's only at the moment of filming that the thing – the image – comes to life... This was the only time I suddenly saw some kind of magic situation or premonition. A huge white room came to me out of the blue, an enormous room with people crossing it, with no furniture referents, nothing. A huge, enormous white room with a tiny door on the far wall, exactly as it turned out in the movie, and two groups dragging two people. The two people are being dragged by the two small groups: one is the person who is going to be put to death and the other is the person who is going to do the killing. And then we have the two people being dragged by those two groups, who in my mind were, well, society, forcing one of them to die, and forcing the other one to kill.

Excerpt from "*Berlanga vist per Berlanga*", interview shown on Canal 9. Full interview: <https://vimeo.com/53101672>

## THOUGHTS FROM ACTOR PEPE ISBERT (AMADEO)

That was when I did *The Executioner*, by Berlanga. It was a big part, a weirdly likeable character within his macabre role. He's the man who kills simply because it's his duty, yet he is incapable of hurting or offending anyone. He kills a person who has been condemned to death, but wouldn't kill a fly. The psychology is complex but hugely humane. I have very fond memories of my time with Berlanga and of the chats I had with my incredibly intelligent friend and colleague Ángel Álvarez, a veteran of Spanish cinema, which he regales with sympathy and generosity. He defended my crackly, hoarse voice when it came to the dubbing, and it was Berlanga's and the producer's patience that made my work satisfactory in the end. But the constant air from a fan in the studio made me catch pneumonia that got steadily worse.

Thoughts from *Memorias de Pepe Isbert* quoted in *El cine de José Isbert*, ed. Julio Pérez Perucha, Ayuntamiento de Valencia, 1984, p.218



*The Executioner* filming. On the left, Luis García Berlanga; on the right, Pepe Isbert, Nino Manfredi and Emma Penella.

## SCENE SEQUENCE



1 – Credits, splitting in two the illustration from *Le Voleur*, by Georges Darien. Music: twist from *The Executioner*, by Adolfo Waitzman. (from 0min to 2min 01s)



2 – A prison guard stops eating lunch to open the door to two employees from the funeral home carrying a coffin. They meet the executioner. (from 2min 02s to 6min 53s) [see analysis in “A sequence. An introduction that contains the whole film”]



3 – In the hearse, the executioner laments the fact that his profession is misunderstood. He says goodbye, forgetting his bag of implements. José Luis runs after him. (from 6min 53s to 8min 21s)



4 – Carmen, the executioner's daughter, invites José Luis in. They talk. “I think people should die in their own bed”, says José Luis. (from 8min 21s to 13min 10s)



5 – In the apartment that doubles up as a tailor's workshop, José Luis argues with his brother Antonio and sister-in-law Estefanía. The baby cries. Amadeo comes to collect him for an outing to the country with Carmen. (from 13min 10s to 17min 36s)



6 – During lunch by the river, Álvarez tells José Luis he should marry. Amadeo starts talking about a recent job he did. Carmen walks away. (from 17min 36s to 19min 32s)



7 – Carmen and José Luis slow dance. He asks Carmen, “Where would you like to die?” (from 19min 32s to 21min 23s)



8 – José Luis and Álvarez collect a coffin from a runway. (from 21min 23s to 22min 56s)





9 – At customs, the widow doesn't recognise her dead husband. José Luis phones Carmen and they arrange to meet at her house. (from 22min 56s to 24min 48s)



10 – Carmen and José Luis are in bed. Amadeo walks in, happy he has been placed on the list of state-sponsored apartments. After hiding at first, José Luis comes out to Amadeo and asks for Carmen's hand, "even if it is a lie". (from 24min 48s to 29min 04s)



11 – At the garage in the funeral home, José Luis is preparing a funeral. Carmen pays a visit and tells him she's pregnant. (from 29min 04s to 32min 27s)



12 – After the wedding of a rich couple, the priest officiates at Carmen and José Luis's wedding while the altar boys remove the carpet and flowers from the aisle and the sacristan puts out the candles. José Luis's brother Antonio and his wife Estefanía leave the church without signing the register as witnesses. (from 32min 27s to 36min 27s)



13 – Outside the church, Antonio and Estefanía are about to leave on their motorbike and sidecar when José Luis pleads with Antonio to sign the register. In spite of his wife's protest, Antonio gives in: "I'll sign, but nothing else". (from 36min 27s to 37min 23s)



14 – Amadeo, Carmen and José Luis visit the apartment that is still under construction. They've just assigned bedrooms for themselves when three women and a young seminarian arrive, assuring them the apartment is theirs. (from 37min 23s to 40min 35s)



15 – At the site office, an employee explains to Amadeo that with his daughter married and his own retirement imminent, he's no longer eligible for the apartment. (from 40min 35s to 41min 40s)



16 – José Luis, Carmen and Amadeo eat ice-creams in front of the building where José Luis should apply for the position of executioner, the only recourse if they are not to lose the apartment. He refuses to go in at first, but Carmen and Amadeo convince him. (from 41min 40s to 44min 17s)



17 – In the office, José Luis signs the application with Amadeo's guidance. He is number 37 on the waiting list. They need a reference to move up the list. (from 44min 17s to 46min 36s)



18 – Amadeo and José Luis go to the book fair to get a reference from the academic Corcuera: 'To the future executioner, who will continue a family tradition'. Young, trendy people ask for books by Bergman and Antonioni. (from 46min 36s to 51min 36s)



19 – José Luis collects his monthly wages. As he exits, he intervenes in an argument, fearing it could end up with one of the parties getting killed. (from 51min 36s to 55min 13s)



20 – José Luis, Carmen, the baby and Amadeo are living in the new apartment. José Luis receives a summons: he must carry out a capital punishment. He wants to refuse, but Carmen and Amadeo convince him to go, saying there will probably be a pardon. (from 55min 13s to 1h 02min 11s)



21 – The family arrives in Palma de Mallorca, among tourists, the UN flag and a beauty contest. José Luis tries to flee when he sees the police waiting for him. Finally, after Amadeo brings the bag of implements he had forgotten, he goes with them in the jeep. (from 1h 02min 11s to 1h 05min 21s)  
[see analysis in "A Frame. Foreseeing the final execution or José Luis's first death"]



22 – From the car that takes them to the guesthouse, Carmen, the child and Amadeo wave to José Luis as he pulls away in the squad car. (from 1h 05min 21s to 1h 05min 55s)



23 – At the guesthouse, Amadeo and Carmen discuss the menu with the landlady. José Luis arrives, saying the prisoner has fallen ill. They decide to enjoy the all-expenses paid trip as if they were on holiday. (from 1h 05min 55s to 1h 08min 02s)



24 – In a souvenir shop, three young Swedish tourists ask José Luis to take a photo of them. Carmen becomes jealous. (from 1h 08min 02s to 1h 10min 05s)



25 – Carmen and José Luis visit the Dragon Caves. While they are kissing in the dark and surrounded by Offenbach's music, three policemen arrive in a boat calling José Luis on megaphones. He leaves with them.  
(from 1h 10min 05s to 1h 13min 59s)



26 – In the prison yard, one of the guards sets up the implements for the garrotte with José Luis unable to offer assistance. (from 1h 13min 59s to 1h 14min 50s)



27 – A man who is a marquis brings champagne for the prisoner, while Amadeo tries to calm José Luis, ever hopeful a pardon will be granted. (from 1h 14min 50s to 1h 17min 17s)



28 – A prison guard goes with José Luis to the prisoner's cell. He looks through the door hatch but can't see anything because a cleric dressed in black is blocking his view.  
(from 1h 17min 17s to 1h 18min 07s)



29 – In the prison kitchen, José Luis refuses to carry out the job. He asks for the exit, wanting to go back to Madrid, no longer interested in the apartment and intent on resigning. He tells the prison governor his story and is offered the same champagne that was offered to the prisoner. A prison guard puts a tie on José Luis.  
(from 1h 18min 07s to 1h 25min 30s)



30 – Two groups cross the huge white empty room heading for a tiny door. One is the executioner's group and the other is the prisoner's. José Luis faints but is dragged to his feet. Everyone goes through the door until there is no one left in the room. (from 1h 25min 30s to 1h 27min 20s) [see analysis in "A screenshot. An empty white box highlighting two punishments"]



31 – At the pier, José Luis is back with his family after his first execution. He doesn't want to have to go through the experience again. "That's what I said the first time", says Amadeo as he waves goodbye from the deck with his grandson in his arms. The rich, fashionable tourists speed away on a boat with the music blaring. (from 1h 27min 20s to The End)

## QUESTIONS OF CINEMA

### THE SCRIPT: STRUCTURE AND THE BERLANGUIAN ARCH, MOTIFS AND THEMES, BY PEP GARRIDO

Whenever he could, Luis García Berlanga eschewed the classical concept of the script, which he considered to be ‘the Gestapo of the film’. He preferred not to be confined during filming, wanting scope to create, improvise and discover, as well as to dub the film afterwards in a recording studio. Like Fellini, he’d tweak the dialogues and perfect the sequences until he was satisfied with their final shape, sometimes even reinventing them from scratch.

