

**Images of exile: tracing the past within the present in Henri-François Imbert's  
*No Pasaràn! Album souvenir***

Maryse Bray and Agnès Calatayud

**Abstract**

Henri-François Imbert's *No Pasaràn! Album souvenir* (2003) focuses on a lesser known episode of the Spanish Civil War: half a million Republicans fled their country after Franco's victory and crossed the border into France only to be "parked" into makeshift refugee camps, ostracized by the host country about to fall into the hands of the Vichy government. The film is an illustration of the validity of cinema as a medium to help us understand history and offers welcome alternatives from the cliché-ridden representations of migrants in popular culture.

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## Text of article

Even the most media-averse amongst us cannot but have noticed the plethora of events organized in France in the summer of 2004 to celebrate, in various national and local acts of remembrance, the end of the Second World War sixty years ago. As could be expected, the anniversary was marked by numerous paper publications and various television programmes, most of them reciting the well-rehearsed discourse on the heroic feats of the French Resistance against the enemy, on the role played by the Allied forces in the liberation of France, and on the gratefulness of the French nation towards its liberators. However, amidst the sea of conventional, if sincere, words of mutual congratulations and thanksgiving, new light was thrown on little known and yet decisive war episodes. Major newspapers such as *Libération*, but also regional ones, for example in the Provence area, carried extensive coverage of the vital part played by those who had so far been essentially forgotten by history: the role of the Tirailleurs sénégalais (the Black suppletive soldiers within the French army)<sup>1</sup> and that of the North African soldiers (INA: Indigènes Nord-Africains) were finally acknowledged, as well as the contribution of the Spanish Republicans in the liberation of Paris.<sup>2</sup> Up to then, in spite of Picasso's painting *Monument aux Espagnols morts*

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, until the exhibition *Nos libérateurs, Toulon, août 1944* opened in the Musée d'art de Toulon in February 2004 to some acclaim in the French media, it was not very well known that Toulon was liberated by units which were essentially colonial in their recruitment. See Michel Henry's 'Toulon sauvé par le Goum', *Libération* (10 February 2004), pp. 31-32. In fact, it is worth remembering that it is General Magnan, in charge of the 9<sup>e</sup> Division d'infanterie coloniale who received the surrender of the German admiral in command of the Toulon base on 27 August 1944. Recalling the courage and the loss of human life amongst the 6<sup>e</sup> regiment des Tirailleurs sénégalais (who were the first to enter Toulon), President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal declared, in an interview on the French TV channel *France 3* in August 2004, that it was 'shocking' to see that the role played by African soldiers was hardly mentioned in French history school books. <<http://www.lobserveur.sn/articles/showit.php?id=2214&cat=actualite#>> [Accessed 29 November 2004]. However, in his speech on 15 August 2004, in Toulon, Jacques Chirac at long last paid public homage to the essential part played by the French colonial troops (100 000 out of 256 000 soldiers) in the success of the liberation of the town. In President Chirac's own words: 'The sons of your nations have written their names in France's military history. Their blood has been forever blended with ours.' <<http://www.algerie-dz.com/article1002.html>> [Accessed 13 December 2004].

<sup>2</sup> See Denis Fernández Recatalá, 'Ces Espagnols qui ont libéré Paris', *Le Monde diplomatique* (August 2004), p. 10. See also Michel Lefebvre, 'L'épopée des réfugiés espagnols', *Le Monde* 2 (25-26 July

*pour la France* hanging next to *Guernica* in Madrid, few were those who had known the extent of the involvement of Spanish fighters on the side of the Allies in the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> Fewer still were those who knew that the Spanish liberators had arrived in France shortly before the start of the war among half a million Republican refugees once labelled ‘*la lie de la terre*’<sup>4</sup> (the scum of the earth) by the French Extreme Right press when they crossed the border after their defeat against general Franco’s forces.<sup>5</sup> Many were the French who only found out a full sixty years after the event that the Third Republic, faced with such an influx of people, hurriedly opened temporary camps to shelter the refugees, first on the beaches of the Roussillon near Perpignan (in Agde, Barcarès, Saint-Cyprien, Argelès, Collioure), and then in various places scattered around southern France (in Gurs, Bram, Le Vernet etc.)<sup>6</sup> The exiles were literally ‘parked’ in rudimentary conditions, in camps variously called *camps d’hébergement* (accommodation camps), *camps d’internement* (internment camps), *camps de regroupement* (regrouping camps), or even *camps de concentration* (concentration camps) - although this latter denomination must be read in context: while ‘the first Nazi concentration camp had been opened six years earlier, in 1933, in Dachau, with this name in German, *Konzentrationslager*’<sup>7</sup>, the horrendous