If we consider the idea of a script in its broadest possible sense (not just the writing itself but how it affects a range of other issues, such as the structure, acting, and how the characters, dialogues and mise-en-scène are put together), there can be no doubt that the script of *The Executioner* is one of the most perfect and paradigmatic of all Berlanga’s films. Co-written by the director and Rafael Azcona, it embodies all the narrative and expressive qualities Berlanga ever achieved.

Berlanguism, an unmistakable style that is costumbrist and quaint, teeming with people and buzzing with noise, full of fast-paced, muddled dialogues overlapping each other, where levity is skilfully handled by Berlanga and Azcona to reveal an underlying horror charged with that scathing black humour so keenly appreciated by audiences in Francoist Spain: in the darkness of the movie theatre, a burst of laughter was a subversive gesture of freedom, a release valve for criticism.

Berlanga’s and Azcona’s scripts are perfectly fine-tuned, capable of getting past the censor and making it to film relatively intact despite containing some of the most merciless condemnations cinema ever made against the dictatorship. Spanish censorship was clumsy and unsophisticated, which allowed Berlanga’s golden trilogy (*Welcome Mister Marshall* – written with Bardem and Mihura – *Plácido*, and *The Executioner*, both written with Azcona) to spectacularly broach the taboos of religion, politics and sex, thanks to an intelligent and subtle narrative technique.

As Fernando Trueba explains in his discussion of the film’s context, the original idea came from the real life execution of Pilar Prades, ‘the poisoner of Valencia’, where the executioner had a severe panic attack and collapsed. When Azcona heard of the extraordinary scene of the executioner turned victim, his response was, “OK, then, all we have to do is add another hour and a half”. That hour and a half in *The Executioner* hangs on the story-telling method known as the ‘Berlanguian arch’, a cyclical structure based on emotional logic, where the non-hero protagonist ends up worse off at the end than he was at the beginning. The circularity of the script, which in *The Executioner* begins and ends with different executions, reinforces this structure. It comprises three main stages which we shall examine next.

#### Introduction.

A first act where the situation and the conflict are introduced. Three changes in viewpoint at the start define and introduce the three main characters: José Luis, a funeral home employee; Amadeo, an executioner about to retire; and Carmen, the executioner’s daughter. José Luis falls in love with the executioner’s daughter. They are caught in bed by her father, Amadeo, and forced to marry. She becomes pregnant. Amadeo is granted an apartment on a state housing scheme, but demand is high and, given that he is soon to retire, he loses the apartment. The only way he will be entitled to it is if someone in the family is a state employee.

#### Euphoria

A second act where everything seems to point to the conflict being happily resolved. The characters reach high levels of satisfaction so that the obstacles they encounter will be all the more effective and their fall all the harder. Even though José Luis is thoroughly repulsed at the idea of being an executioner, his wife’s and father-in-law’s insistence, and the need to provide for his son, persuade him to accept becoming Amadeo’s successor in the hope that he will never have to perform an execution. They get the apartment. Everything seems to be going well – José Luis even manages to buy a motorbike with a sidecar – when he receives notice that he must go to Mallorca to carry out an execution. Riding on the hope that a last minute pardon will be granted, and taking advantage of a delay in the proceedings, the family embrace the trip and have a wonderful holiday.

#### The fall

A fateful outcome that places the characters in the same or worse situation than at the beginning. The pardon isn’t granted. Under the pressure of the moment and pressure from the prison guards, José Luis finds it impossible to resign. The executioner becomes a victim. Arriving back at the boat, José Luis swears he will never perform another execution, to which Amadeo replies, “That’s what I said the first time”.

While the main characters are relatively complex and go through a long emotional journey (especially José Luis, an innocent man keen to improve his lot, whose ambition and circumstances ultimately force him to go against his moral principles), the portrayal of supporting characters and the social groups they represent departs from the stereotype, and is dissected with skilful precision. One example is Antonio, José Luis’s older brother, a tailor for the church and the army, who exemplifies the main pillars of the regime. The tourists are another example, an impersonal mass of foreigners who represent the regime’s key economic development strategy, ever ready to turn a blind eye because Spain is different.

## SHARP DETAILS

Worthy of attention, too, are the dialogues and small gestures that are repeated throughout the film, charged with bitter, barbed irony. Two examples below deserve attention.

a) Several veiled references remind us of execution by garrotte.

- Visiting the new apartment that is still under construction, Amadeo tells his son-in-law: “Cuidado, que te vas a desnucar” (Watch it, you could fall). In Spanish, ‘desnucar’ means ‘to break one’s neck’. [Sec. 14 – from 37min 23s to 40min 35s]

- Before going into the police station to sign up for the job of executioner, Carmen, who is on her way to the sales, tells José Luis she wants to buy him a few shirts and asks for his collar size. He can’t remember so she turns to Amadeo, an expert in necks, and asks, “Father, what’s his neck size?” A quick glance is enough for him to guess correctly. [Sec. 16 – from 41min 40s to 44min 17s]

- Just before the execution, one of the prison guards forces José Luis to put on a tie, reminiscent of a rope or the actual garrotte. [Sec. 29 – from 1h 18min 07s to 1h 25min 30s]



b) There are numerous references also to food and cleanliness, centred on one particular gesture that is repeated many times: the washing of hands. When José Luis goes to the executioner’s house, for example, to return the bag he had left in the van, Amadeo washes his hands after he leaves José Luis at the door. Just then, Carmen comes in wiping her hands on her apron. Once José Luis is inside the house, Amadeo dries his hands with the kitchen towel. The repeated gesture paints a costumbrist picture, emphasizing the high value Spanish society places on hygiene and cleanliness. But it is no doubt also an allusion to Pontius Pilate’s memorable gesture after Christ is condemned to death, when he washes his hands in front of the crowd saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood. It is your responsibility!” (Matthew 27: 24). When Amadeo introduces Carmen he says, “She’s very clean”.



Food



Cleaning

Clearly, *The Executioner* denounces summary execution, in a context where it is part of everyday life. However, it goes far beyond that, as Berlanga himself said. It is a film about free will and the lack of it, about the violence with which social determinism – and, by extension, an authoritarian regime – forces, blackmails and oppresses an individual. It’s about housing problems and the extremes the working class will go to secure a small apartment from the state in a concrete block in an unattractive Madrid suburb “with a great view”. And it is about death and the state’s prerogative to play God and impose death as it pleases, in the name of the law and of that other executioner, Francisco Franco, who for many viewers was also hiding in code behind the title of Berlanga’s film.

Berlanga described the moral position of his movies in these terms: “When I say society is shitty, I’m not sure that I’m insinuating an alternative solution. What I’ve said is that my movies and I sail on the same boat as this society. What I do, inside that boat, is always pee in the same place so that I might eventually make a hole that will sink the boat.”

### THE VALUE OF SPACES: HIGHLIGHTING ANGUISH, BY BERNARDO SÁNCHEZ

*The Executioner* is a resonance box, but one where everything resounds in a vacuum. There's no release valve, no exit, no horizon, no positive outcome, and of course, no possible answer. Everything resounds in a loop, collapses into fallacy. Everything implodes. Every word spoken – words of justification, love, promise, happiness, hope, consolation, pleading – are drowned from the outset. Choked to death, so to speak.

The individuals trapped inside this space – the three main characters, their family and work colleagues – can't cohabit, have conversations, love each other, feel, connect, move forward... They can't live. Not in any real way, with any degree of freedom. They live stifled non-lives. Because they are mutually conditioned. Because they choke each other, intentionally or otherwise. With terrible consequences. Unable to ever break the chain of dependency or utter anything to make things better. No-one pulls anyone out of the hole. Quite the opposite. Old Amadeo's life sentence is to be practically shunned by society because of his profession, Carmen is condemned to be the executioner's daughter, and José Luis Rodríguez – whose profession had already acquainted him with death, though he was in no way responsible for any death – will have to accept the role of executioner, taking Amadeo's place, in order to be entitled to an apartment that will enable him to marry Carmen, who is carrying his child, so he can bring up his son – a son who will, needless to say, forever be the executioner's grandson.

As a result, the film script forges on relentlessly. It advances, turning the screw (in every sense) on the multiple obligations that hang over José Luis, pushing him deeper into commitments, deeper towards the point of no return, deeper into a corner. A corner that will not only bring about his moral self-destruction as an individual but the death of a complete stranger. A corner where he will eventually find it completely impossible to say no, or stand his ground, where it will be impossible for him even to be heard (his refusal falls on deaf ears, and the pardon never comes). A corner so tight that when he looks back he will no longer be able to see where he took the first wrong step. A corner so dark he won't be able to recognise himself.

Society, and its structures, puts an inordinately high price on dreams, desires, personal projects, one that is extorted more expeditiously in a repressive, closed, coercive and deficient system such as was Franco's dictatorship. It had plateaued in the 1960s when the story of our two executioners takes place. The price is so high that people pay with their lives. At uncomfortable intervals. One more uncomfortable than the next. Be it their own life or, in the case of the executioner, the lives of others. From this socio-political and historical perspective, the film could be considered the story of a generation whose citizens, particularly the middle and lower classes, had to sacrifice many of their aspirations, ideas and plans in order to achieve any kind of prospects for their family.

The box that is the framework for *The Executioner* contains other boxes that act as water-tight compartments: a working class house in a busy street, a funeral home, a basement cum tailor's shop, a small apartment in a state housing scheme (seen first under construction, when it is no more than a hollow and exists only in the imagination), the Dragon Caves, an apartment, and all the rooms in the prison: the entrance gate, the visitor's room, the cell, the kitchen, and the corridor linking to the execution yard through what Berlanga called "the rat hole" (a small, black door that symbolises a mousetrap, leading to the scaffold). Other boxes are implied in alcoves, sacristies, cashiers' offices and various other offices, weaving a Kafkaesque network. Not least, there is the bag, the black box of this entire drama, with its creaking iron implements of death. Everything gets absorbed back into the bag, that travelling microspace.





Perhaps the most eloquent definition of spatial anguish, and of the lonely fight to carve out a nook for oneself in the box, is what José Luis says when they are imagining the layout of the rooms for the apartment under construction. He suggests to Carmen that they give her father the smallest room because, after all, he's an old man and at his age he doesn't need to breathe as much. Another paradox in the film – underscored generally by the tragic paradox – is that even though the space seems to open up at a certain point from Madrid to Mallorca and from streets to the sea, the sinister interior circuit that steadily drills through the couple's lives squeezes the edges of everything tighter and tighter until they are reduced to nothing and disappear completely. In an identical paradox, even though the characters seem to move from the grey ambience of Madrid to the brightness of Mallorca, the Mediterranean luminosity is almost unreal and nightmarish, more akin to the white of death.



The characters that populate *The Executioner* are literally boxed in, their bodies, words and deeds empty. Berlanga and Azcona don't hide the inevitable comparison between the figure of the prisoner condemned to death and José Luis's and Carmen's destinies. José Luis, the official executioner, is dragged to the scaffold through the huge white box that leads to the yard. We see him from above, greatly reduced in size as if he were a little creature, almost an insect, overcoming a greater force (another paradox) than the one exerted by the actual prisoner (played by Manuel Aleixandre who, as it happens, we only get a glimpse of).

This poetic and visual interweaving of spaces, dialogues and epic voyage into one continuum is achieved through the perfect montage of elements. Expert at handling space, Berlanga stretches and sharpens the dead time between actions in a scene until the emptiness becomes palpable and the progressive grinding of screws being tightened is almost audible. To this we can add Rafael Azcona's formidable ear. Not only is his sensitivity for acoustic effect unparalleled in Spanish cinema, it effectively captures all of Spain from the 1930s to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Azcona is capable of inserting speech in an urgent, verbose, fast-paced dialogue sequence that will ultimately fade to stagnant silence, with the characters unable to take action, zapped of energy by the box they are trapped in.

Where, then, is the black humour Berlanga is so famous for? It's an effect. We call it humour when we look at it from the outside in, because life, with its intractable contradictions, accidents and paradoxes, appears tragicomic and absurd. It makes us laugh, but only as long as we are not the subject going through the anguish. We laugh so as not to cry. Rafael Azcona used to insist that his intention wasn't to produce black humour; all he was doing was describing the internal mechanisms of reality, how real life plays out. And sometimes it is absurd and black. Granted, José Luis Rodríguez's predicament is an extreme case, with no way out, but the events of his life have many different analogies in all our lives. Life sometimes blackmails us, bleeds us or ties our hands simply because we chose to give in to some emotional or financial need.

## A SCREENSHOT

### AN EMPTY WHITE BOX HIGHLIGHTING TWO PUNISHMENTS

(sequence 30 – from 1h 25min 30s to 1h 27min 20s)



This is probably the most emblematic image in the movie. As has been noted earlier, it is also the first image that came to Berlanga (see 'The sequence of the huge white room: an image').

In a huge, almost abstract box-like space, with its colossal, dirty white walls against the grey of the ground, two groups of people walk towards a small door – a perfect rectangle, dark and flat, adding to the abstract geometry of the space. The door is the only escape route in the shot. In Kafkaesque style, a uniformed guard stands sentry, and everything leads to that door. The unforgiving coldness of the space, so totally dehumanized, is terrifying in itself.

Equally cold is the shot, to which the camera has been building up after the complex movements of this extraordinary sequence shot. The camera is high up, in a corner of the frame, in a similar position to surveillance cameras. With its impersonal eye, it can survey

everything, like Foucault's panopticon. From this slightly tilted angle, it magnifies the size and emptiness of the space.

In the first group, accompanying the prisoner, we can see the priest lagging slightly behind. He is a necessary accomplice to the execution, just as the church was to the dictatorship. Everyone in the group is walking in a dignified manner, head high. All are wearing black. In the second group, José Luis is the most distinguishable figure. He is the only one dressed in lighter clothes (he was 'on holidays', after all), and he is also the only person to buckle as he walks, needing to be dragged (he has allowed himself to be dragged through the whole film by circumstances, by familial and social duty, by his father-in-law, by his wife). Between his resistance and his physical collapse, the executioner becomes a condemned man. Some distance behind him lies his hat, forming a small white spot. José Luis is the only official to have lost his hat, that symbol of dignity. Harder to see on the ground, is a puddle. It's only water but is reminiscent of blood, visually heralding the crime.

In his discussion of 'Comparative images' Javier Rebollo posits that there is a rich dialogue between the whiteness and emptiness here and that of other spaces, from the prison yard in the opening sequence (filmed from the same angle), to Martin Creed's room, through Ives Klein, Michelangelo Antonioni, Grzegorz Klaman and Giorgio de Chirico.





## A FRAME

### FORESEEING THE FINAL EXECUTION OR JOSÉ LUIS'S FIRST DEATH

(sequence 21 – 1h 02min 11s to 1h 05min 21s)

The moment José Luis arrives in Palma de Mallorca, the police are waiting for him so he can perform his duty as executioner. As he has done so many times in the past, he recoils, trying to get out of it by not meeting the police. And like so many times before, he allows himself to be led on (in every sense). José Luis's final fall has begun. Berlanga condenses all of the protagonist's journey into this one frame and prepares us for the definitive moment of his fall, with him buckling and having to be dragged as he crosses the white room to the scaffold where he will have to 'act' for the first time [see analysis of 'A screenshot'].

The frame is arranged into three sections, three moments where the camera pauses. Unlike the technique for many other frames in the film, in this instance the camera advances in the same direction all the time, left to right, leaving behind the boat and any hope of a happy (or at least a normal) life, as it follows José Luis towards his inevitable fate. Let us examine the three sections.

1) The frame opens with José Luis trying to get away, Amadeo holding on to him and pulling him back so he will do his duty. The dialogue is succinct. Amadeo plays down the situation, saying "You go to the prison and then come back". On the one hand, "you go to the prison" underscores José Luis's ambiguous position as both victim and executioner. Those words could equally be said to a condemned man. Lurking in the phrase "and then come back" is the profound horror of acceptance. José Luis will indeed come back, as he will after his second visit to the prison when he will have executed the man who has actually been condemned to death. But there's no going back from his deeds. José Luis's denial encapsulates the attitude of all of society, who would rather not confront the problem: "I'm not going and that's final".

2) In spite of himself, José Luis eventually consents to be led on, not for the first time. He has given in throughout the whole film and it is what has led to his final punishment. He goes down the gangway, which is yet another symbol of crossing a boundary, along with thresholds and doors. He walks on, held by Amadeo, until he stops beside the police (figures of authority). The question one of the police asks, "Who is José Luis Rodríguez?" also captures one of the constants of the entire movie: the issue of identity. Who indeed is José Luis? He himself seems to deny or avoid his identity on a number of occasions (even when the historian Corcuera asks his name, José Luis says, "That doesn't matter. What matters is your signature").

3) Finally, José Luis starts walking towards the car that will take him to the prison, now accompanied by the police (on the side of authority). Carmen realises he has forgotten the bag. José Luis stops and the camera stops with him, but he doesn't go back for it. That task is left to Amadeo, who hands it to him, encouraging him (perhaps warning, or insisting), "Behave like a man". Once more, the words carry true weight despite being a



platitude and a cliché. Even though this is ultimately the story of an executioner, we are reminded of Primo Levi's novel *If This Is a Man*. It would make a good title for *The Executioner*, too. What does it mean to be a man? What is it that makes us human or makes us lose our humanity?