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2004), pp. 54-57: the 9<sup>e</sup> Compagnie which formed part of General Leclerc’s famous 2<sup>e</sup> Division Blindée (2<sup>e</sup> DB) was actually called the *Spanish Unit*: ‘The language spoken was Spanish, most of the officers were Spanish, soldiers wore on their uniforms the colours of Republican Spain next to the FFI insignia, and the half-tracks bore the names of the main fighting grounds of the Spanish Civil War: Guadalajara, Brunete, Madrid, Teruel, Ebro, Guernica, Santander, or Belchite.’

<sup>3</sup> As recently as 1994 François Mitterrand’s and former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez’ homage to the courage of the Republican guerilleros who captured a Nazi division in Prayols (Ariège) in 1944 received relatively low media coverage.

<sup>4</sup> E.D., ‘Val d’Aran: comment furent trahis les républicains espagnols’, *Marianne* (28 June–11 July 2004), p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> The current trend in Spain is also to delve deeper into the Franco era and the sombre years of the Civil War. See for example Alicia Alted Vigil, ‘Exilio: La historia olvidada’, *El País Semanal*, n°1372 (12 January 2003), a detailed account on the revival of memory regarding the exile of the Republicans after their defeat against Franco in 1939. See also Amadeo Gracia Bamala’s personal testimony on the exile in Lola Huete Machado, ‘Regreso al exilio’ *El País Semanal* n° 1425, (18 January 2004).

<sup>6</sup> See Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand and Emile Temime, *Les Camps sur la plage, un exil espagnol* (Paris, Les Editions Autrement, 1995), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Henri-François Imbert, *No Pasarán! Album souvenir* (voice-over commentary).

connotations which we now associate with them became only widely known at the end of the Second World War. Under the Vichy government, the Spanish refugees' fates varied: some managed to continue their struggle against fascism by joining the ranks of the Resistance, while the less fortunate were forcibly incorporated in the Foreign Legion and transferred to Algeria. Many refugees were later sent in their droves to the even more sinister concentration camps in Germany and Austria, with the blessing of the Vichy government. If such facts have remained largely unknown, it is because up to now, the history books<sup>8</sup> and the media<sup>9</sup> have remained, for the most part, silent on the matter. As far as cinema is concerned, a handful of documentaries have been made on the subject,<sup>10</sup> but they have not enjoyed a wide circulation apart from Henri-François Imbert's *No Pasaràn! Album souvenir* (2003)<sup>11</sup>, and its forerunner Bernard Mangiante's *Les camps du silence* (1988). *Les camps du silence*, in a style reminiscent of Marcel Ophüls' landmark documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), was shot on the site of the refugee camps. It is based on the recollections of witnesses, mostly former inmates, who half a century later, recount their ordeal. The survivors' dignified testimonies inform us on the dire conditions in which

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<sup>8</sup> However, Bartolomé Bennassar, one of the best-known French academics specializing in the Modern History of Spain has just published *La guerre d'Espagne et ses lendemains* (Perrin, 2004), a landmark study on the Spanish Civil War, in which he sheds light on this little known episode. In his book, he highlights the successive exiles of Spanish Republicans from 1936 to 1939. Bennassar points out that in 1936 there were actually two groups of Spanish immigrants who crossed the frontier into France: the Nationalists from Catalonia who were opposed to Franco and the Republicans from the Basque region. In 1937 another 120 000 Spanish people fleeing oppression crossed over into France, followed by another wave from the Aragon province in April 1938.

<sup>9</sup> However recently the national media reported on the official visit to France of King Juan Carlos of Spain in March 2006 which took him to Toulouse, and on his comments about the 'most Spanish of French towns (...) where [Spanish] exiles settled and who deserve our gratitude'. See Gilbert Laval, 'Juan Carlos dans sa colonie', *Libération* (30 March 2006).