From that same position where the camera has paused for the third time, it rises slightly, perhaps as a sign or in preparation for what will happen when José Luis is dragged through the scaffold. In this third section, the camera no longer follows José Luis parallel to him and in profile. Rather, it stays in position as he moves away.

So far, we have analysed what could be considered the foreground of the frame, in terms of image and dialogue. However, the background has also been given masterful attention. José Luis is an isolated individual in the midst of a crowd. All around him there is a party atmosphere, which is particularly important to the *esperpento* genre. A beauty competition is taking place. The sequence opens, in fact, with a frame that begins by showing the United Nations flag waving in the breeze. In this way, Berlanga and Azcona convey a cosmopolitan society and an international community that, like José Luis, doesn't want to know. Several reporters appear in the background, all of them busy taking photographs, though not of the main plot, which is the most important thing happening, but of the superficial competition. Where are those reporters looking? What do the tourists see of Spain?

Another two elements that populate the background are worthy of mention. One is the small group of children dressed as soldiers, alongside whom José Luis walks, and the other is a gesture that is repeated many times over: hands and hats waved in farewell. Maybe they are ironically waving goodbye to José Luis, to the human being that he is (or was). At the end of the film, when José Luis has 'acted', Amadeo tells his little grandson, "let's say goodbye" to Palma de Mallorca as they wave and look out from the boat.

## A SEQUENCE

### AN INTRODUCTION THAT CONTAINS THE WHOLE FILM

(sequence 2 – 2min 02s a 6min 53s)

Being classical filmmakers par excellence, Berlanga and Azcona devote the first sequence to introducing the characters. And as master storytellers, they already hint in the first sequence at some of the major themes of the film. For that reason, the sequence is a microcosm of many key elements in *The Executioner*.

We can begin by observing the complex choreography in each of the six frames: the movements of the characters and how they interweave past each other; the movements of the camera in relation to the characters; the use of space where entries and exists seem to multiply, as if it was a modular stage. The camera follows one character, then another, often taking advantage of the moment where they cross each other to change the direction of its own movement, thereby creating skilful frame changes.

Hand in hand with vocal crowd scenes, we are given mobile viewpoints. Only on two decisive occasions is the camera clearly placed beside José Luis, who we already sense is the main character, the epitome of the antihero. The first of those instances is when the entourage that has been present at the execution comes out (we never see that particular scene, either now or at the end of the film). For the first time, the camera foreshortens one of the characters, who is, of course, José Luis. We see the entourage literally from his point of view. The second time is for a particularly poignant frame if we think of José Luis's introduction in the overall context of the film. It opens with a close-up where we see him behind bars, enclosed in the space where the death penalty has been carried out. From behind the bars he calls out, almost shouting, pleading "Open the door!". At the end of the film, when he is disoriented in the kitchen, he pleads, "please, sir, open the door". It could be said that José Luis is condemned to being condemned, to being an executioner. Maybe that is why it is he who, solemnly carrying that coffin with only one cross, seems to be 'carrying the cross', symbolically sacrificed. It is no coincidence that the first time we meet the protagonist in the film he is hidden behind a coffin: a faceless man with no personality. In the words of Robert Musil, he is a 'man without qualities'.

Many elements of this sequence will find an echo at the end of the film. The reason lies in Berlanga's penchant for symmetrical structures and his skill at weaving them. This can be seen two-fold: in what happens within this opening sequence, and in the film as a whole. On the one hand, the first part of the sequence, an indoors scene, begins and ends with the guard eating at the table. At first, he tries to have breakfast in peace despite the events taking place around him (the prisoner is being executed). He is also reading the newspaper (we can imagine what is making news and what is not). But at the end of the sequence, he eventually gives up eating.



1



2



3



On the other hand, the sequence is symmetrical with respect to the ending of the film when José Luis 'acts' for the first time. The same elements are repeated in that scene: food and death (much of the final scene unfolds in the prison kitchen); once again, there are numerous enclosed spaces that have a claustrophobic effect, with entry and exit being difficult; the huge room appears again, with its gleaming stain undoubtedly evoking blood; the camera angle is similar, as is the far door closing off the possibility of escape (see analysis of 'A screenshot').



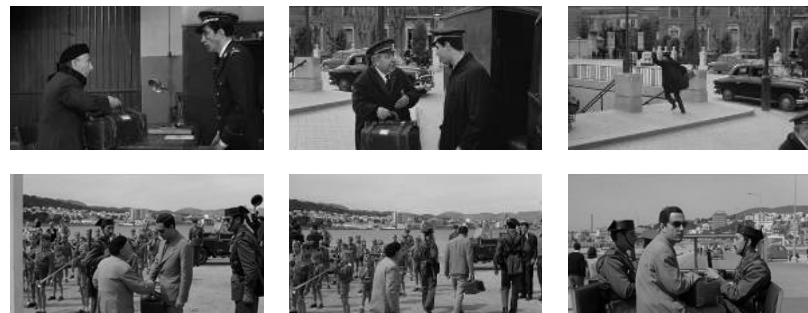
Even the dialogue provides striking symmetry. When José Luis's assistant turns to Amadeo, the executioner, for example, inviting him to go with them in the van, a reluctant José Luis says "I'm leaving". At the end of the film he will plead to be allowed to leave: "but I'm leaving..."



Lastly, we should be aware of sound in the sequence. It is as important here as it is throughout the film. Two musical genres are particularly striking: one is the use of 'cante jondo' (considered to be the most authentic type of Andalusian song, a profound expression of pain that verges on the existential). It accompanies the entire sequence like a base note and ends with the phrase "y quién en ese error no vive" [who doesn't live in that error]. Then there are the different metallic noises built into the scene, reinforcing the presence of the garrote we never actually see, hidden as it is in the bag. We hear keys, the unmistakable reference to the garrote in the door lock as it slides, the door hinges, objects being dragged...



We cannot end without commenting on a few other elements: the biting irony that already comes through in these first dialogues, especially when, having just carried out an execution, Amadeo tells the prison guard that he can't give up smoking (expressed more strongly in the Spanish dialogue, where he says he's not brave enough to give up smoking); the presence of the bag, whose symbolism and guilt associations increase as the film progresses. In this sequence, the guards don't want to see the bag or touch it. In the next sequence, Amadeo forgets to take it with him and José Luis returns it, mindful of protecting his hands with his cape so as not to directly touch the dreaded object. Yet despite his precautions, contact with the bag leads to his eventual punishment. In a reversal of roles, when they arrive in Palma de Mallorca, José Luis will be the one to forget the bag, with Amadeo bringing it to him so that he can perform his duty as executioner for the first time.



## COMPARATIVE IMAGES, by Javier Rebollo

Nineteen sixty-two, the year in which Luis García Berlanga filmed *The Executioner*, was the year Andy Warhol held his first exhibition. The great pop artist immortalised the electric chair (a death machine as gruesome as the Spanish garrotte and the French guillotine), boxes of detergent and Campbell's soup. Nineteen sixty-two was also the year of the first pop exhibition, an example of popular and mass culture, American consumerism as art.

The image of Spain portrayed in *The Executioner* is of a country anchored to the dictatorship and bureaucracy (like Franz Kafka's novels), yet turning towards the sun and tourism. A country where the death penalty was still used as the ultimate punishment. A country that was hostage to misunderstood and backward-looking religiosity (like one of Nicolas Müller's photographs or Darío de Regoyos's paintings), subjugated by an authoritarian concept of family and state (embodied in film by the police, as they appear in photographs by Eugene Smith).

Fear was palpable among the people and the police, those servants of the state that became a laughing stock for a time because of a real-life convict known as 'el Lute', who was also later fictionalised. In that grey yet sunny Spain, the citizen, the human being, was alienated and reduced to nothing (like Isaac Cordal's little figures in a filing cabinet).

All of this is illustrated in the film with Kafkaesque humour and absurdity, with tenderness of a very Spanish hue, typical of the satirical magazine *La codorniz*, edited by Miguel Mihura and Chumy Chúmez, to which Azcona contributed. Azcona, of course, was Berlanga's screenwriter, while Mihura and Azcona co-wrote, *Welcome, Mister Marshall* with Berlanga.

The film's main theme is the denouncement of the death penalty and torture (as it was in another key film, *Queridísimos verdugos* [Dearest Executioners] by Basilio Martín Patino, or in Goya's and Gustave Doré's engravings, or Joan Brossa's installation). It is visually and gravely embodied in the metaphysical space of the prison yard before the execution. The space reminds us of Giorgio de Chirico's paintings, or movies by Antonioni, who in 1962 filmed *The Eclipse*, and whom Berlanga mentions in *The Executioner* in the sequence set at the book fair. The funeral procession in the last scene has analogies in other happier, though equally dark processions (such as Solana's drawings and paintings), the parties de campagne or the coast and the beach that appear in *The Executioner* (reminiscent of Martin Parr's sarcastic photography and non-glamorous documentaries).