<sup>10</sup> See René Grando and Marie-Louise Roubaud's *Contes de l'exil ordinaire* (1989), Linda Ferrer-Roca's *Photographies d'un camp: le Vernet d'Ariège* (1997), Jacqueline Veuve's *Journal de Rivesaltes 1941-1942* (1997), Lala Gomà's *La traversée de l'espoir, le Winnipeg* (2001), Laurent Lutaud's *Lettre du train fantôme* (2002), Jean-Jacques Maurois's *Mots de Gurs, de la guerre d'Espagne à la Shoah* (2003).

<sup>11</sup> The scenario of Imbert's *No Pasaràn! Album souvenir* is published in *Filmer le passé dans le cinéma documentaire: Les traces et la mémoire* (ADDOC, L'Harmattan 2003), pp. 113-135. The film has also been released on DVD by Editions Montparnasse in 2006.

inmates were crammed together, as France was not prepared for an exodus from Spain on such a massive scale: 'All that the French authorities provided was the barbed wire. During the first months of 1939 the dead were counted in the thousands. They perished from hunger, the bitter winter cold and the diseases that spread uncontrolled because of the lack of medical supplies and facilities. (...) They were guarded inside by seven squads of (...) a special mobile police force [;] outside were two companies of Senegalese troops with fixed bayonets and machine gun batteries, and further out, patrolling the outskirts on horseback in case of escape were the *Spahis*, a North African cavalry.'<sup>12</sup> For the viewer, *Les camps du silence* provides an enlightening and naturally moving experience. However, in our view, the impact of Henri-François Imbert's *No Pasarán! Album souvenir* is of an altogether different nature. As a documentary, it sheds as much light on the tragic destiny of the Spanish refugees in France as Mangiante's work but it goes well beyond that achievement. Indeed, the attraction in Imbert's film resides in its original and effective narrative style where the author involves himself personally, thereby succeeding in tracing the past within the present. In doing so, Imbert enables the viewer not only to understand the historical background and to empathise with the Spanish refugees, but also to extend our concern over the plight of refugees in contemporary Western societies as a whole.

*No Pasarán! Album souvenir* is Henri-François Imbert's second feature film. A young French filmmaker who enjoys a growing following in France, Henri-François Imbert's is virtually unknown in Britain. Yet he is the author of three noted documentaries: *Sur la plage de Belfast* (1996), *Doulaye, une saison des pluies* (1999) and *No Pasaràn! Album Souvenir*, which was selected for the Directors' Fortnight in

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<sup>12</sup> John Andres Garcia, 'The International Brigades and the Refugee camps in the south of France', <[http://www.manningclark.org/papers/brigades\\_france.htm](http://www.manningclark.org/papers/brigades_france.htm)> [Accessed 13 September 2004].

the 2003 Cannes Film Festival. His three films belong to the thriving sub-genre of what is called in French cinema studies ‘le cinéma à la première personne’ - films where the filmmaker uses his life experience, his memories, and his own soul-searching as a guiding path that leads him inexorably to discover the Other via a dialogue with him/her.<sup>13</sup> However Imbert’s aim is a far cry from the present trend towards the public exposure of private matters - what Serge Tisseron calls in a telling neologism, ‘un désir d’extimité’ (a craving for extimacy) which ‘entices people to publicize their ‘intimate experiences’ and to have them acknowledged by a growing number of witnesses’<sup>14</sup>, a phenomenon *Le Nouvel Observateur* labels more prosaically, ‘le grand déballage’ (the great outpouring of secrets.)<sup>15</sup> While Imbert’s starting point clearly forms part of his personal history, in the end his film has a much broader scope: the issue here is to combine the personal and the general while creating a successful interaction with the public.<sup>16</sup> Hence the subtle change from first person narrative in the first two-thirds of the film to the inclusive ‘we’ towards the end of the voice-over commentary. In his words, Imbert makes films ‘with people rather than about people’.<sup>17</sup> He describes his singular method of filming in the following words: ‘I go and film all by myself without a technician (...) without a production director. (...) However, once I am actually making the film, I am no longer alone. I mean that, what is at stake for me in filmmaking, is to see whether, having arrived somewhere

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<sup>13</sup> Imbert’s filmic approach echoes the writer and journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski’s views (themselves based on the theories expounded by Emmanuel Levinas: ‘Human beings have ever had three types of reactions towards the Other: war, refuge behind high walls or dialogue. (...) It is only through dialogue with the Other, through the exchange of experiences – if only to join forces against a system which crushes men and their cultures – that common humanity can resonate’ in ‘Rencontrer l’Etranger, cet événement fondamental’, *Le Monde diplomatique* (January 2006), pp.14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Serge Tisseron, *Comment Hitchcock m’a guéri: Que cherchons-nous dans les images?* (Albin Michel, 2003), p. 8 n.1.

<sup>15</sup> Elsa Vigoureux, ‘Secrets intimes sous projecteurs: Le grand déballage’, *Le Nouvel Observateur* (22-28 April 2004), pp. 78-83.

<sup>16</sup> As François Caillat asks in *Filmer le passé dans le cinéma documentaire: Les traces et la mémoire*, p. 39: ‘Can a filmmaker do anything else but film the *particular*? And yet how can s/he forge a relationship between this *particular* and the *general* (be it universal or only partly so)?’

<sup>17</sup> Henri-François Imbert, ‘Enquêtes d’auteur’, *Télérama* n° 2807, <www.telerama.fr> [Accessed 28 October 2003].

alone I might not remain alone, and whether those I meet will create the film with me.’<sup>18</sup> The resulting films are not classically built on interviews as such, but on the intangible ties that are the essence of his - often chance - encounters.

After his second film which took him to an exhausting search in Mali for Doulaye, a long lost friend of his father’s, Imbert swore that he would never again involve himself so intimately in any of his works. In some ways, Imbert is true to his words: he no longer features physically in *No Pasaràn! Album Souvenir* and his voice-over commentary, so characteristically burred in his preceding films, is limited to a minimum. And yet the film still stems from a powerful childhood memory of his: visiting his grandparents as a child in the late seventies in the village of Le Boulou in the Pyrenees close to the Franco-Spanish border, Imbert came across six sepia-toned postcards – he would find out later that they actually belonged to a series of 29. What intrigued the young boy was that they did not depict any of the strikingly looking landmarks of the region, but eerily showed, for example, tired but happy looking men weighed down by heavy bags walking determinedly on countryside roads, or numerous cars laden with domestic possessions parked in his grandparents’ small village, or again images of the nearby beach strewn with so many makeshift tents: ‘All of a sudden, coming across a postcard of my grand-parents’ village which wasn’t a panoramic landscape meant that something must have happened there. (...) Something extraordinary which is not entirely described by the picture nor by the caption.’<sup>19</sup> In fact, in stark contrast to the pictures, the postcards’ bland captions, such as ‘On the Road to Cerbère’, ‘Car park in Le Boulou’, ‘The Camp on the beach’, only served to heighten the mystery surrounding them. The postcards were in fact featuring

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<sup>18</sup> Henri-François Imbert, *Court Circuit*, Arte (22 October 2003)

<sup>19</sup> Serge Kaganski, ‘Chercheur d’or’, *Les Inrockuptibles* n° 413 (29 October 2003), p. 44.

the *Retirada* or the retreat of the beaten ‘freedom fighters’ from Spain. Never sent, they had been issued to keep a record of these tragic events, as was common practice in the days before the advent of MacLuhan’s global village where news can travel across the world in an instant. Guided by the intuition that a momentous untold story lay dormant behind the fragmented scenes he was contemplating, Imbert kept them precious. In 1990, he returned to Le Boulou to start researching his project, collating various memorabilia and filming a number of rushes for a future film on this subject. Gradually, he managed to get hold of the missing postcards and thought that he then had all the elements needed for his documentary. In the event, his two other films got made first and it took another decade or so and a potent catalyst - the closure of the Red Cross refugee centre in Sangatte (Pas-de-Calais) in 2002 - to allow him to finish *No Pasaràn! Album Souvenir*. Struck by the images and commentaries on the ‘new’ refugees repetitively relayed by the media, Imbert’s latent memories of the Spanish refugees in 1939 were reawakened: he could not help but recognize the same state of destitution and the same haggard, confused look on the faces of the migrants of today. Finally, the last piece of the puzzle was in place for Imbert’s film on the Spanish refugees to be completed.