Emptiness and Nothing are the two great subjects of contemporary art: John Cage composed his 4'33 in 1962, emptying space itself, from the darkness of Malévich through the emptiness of Yves Klein – who also died in 1962 – to British artist and composer Martin Creed, who won the Turner Prize thirty years after *The Executioner* was filmed, with his installation of an empty room where the lights switch on and off. Alongside machines associated with death and torture as the embodiment of horror, we have useless machines and modern art sculptures such as those of Jean Tinguely or Chillida.

1. Antoni Tàpies, *Alegato a la pena de muerte*, [Denouncement of the Death Penalty], 1975
2. Joaquim Gomis, *Untitled*, 1947
3. Joan Brossa, *El convidat / The Invitee*, 1986-1990
4. Jean Tinguely, *Máquina*, 1965
5. Advertisement for Ataúdes Fernández coffin-makers, compiled by Luis Carrandell in his column 'Celtiberia Show' published in the weekly paper *Triunfo*
6. Gustave Doré, *Execution of an Assassin in Barcelona*, 1847
7. Andy Warhol, Exhibition invitation in Cologne, *Ten electric chairs*, 1967
8. Luis García Berlanga, Scene cut from *The Executioner*, 1963
9. Manolo Millares, *Los curas* [The Priests], 1960-64
10. Luis García Berlanga, *The Executioner*, 1963
11. Franz Kafka, Drawing from the series *The black marionettes hanging from invisible threads*, 1917 [reframed]
12. Josep Maria Subirachs, 1962
13. Chumy Chúmez
14. Basilio Martín Patino, *Queridísimos verdugos*, [Dearest Executioners], Spain, 1977
15. Francisco de Goya, *The Garrotted Man*, 1799
16. Nicolás Muller, *Serrano en traje de procesion* [Country man in a procession suit], Cuenca, 1948
17. Darío de Regoyos, *Viernes Santo en Orduña* [Good Friday in Orduña], 1903
18. Jake y Dinos Chapman, *In our dreams we have seen another world*, Art Basel Miami Beach, 2013 [detalle de la obra]
19. Luis García Berlanga, *The Executioner*, 1963
20. José Gutiérrez Solana, *Murga gaditana*, [Cadiz murga] 1945 [reframed]
21. Luis García Berlanga, *The Executioner*, 1963
22. Borgata Gordiani, *suburb on the outskirts of Rome*
23. Cover of the magazine *La Codorniz*, # 1467 dedicated to development.

28 December, 1969

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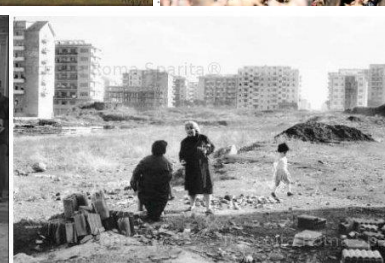
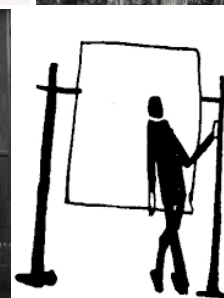
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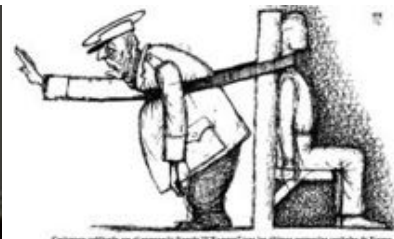
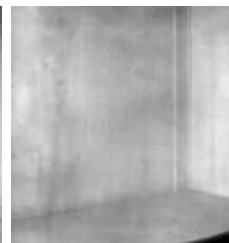
### by Javier Rebollo

#### KEY WORDS FOR THIS VISUAL MAP

THE EXECUTIONER – DEATH PENALTY – GARROTE – ELECTRIC CHAIR  
 GUILLOTINE – DEATH MACHINE(S) – DEATH – EXECUTIONER – CONDEMNED  
 MAN – RELIGION – BACKWARD-LOOKING – ARTIST'S MACHINE – HUMOUR  
 KAFKA – TORTURE – FESTIVAL – PROCESSION – STATE – FAMILY – SPAIN  
 SUMMER – BEACH – POP ART – DEVELOPMENT – HOUSING – CONSUMERISM  
 EMPTINESS – CONTEMPORARY ART – MODERN ART – 1962 AND 1963  
 ALIENATION – HUMAN BEING – BUREAUCRACY – DICTATOR – NOTHING  
 ABSURD – LUIS GARCÍA BERLANGA

24. Tom Wesselmann, *Still life n°12*, 1962
25. Luis García Berlanga, *The Executioner*, 1963
26. Oriol Maspons, *El primer bikini en Ibiza*, [The First Bikini in Ibiza], 1953
27. W. Eugene Smith, *Spanish village*, report published in Life magazine on 9 April, 1951. The publication is of 16 photographs of Deleitosa, a town in the Extremadura region of Spain.
28. Martin Parr, *Life's a beach*, 2013
  
29. El Lute being escorted by police during his trial at the Audiencia Nacional, June 1973
30. Luis García Berlanga, *The Executioner*, 1963
31. Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'eclisse* [The Eclipse], 1962
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33. Luis García Berlanga, *The Executioner*, 1963
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## COMPARISONS WITH OTHER FILMS

### THE EXECUTIONER AND THE MAN WITHOUT A PAST: LOSS OF IDENTITY

A man is brutally beaten outside a train station. Having been on the verge of death, he can remember absolutely nothing when he recovers consciousness: not his name, where he lives, whether he has a family, what he works at. He doesn't know who he is and has become precisely as Aki Kaurismäki's film title says, *The Man Without a Past*. This is not just a story (almost a fable) but a reflection on identity. The theme of the individual is also central to *The Executioner*.

While the protagonist of *The Man Without a Past* (Mies vailla menneisyyttä, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002) loses his identity because he was a victim of violence, José Luis seems to lose his identity (or shirks it) insofar as he goes along with acting within and subjecting himself to a system that is to a large extent sustained by violence. He upholds the system as if it were part of himself. While one man has no past and must reconstruct a life from scratch because he was the victim of an attack, José Luis seems condemned to a fate that appears to be inevitable: every aspect of his life seems to be (pre)determined, events are inexorably linked. In spite of not knowing who he is (or perhaps because of it), M (as the anonymous protagonist is called in the credits) goes forth with dignity and tries to construct a life for himself in a simple, dignified way, showing integrity in love and the respect he has for others. He has ended up in a kind of large open space with blurred borders, somewhere on the fringes (almost not part of the world) where people who have nothing establish bonds of solidarity with the help of a 'salvation project' that offers support and food.

That salvation army is in stark contrast to the social army represented by the omnipresent police in *The Executioner*, by all the state employees, and by a society that totally depends on power – like Amadeo, Antonio and his family, and in the end, like José Luis and his family – all of whom follow its orders, or at least are under its control.

While M "has nothing", as his beloved Irma says, he has himself (even though he has no name). José Luis, on the other hand, manages to climb the social ladder little by little: he finds a wife, has a child, improves his wages after he takes on the job of executioner, secures the little apartment on the state's official housing scheme (the bureaucratic wording says it all), and even manages to buy a motorbike with a sidecar that he can enjoy with his wife, who is happy to be able to go in it to the sales. Yet the more he has, the shakier the ground he walks on. Until he arrives at the doors of death (literally), when he will no longer be able to even stand on his own two feet.

Both films, then, ask questions about identity, about what it means to be a man, and about the relationship between an individual and the society he lives in, a society that always tries to oppress. At the end of *The Man Without a Past*, when the same criminals at the station plan on attacking M again (now called Jaako), a throng of people hobbling and in rags appears as if in a dream, like a group of zombies. This imagined scenario had already been hinted at towards the beginning of the movie, when M regains consciousness in hospital, bandaged from head to toe like a mummy. Nothing could be visually further from that scenario than *The Executioner*, but if we compare the two movies, the question arises of whether the world presented in *The Executioner* might also be one of the living dead.

Beyond the question of identity, which is central to both films, another aspect that is important to compare is the distance Berlanga and Kaurismäki put between themselves and their characters. Both films could be said to be cold, narrated in a distant tone. At no point do the protagonists demand empathy of the viewer. In this respect, both films can also be compared to Kafka's stories. It can't be a coincidence that, like Kafka's characters who are so often called K, the name of the main character in *The Man Without a Past* is also an initial – a name by which he is never actually called in the film. Similar parallels can be drawn with the way Kafka constructs almost abstract worlds, mechanically organised by a relentless, invisible authority that seems to subject everything to the absurd and condemn everyone to a process of dehumanization.



*The Man without a past* (2002)



*The Executioner* (1963)



## THE EXECUTIONER AND IL POSTO: PORTRAITS OF AN ERA AND A SOCIETY

*Il posto* [The Job] (Ermanno Olmi, 1961) precedes *The Executioner* by only two years. Both films offer a fine portrait of their time and of societies that have much in common: the central role of the family, the Catholic tradition, even Fascism (which had fallen in Italy in 1943 but undoubtedly still influenced people's thinking and even certain social mechanisms). Another parallel between the films is the backdrop of miraculous economic growth that Western Europe enjoyed during the 1960s. All citizens – especially the working class (whether in the city or the country) – aspired to and believed in an improved social status: a more comfortable lifestyle that was often (and still is) associated with expressions such 'decent standard of living' or 'wellbeing', which mostly refer to material aspects of life, with little regard for how those lifestyles might be achieved.

The characters of *Il posto* and *The Executioner* share humble origins. Early in both films we see that they lack their own living space: Domenico is sleeping in a corner of the kitchen, while José Luis is living in a corner of his brother's basement. Together with Magalí, Domenico will discover and covet every product the city can offer. Carmen will prove to be delighted to go to the sales thanks to José Luis's extra income from his job as an executioner.

As the titles of both films indicate, work plays a decisive role for the characters, albeit in a general way in the Italian film (*The Job*) and in a more concrete way in the Spanish film (*The Executioner*). Nevertheless, neither character seems to have chosen his job. In Domenico's case, it is his father who decides he should leave his studies to start working. What he works at is of little concern as long as it's in a large company that will guarantee him a job for life. In José Luis's case, a series of interlinked events seems to condemn him to firstly accepting the job of executioner, and finally carrying it out. Both films end under the shadow of that punishment. Moreover, in both cases sound plays an important role in emphasising the inexorability of fate. *Il posto* ends with a memorable foreground shot of Domenico, almost crushed by the background din from the paper perforators, getting louder and louder until it fills the frame. In the final frame of *The Executioner*, after José Luis

has 'acted' for the first time, he arrives at the boat where his family is waiting for him and sits beside his wife, repeating "I won't do it anymore!" while the clucking of caged hens in the background behind him rings more cruelly true than his words.

However, despite these background elements, Olmi and Berlanga are very different filmmakers, and these two films reflect that. While in *The Executioner* we are aware of the distance Berlanga places between himself and his characters, in *Il posto* we are fully immersed in Domenico's first days in the city and his coming-of-age always from his viewpoint, empathising with his experiences and emotions. By way of example, it is interesting to compare the opening scenes of both films, which portray the main character. We observe how the camera movements in *Il posto* work to draw us close to Domenico and take his side, whereas in *The Executioner* the camera travels the space, changing from one character to another without creating any sense of empathy for or identification with José Luis. The tone of each film is almost diametrically opposed: *The Executioner* drowns the viewer along with the character, whereas *Il posto* offers scope for happiness as we run with Magalí and Domenico, holding hands, or feel their nerves as they embark on their first love.



*Il posto* (1961)



*The Executioner* (1963)

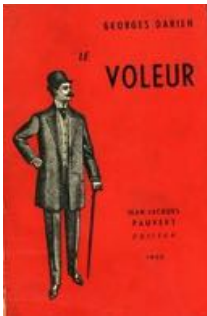
## THE HISTORICAL, POLITICAL AND ARTISTIC CONTEXT, by Javier Rebollo

### ALL THE CONDEMNED PEOPLE IN THE WORLD.

«*The Executioner* is a film that speaks out against the death penalty in the guise of a black comedy. Berlanga liked to call his film 'nonsense' or 'esperpento', evoking Goya and Valle-Inclán, a painter and a writer, to explain a film that, precisely because of its humour, can dramatically and visually fire its meanings in all directions, thereby expanding them.

*The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow.*  
Mark Twain

The credits in *The Executioner*, with the musical swing, are the only instance of music that isn't heard in the film itself, getting the viewer 'in the mood'. For the credits, Berlanga, who was an avid reader, resorted to a very private intertextual game by appropriating an illustration from the novel *Le Voleur*, by Georges Darien (which was later filmed by Louis Malle with Jean-Paul Belmondo in 1973). Darien was a freethinking anarchist, highly critical of the society he lived in, and the character he invented was an elegant and happy Parisian bandit who was the scourge of the sanctimonious, prudish bourgeoisie. The illustration Berlanga 'appropriated' is repeated throughout the credits, but cropped in every frame by the edge of the screen. According to Berlanga, who rarely gave explanations and without whose words it might be hard to interpret the distorted images, they reflect "the schizophrenia of a society that accepts the death penalty but not the executioner".



Berlanga,  
appropriationist.

*People who say the garrotte is inhuman make me laugh. [...] And what about the Americans! The electric chair has thousands of volts. They turn black, scorched. Where is the humanity of that famous chair?*

Pepe Isbert as Amadeo in *The Executioner*

Thomas Alva Edison, famous and revered for inventing the lightbulb, also invented the record player and the kinetoscope. Controversially, and to his own benefit, he promoted electricity in the home and the electric chair, which he defended in the United States, fully convinced that it was an effective way of applying the death penalty.

The pictures below show a photograph of a melodramatic fictional take on the electric chair, and a screenshot of a strange film Edison made of an elephant dying on screen, electrocuted by a powerful electrical discharge. The film was made to be viewed by one viewer at a time, looking through a small viewing hole into a box, moving the images by turning a crank.



The electric chair, a very real fiction.

*The devastating, degrading fear that is imposed on the condemned for months or years is a punishment more terrible than death. The death penalty is no more than an act of revenge carried out from a structure created by citizens who look the other way.*

Albert Camus

In 1957, Albert Camus won the Nobel Prize for Literature and published *Reflections on the Guillotine*, a long, spirited essay against the death penalty that should be compulsory reading in every school. Like Berlanga, many artists and intellectuals – among them Victor Hugo, Émile Zola, Walter Benjamin, Arthur Koestler, John Dos Passos, Elias Canetti – have written about capital punishment, about death sanctioned by men and the state. The year *The Executioner* was premiered in Venice, the guillotine was still used in France (the last execution was in 1977). President François Mitterrand abolished it by law in 1981 but it was still constitutionally permissible until the year 2000.



Albert Camus and Thomas A. Edison, two famous men against and for the death penalty.

Spain in 1962 was going through unexpected economic development, looking beyond its own borders. This was reflected in the tourist boom, with people and their money flocking to the country in search of the sun and a folksy image of Spain. While that was happening, however, Francisco Franco's cruel dictatorship remained locked in its labyrinth, applying state terrorism and carrying out executions at will. That was the year Julián Grimau, a prominent politician and clandestine communist leader, was detained. Grimau was brutally tortured, tried by a military tribunal and put on trial without any guarantee of exoneration. He was shot on April 20th 1963, just five days before filming on *The Executioner* began, as Fernando Trueba mentions. His death inspired poems in his memory from playwright

Alfonso Sastre and the great poet in exile León Felipe, and a song by Chicho Fernández Ferlosio, an unorthodox Spanish singer-songwriter who stands up for minorities and the disadvantaged.

*To the glorious general Francisco Franco after he signed Grimau's sentence by firing squad*

(Sir...  
Your handwriting is truly lovely!  
Such beautiful barracks calligraphy!  
It's how tyrants write, isn't it?  
And glorious dictators...!  
Such a steady hand!  
Both of you have the same rank,  
the same stripes.  
The General differs from the executioner  
only  
in that the General's writing is lovelier,  
for signing a death warrant  
your handwriting must be really lovely...  
Your handwriting is truly lovely, Sir!)

León Felipe  
Nueva antología rota



Julián Grimau painted from memory by Domingo Malagón for the mass protest in Paris after his execution

For the premiere of *The Executioner* in Venice, Ricardo Muñoz Suay, who was the producer and Berlanga's assistant director, had thought of using a print by Goya that shows a man being garrotted. 'Muchos acaban así' (Many have ended up like this), says the aquatint. It may have been an attempt at some black humour of his own, but the exhibition coincided with the execution of two other young Spanish anarchists, so Muñoz Suay decided against his original idea.

In 1962, the Prado museum purchased a comical and buffoonish Goya. It is a little-known painting depicting a group of comedians in costume, one of them with aristocratic affectations, one a drunken dwarf in military uniform, and other characters from the commedia dell'arte. Goya is the art world's equivalent of Molière, an unforgiving exponent of false morals and the despotism of a loveless social class. If it is true, as Borges says, that each of us seeks our own influences, Berlanga finds his in the grotesque of Valle-Inclán – esperpento, as it is known in Spanish – in paintings such as this one by Goya, or in Goya's famous caprichos.



Detail from 'Wandering Comedians' (1793) by Francisco de Goya.

*Classical heroes reflected in concave mirrors look like esperpento. The tragic sense of Spanish life can only be achieved through an aesthetic that is systematically deformed. (...) Spain is a grotesque deformation of European civilization. (...) The most beautiful of images will appear absurd in a concave mirror. (...) Let us deform expression in the same mirror that deforms our faces and all of the miserable life in Spain.*

Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, *Bohemian Lights*



Franz Kafka, *The Castle*

The seminal image of *The Executioner*, the one that gave rise to the story, is the perfect visual incarnation of the Spanish esperpento genre: in the empty white yard of a prison, officers accompany a prisoner who is walking calmly towards the scaffold; in the group that follows behind, the executioner is dragged towards the place of execution so he can do his job.