Indeed *No Pasaràn! Album Souvenir* is like a jigsaw which is difficult to describe because it is so unusually constructed. Imbert himself once resorted to a light-hearted quip to summarize his film describing it metaphorically as ‘the story of a man who is looking for old postcards’.<sup>20</sup> The man in question is the director himself who constructs his film through a very slow succession of sequences showing individual postcards on a dark background (*banc-titre*), interspersed with

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Henri-François Imbert (June 2003) in a presentation leaflet distributed in cinemas prior to the showing of *No Pasaràn, Album souvenir*.

conversations with various old postcards dealers, former Spanish refugees still living in the area, and new photographs (taken by him) or more recent postcards of the places depicted on the original views. The editing is an attempt to encourage the spectator to follow Imbert's steps and his sense of discovery as postcard after postcard, he unearths a past equally unknown to both of them, thereby generating a sense of suspense and wonder in the viewer. For instance, Imbert focuses on a 1960s picturesque card showing an ordinary camping site in Saint-Cyprien built on the exact same location as the earlier refugee camp. The irony is striking. In a later interview, Imbert explained that he found this postcard particularly attractive because of its 'colours, its framing, its composition'.<sup>21</sup> It was also very interesting for him as a filmmaker since he could not help noticing that: 'In a few years the [refugee] camp has been replaced by a warm aesthetics and a carefree way of life. What stuns me is the speed with which the enjoyable leisure activity has replaced the horror of the camp. (...) When you look at the postcard of the camping site, you see that everything makes it comfortable: the equipment, the café, the protective hedges... whereas the refugee camp was uninhabitable.'<sup>22</sup> The postcards, complete with their white serrated edge, appear as filmed objects, left for inspection for a few minutes at a time, with the camera first panning the picture and then gradually focusing on a detail. In some instances, the camera lingers on a character to the exclusion of everything else on the card. The spectator then feels that it is no longer the original photographer that has captured this image but Imbert's own camera, which he uses as a kind of foraging tool, taking the spectator away from the bound postcards. In so doing, Imbert makes the refugee seem physically closer, bringing his humanity to the fore: the close-ups which render the grain of his skin visible make him look literally alive, as though Imbert had

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<sup>21</sup> Serge Kaganski, 'Chercheur d'or', p. 43.

<sup>22</sup> Idem.

been the first-hand witness of his plight. This ‘special effect’ has the consequence of abolishing the distance between two separate time frames, between the end of the thirties and the beginning of the twenty-first century and thus leads the spectator to use his/her own experience to empathize with the depicted refugee’s traumatic fate.

Imbert achieves his aim not only by using the photo-cards for his own purposes, but also by a clever edit of the soundtrack, the most striking feature of which is the use of long periods of silence alternating with the voice-over. On one level, this creates a palpable sense of uneasiness in the audience who are nonplussed by such a device, while on the other, it allows the viewer’s thoughts to meander freely, to take shape and finally to make some sense of the director’s quest. While editing the film, Imbert was very conscious that the spectator would need silence and time to peruse the postcards: ‘Every image required its own time and its own rhythm.’<sup>23</sup> When there is a voice-over commentary, it is read by Imbert himself in his inimitable softly spoken tone, a ‘somewhat hypnotic voice which allows the facts to stand out as opposed to the emotions, leaving the spectator/listener to his/her surprise, to his/her interpretation’<sup>24</sup>: no description however in Imbert’s text, just a summary in the past tense of how, when and where he obtained the postcards, or of his musings about them at the time. For example, while postcard 9 stands still on the screen, Imbert’s voice-over reads as follows: ‘The following card pictured exactly what I was hoping to find: ‘The militia men concentrated in the camp of Argelès-sur-mer.’ And yet it wasn’t what I was expecting, perhaps because there was no sea to be seen, nor any camp for that matter, only men.’ On other occasions, Imbert shares with us his reflections on the process of gathering the postcards (which took him four years), and

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<sup>23</sup> Serge Kaganski, ‘Chercheur d’or’, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Caroline Lamarche, ‘Ce qui fait frontière’ in the booklet distributed with the DVD of Imbert’s three films (Editions Montparnasse, 2006).