Before filming *The Executioner*, Berlanga and Marco Ferreri tried to adapt *The Castle* by Franz Kafka, someone who knew a lot about imprisoned women, state-sponsored absurdity and anonymous citizens being put to death. They even went to the spa where Berlanga had filmed *Every Thursday, A Miracle* in order to meet Kafka there. "We spent a couple of weeks there, the spa water did us the world of good, but the project was a flop: we were charged a fortune for the rights", Berlanga recounted. He abandoned the idea (though Ferreri didn't, running with it ten years later in the Vatican when he directed *The Audience*, collaborating with Azcona). In any case, Kafka's laughter reverberates throughout the plot and the tone, until it bursts out in *The Executioner* (as it does in *Welcome Mister Marshall*, 1952, and in *Plácido*, 1961). Little has been said about the relationship between the Czech author's work and the Valencian director's: their humorous critiques, their humanity, the absurd aspects of the state and administrative systems that unite them, and especially their uses of their chosen idiom (literature and film, respectively) to deal with truth from an unorthodox angle, one Kafkaesque, the other Berlanguan.

Sigmund Freud's interest in love and death, and his famous text on The Uncanny cannot be overlooked when we hear Offenbach being played in the Dragon Caves scene of *The Executioner*, with its allusion to *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Hoffmann, of course, is the German author of *The Sandman*, which Freud analysed to explain the uncanny and its faculties. At his best here, Freud's analysis helps us think about the film in terms of its sinister aspects and its horror. Furthermore, we should recall his analysis of the role of jokes and the unconscious in comedy, a genre that relies so heavily on the sinister, even on cruelty and death in the face of love, as is the case in *The Executioner*, where funerals, executions and weddings co-exist happily side by side.

But in Berlanga we can also see influences of Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, an understanding of nonsense as sense and speech as incessant chatter.

Worthy of note, too, is the use of the word 'Austro-Hungarian' in Berlanga's films, whether at first by chance or from a sense of superstition as his work evolves. It reminds us of the stateless Austro-Hungarian Robert Musil and his epic novel *The Man Without Qualities*, an (in) human book which, in the words of the famous Argentine cartoon character Mafalda, deals with how modern life is more and more modern and less and less life.

## RECEPTION OF THE FILM by Fernando Trueba

*José Luis: At what time does the pardon usually come?*

*Officer: Normally it never comes.*

This dialogue between the novice executioner and the prison officer was one of the many cuts made by the first censors. It was made on the script, prior to granting the filming permit. Even after it was filmed and edited it underwent several further cuts to get the censor's approval before it was released. Despite the obstacles, it did, and was chosen to represent Spain at the Venice Film Festival, against the Spanish government's wishes. They had wanted to put forward *Nunca pasa nada* [Nothing Ever Happens], by Juan Antonio Bardem. While the Spanish delegation walked out of the Festival in protest against the screening of *The Executioner*, the crew was literally assaulted by a group of Italian anarchists throwing stones at them, mistakenly believing the film sang Franco's praises.

Lack of understanding and confusion prevailed in reviews of the film. For example, it was deemed by critics for *Positif* magazine as "Francoist and in favour of the death penalty!" Despite its negative reception, it was awarded the Venice International Film Critics prize (FIPRESCI).

No critic understood the film quite as thoroughly as the Spanish ambassador to Rome, Alfredo Sánchez Bella, who wrote, "The film seems to me to be one of the most outrageous libels ever made against Spain; it is an astonishing political pamphlet, not against the regime but against all of society. Its only claim to humour is in the credits. The rest of it is no more than an unacceptable, critical caricature of Spanish life". Sánchez Bella also accused the film of being "Communist propaganda", but "of a Spanish kind, which means it is almost anarchistic". He couldn't have been more right.

Sánchez Bella did everything possible to prevent the film from screening at the Festival, but the instruction was that there couldn't be a repeat of the *Viridiana* case. Two years earlier, Buñuel's film had won the Palme d'Or in Cannes (the only Spanish film to have been given that award at the time) despite the severe criticism it received from the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore romano*. Not only was screening of *Viridiana* banned, any mention of it in the press was also banned (even at the Cannes awards), Buñuel was forced back into exile in Mexico, and Franco ordered all copies of the film to be burned. The only reason it survived was that its Mexican co-producer, Alatríste, managed to rescue one of the negatives and smuggled it out of the country in a car while they crossed the French border. Despite the furore, Franco's derisory opinion of it when he saw it was that it could be classed as slapstick.

The *Viridiana* case had created huge negative publicity for Franco's regime. As a result, they decided not to ban *The Executioner*. What minister Fraga did do, however, was call

Berlanga. After a good dressing down, he told him that because of the Venice scandal they had no option but to make more cuts to the film before it could be released in Spain. The Spanish release had fourteen cuts and was shortened by four and half minutes. Among other things, the film that Spanish viewers saw had none of the protagonist's repeated references to wanting to emigrate to Germany, no scene where the prison guards set up the garrotte before the execution, and none of the noises made by the garrotte implements grating inside the executioner's bag. Fortunately, it was possible years later to reconstruct the original montage from the Italian copy of the film.

*The Executioner* was an unmitigated flop. It showed for only two weeks and it would be several years before Berlanga could make his next film. But the maelstrom caused by the film reached the council of ministers, where Franco had one more famous comment to make: "I know Berlanga isn't a Communist; he's worse than that, he's a bad Spaniard".



## RECEPTION OF THE FILM

The film is, in my opinion, the most important one Berlanga has made so far. [...] In *The Executioner*, reality has disappeared and given way to critical realism despite its humorous formal quality, which can, at times, become eccentric. The criticism doesn't just address a Spanish (or provincial) problem, but an international problem, pertaining to each and every country. Yet the special value of this film by Berlanga is that it is situated in Spain today, today, and today, it is profoundly national insofar as it universalises the terrible problem of the legal executioner under legal justice.

As can be expected, *The Executioner* has started to run into problems. On the one hand, the previous censorship (of the script) already imposed modifications, some of them substantial. On the other hand, in relation to the finished film which I have seen from beginning to end, I must admit that it could suffer from a lot of pressure given that what it recounts is a problem that current society doesn't want to avoid, yet wants, at all costs, not to publicise. Especially on the big screen.

For these reasons – which you will soon be able to confirm for yourself – I would recommend – and it is an objective recommendation, completely unconnected to my modest input into the film – I would, I repeat, recommend *The Executioner* as the Spanish film that could play a similar role in Venice to the one played two years ago at Cannes by that other film by Buñuel, *Viridiana*, in which production, as you know, I was also involved.

*Fragment of a letter sent by Ricardo Muñoz Suay to Luigi Chiarini on 26 June 1963, compiled in Ricardo Muñoz Suay. Una vida en sombras, by Esteve Riambau, IVAC La Filmoteca, 2007, pp. 400-401*

*The executioner* is such an endearing character because he is all flesh and blood. Berlanga is anything but a simplistic director. Even though he might sprinkle everything with free-flowing humour, all his characters are given serious depth, which makes them neither good nor bad people. By portraying them in this way, I think he creates more irony about the human condition than he does tenderness and compassion for his characters. Which makes Berlanga more unclassifiable and interesting as a director.

I know many young people who were very excited when they first saw *Plácido*, *Bienvenido Mr Marshall* [Welcome, Mr. Marshal] and *The Executioner*. Luis's point of view is always absolutely contemporary, much more so than colleagues of his generation. He has always been atypical, unpredictable – in the best sense of the word – a totally independent spirit. That has pushed him to make films that no one at the time would have dared make.

*Reflections from filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, compiled in ¡Bienvenido, Mr. Berlanga!, by Carlos Cañeque and Marta Grau, Barcelona, Ediciones Destino, 1993, p.160*

Berlanga's films are typically Berlanga. He is our only filmmaker whose name has given rise to a descriptive term that is not confined to the arts, as in the case of prose that is Galdosean, Valleinclanesque, or Proustian, or to a new director who might be Fellinian. Berlanga's influence has entered everyday language, which is very rare. Referring to people, or an incident, we hear them described as being 'very Berlanga'. [...]

In a supermarket not long ago, I came across eight or ten people of different ages and walks of life, all talking over each other in a cacophony of chatter, and there was someone in uniform among them, maybe a security guard. I heard a middle-aged woman who was trying to get to the door, unsuccessfully because it was being blocked by the people arguing, and she said to a very well-dressed Japanese man who was carrying a felt bull with *banderillas* in a cellophane bag: 'Heavens above, this is so Berlanga!'

*Reflections from actor Fernando Fernán-Gómez, compiled in Berlanguiano, Nickel Odeon n°3, 1996*

Berlanga's films haven't received the recognition they deserve outside of Spain, in my opinion, for a reason I discovered in Paris while watching *Plácido*. The film was ruined by the subtitles, not because they were badly translated but because it is almost impossible to translate so many actors all speaking so quickly. Only ten or fifteen per cent of the dialogue was reproduced in the French subtitles. Besides, there was hardly time to read them. Orson Welles, who came from radio, started the technique in *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, with actors interrupting each other and overlapping dialogue. But Luis, by injecting the one-act comic *sainete* tradition into his films, has gone much further than Welles, because he fits more people into a frame. The problem lies in the fact that in Berlanga's films, what's being said in the background is often as important, if not more important, than what's being said in the foreground. It's a bit like Tintoretto's paintings, but on a sound track. With Berlanga, you have to understand everything or you won't understand anything at all.

*Reflections from writer and historian Román Gubern*

## BEFORE THE SCREENING

Some comment on the film's historical context (Francisco Franco's Fascist dictatorship) is important. It can also be pointed out to the students that even though the subject matter is largely the death penalty and the protagonist accepting the role of executioner, as spectators we should delve deeper and reflect also on the background critique of society, how we think about the choices an individual makes, which may perhaps have analogies in the present day.

With regard to the cinematography, we can prompt the students to pay particular attention to the complexity of the frames: camera movements, position and choreography of the characters within the frame, etc. Last but not least, we can ask them to consider carefully how sound is dealt with.

## AFTER THE SCREENING

### SPACE AND CHOREOGRAPHY WITHIN THE FRAMES

As we have seen, space plays a very significant role in how the sequences are managed and in the *mise-en-scène* [see analysis in 'The script and space. The value of spaces: highlighting anguish']. A good starting point is to ask the students to say what spaces they felt were important: spaces in the prison, Amadeo and Carmen's apartment, the brother's house cum tailor's workshop, the apartment under construction before and after the family moves in, the kitchen, corridors, the huge white empty room in the prison in Mallorca.

Next, one of the sequences can be analysed in closer detail, perhaps drawing the space as a plan view (seen from above). In this way, the students will gain a better understanding of the space, its key components, entry and exit points, etc.

When they have completed their drawings, it might also be interesting to place the characters in them, trace their movements and describe the camera position and movement in each drawing. Making a model of the spaces can also be useful, showing the characters, the camera, and their respective movements.

The opening sequence in the prison is particularly engaging

(see the introduction to 'A sequence'), as is José Luis's first visit to Carmen's and Amadeo's apartment (analysed in 'Cinematographic considerations for a screenshot').

### SOUNDS

The importance of sound should have already been mentioned before the screening. It can be rewarding to return to the question of sound afterwards, trying to remember all the times when sound seemed particularly relevant. The students can make a list of sounds and subsequently analyse each one and its significance more carefully.

### POSTERS

Another fun activity is designing posters for the film, taking inspiration from posters from the 1960s, images from the film itself or from the other visual references provided by Javier Rebollo.

### DOORS AND THRESHOLDS, ENTRANCES AND EXITS

In many of the spaces, doors and thresholds play an important role. Even in the dialogue, phrases referring to going in or out of somewhere are often repeated. Do the students remember any of these dialogues? One to remember, for example, is the time José Luis and Amadeo get ready to enter the building where José Luis will apply for his new job as executioner. When José Luis doesn't want to go in (i.e., take that step), his father-in-law encourages him, saying, "This doesn't commit you to anything". At the end of the film, too, in the scenes just before everyone crosses the white room in the prison, José Luis insists he wants to leave, pleading in the kitchen, "Where is the exit?" Think about the metaphor of the door, the decisive impact it has every time José Luis takes the decision to step through that door or threshold. It is worth doing a visual run through the film watching out for those particular moments. In 'Comparative Images' we discuss a wide range of instances in art, sculpture, photography and film that will provide a useful starting point, or the students may wish to try and think of similar instances themselves.



## FOOD AS METONYMY

Food is a recurring element throughout the film. It often appears at moments that show someone's hypocrisy or their deliberately turning a blind eye, preferring the comfort of a hot plate of food over having to address what is actually happening. In the opening scene of the film we see a bowl of hot food, and in the final scene we see Carmen feeding the child, asking José Luis, just after he has 'acted' as executioner for the first time, "Have you had anything to eat?"

Ask the students to recall other times when food features. What about the ice-creams Carmen and José Luis have before José Luis signs his offer of acceptance for the executioner job? Or the sequence in the prison kitchen, among others? What can be said about the important role of food?

The Spanish Golden Age poet Luis de Góngora wrote a poem based on an old Spanish proverb that gives us a clue:

*(Let me be warm  
And let people laugh.  
Let others concern themselves with the government,  
With the world and its monarchies,  
While my days are governed by  
Butter and soft bread,  
And winter mornings  
By orange juice and brandy,  
And let people laugh.)*

Read the words carefully, then note how food in the film becomes increasingly charged with irony. Think also about whether similar connections with food exist nowadays.



## THE BANALITY OF EVIL

Hannah Arendt (1906 – 1975), one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century, wrote with clear and deep insight on the Nazi holocaust. Born in Germany under threat from the National Socialist regime, and being from a Jewish background, she emigrated to New York. Almost thirty years later, in the spring of 1961, by then a journalist, she attended the trial of Adolf Eichmann, lieutenant colonel in the Nazi SS and one of those directly responsible for the systematic genocide of the Jews. Having published several articles on the trial, Arendt went on to published Eichmann in Jerusalem: *A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

After watching *The Executioner*, the students can be encouraged to reflect on the title of Arendt's book. What does the expression 'the banality of evil' evoke? They can look back over some moments in the film and things the characters said, and think of them in relation to the idea of 'the banality of evil'.

In her book, Arendt puts forward the argument that even though public opinion considered Eichmann to be a monster and a criminal psychopath, he was actually a normal human being with a very heightened sense of order, who had absorbed the German ideology and put it into practice complying with the orders he received. According to Arendt, Eichmann was an ordinary man, an ambitious and efficient bureaucrat, someone who was "terribly normal", who believed he was performing his duty.

Eichmann in Jerusalem: *A Report on the Banality of Evil* was published in 1963, the same year that *The Executioner* was released. Perhaps the students can relate Arendt's argument to the story of José Luis and how it unfolds. Encourage them to think of some of the phrases he uses that may be significant. For example, at the beginning of the film, as José Luis is putting the coffin into the hearse, he says of the executioner whom he has just met, "He looks normal". Later, when he is about to 'act' for the first time, he says, "I want to live in peace with my wife and child". It may also be productive to examine the occasions when Amadeo and Carmen push José Luis to keep going towards the moment of the execution, alluding to his responsibilities and duties.

## REFLECTIONS INSPIRED BY QUOTES FROM LUIS GARCÍA BERLANGA

Some of Luis García Berlanga's quotes from 'Thoughts' may inspire the students to think about individual freedom of choice in relation to societal pressure.



## ART THAT DWELLS ON THE HUMAN CONDITION

In this resource book, filmmaker Javier Rebollo suggests many visual comparisons between *The Executioner* and representations of the human condition, (of evil and horror) in other art forms [see 'Comparative images']. Using his suggestions, the students can explore various different aspects of the film. Here are some activities that can be done individually or in groups:

- Choose an image you find particularly interesting or striking. Research the image: its author and historical context. Having gathered information on the image, reflect on the comparisons that can be made between it and *The Executioner*.

- Think of the huge white yard that José Luis is dragged across, and the fact that it was the first image Berlanga thought of. Using Javier Rebollo's suggested material, examine the works he mentions while focusing on the concept of emptiness. Try to explore the concept further by relating it to the present day.

- In *The Executioner*, Berlanga's and Azcona's critique is levelled mainly at Spanish society, but they are also critical of tourism, which in the 1960s started to reach Spain and has grown exponentially since then throughout Europe. Among the comparative images Rebollo suggests, he includes the photographer Martin Parr, whose work denounces modern society in a satirical way, revealing that tourism also has its grotesque side, akin to esperpento. In the classroom, this can

be further explored in Parr's work and the work of others who have depicted tourism in a critical light.

- There are many instances throughout *The Executioner* when situations and characters border on the absurd. Many twentieth century writers and thinkers have broached the absurd, Franz Kafka chief among them. The students may wish to read some of his stories or books and compare them with *The Executioner*, keeping in mind that Berlanga had considered filming *The Castle*.

## VISUAL EXPLORATIONS OF THE WHITE ROOM

The students should start by reading what Berlanga himself has to say about his original vision of the white room, which gave rise to the famous scene where José Luis is dragged to the site of execution. Creating a visual representation of the empty white room may be particularly fruitful, given that that image was the starting point of the film for Berlanga. Different approaches can be taken, be they drawing, painting, photography, installation, 3D mock-ups.

For this project, it may be useful to go back over the comparisons with other images that Javier Rebollo suggests. Similarly useful points of reference can be found in the analysis of 'A screenshot' as well as Fernando Trueba's commentary.

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