of making the film, using techniques reminiscent of historical research, in particular field study and archival examination. For instance, commenting on a postcard depicting a refugee camp near the railway station in the village of Bram near Carcassonne, he recounts how, many years later, he stopped for a picnic in the same village when he suddenly heard the roar of a train, and how this sparked his inquiry with local people. He found out that all traces of the camp had disappeared and that the local memory of such a traumatic event was waning, even amongst the older generation. In *No Pasaràn*, Imbert juxtaposes his recent photographs of the place with the original postcard showing the refugees filing out of the train onto the station. This allows him to create ‘space and time for the spectator’s gaze’<sup>25</sup> injecting a new lease of life in a particularly important historical episode.

However, *No Pasaràn* goes beyond reviving the memory of a historical episode sunk into near-oblivion. Indeed, Imbert’s film closes in what appears like a rough jump cut on interviews with Iraqi and Afghan refugees in Sangatte and with shots of the Channel with a ferry disappearing into the distance on its way to England. In the film, the unexpected jarring juxtaposition between the internment camps under Vichy and the refugee camp in Sangatte actually enlightens our understanding of the present refugee issue in Europe. The camp in Sangatte, a village situated around ten kilometres away from Calais, was inaugurated in 1999. It had been set up with the financial help of the French social affairs ministry, in a vast disused hangar where machinery for the construction of the Channel Tunnel had previously been kept. Managed under the aegis of the Red Cross, it was closed in 2002 following political tensions between Britain and France, who squabbled about the final destination of the

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<sup>25</sup> *No Pasaràn*, *Album souvenir*’s presentation leaflet.

refugees. According to Djaffer Aït Aoudia, a reporter from the French newspaper *France Soir*, writing in May 2002: ‘The camp, the size of about four football pitches, [lay] beneath an immense corrugated steel roof. (...) The toilets [were] collective, with no taps or paper. (...) A smell of dead dog [pervaded] the camp. (...) More than 1.300 refugees [lived] here, cut off from the world. They [had] only one ambition – to get aboard a lorry on the Calais-Dover ferry.’<sup>26</sup> This yearning is wonderfully encapsulated in Imbert’s film. Before leaving Sangatte, Imbert wanted to film the beach in the morning to catch ‘the time when the seascape is imbued with sadness’.<sup>27</sup> He chanced upon a group of Iraqis who had arrived in Sangatte a few days before and who had so far failed to find a way across the Channel.<sup>28</sup> As is his custom as a filmmaker, Imbert lends the Iraqis a camera and eventually includes their clumsy shots of the sea and the ferry in his documentary. The contrast between the anodyne family holiday, home-movie like images shot by the refugees, with their frustrated hopes symbolized by the ferry disappearing in the distance (as well as by their child-like tracing of the word *England* in the sand) and our awareness of the hopelessness of their plight – they will not get through or *No pasaràn!* - creates a kind of incongruity which is particularly successful in conveying the refugees’ suffering, and is very moving. Moreover, the North Sea on that day is not without similarities with the Franco-Spanish coastline as seen on the old postcards - inviting us to transfer our knowledge and our feelings about the Spanish refugees onto today’s migrants, and *in fine* implicating us politically in their struggle. Not so much in a partisan sense, but in

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<sup>26</sup>Djaffer Aït Aoudia, ‘We are already dead. This is the cemetery of the living’, *The Observer* (26 May 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Lequeret, ‘Images enterrées vives’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* (October 2003), p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Sangatte has also inspired the well-known British director Michael Winterbottom whose acclaimed *In this World* (2003) happened to be released in France on the same day as Imbert’s film on 28 October 2003. Winterbottom’s film centres on the journey of two young Afghan teenagers attempting to enter illegally into the United Kingdom. Both films share the same subject matter but they are very different in style and content: although *In this world* is a work of fiction, it resembles a documentary where real events are filmed, whereas *No Pasaràn* conveys the sense of real events through the filter of the director’s subjectivity.

the impetus the film creates in the spectators to take part in the collective history of their times. For Imbert, the documentary is ‘a way of working on political topics’<sup>29</sup> and *No Pasaràn*’s very existence is a testimony to this aim. Cinema in such an outlook is not there to deliver a message as such but to create a space for dialogue between the filmmaker and the spectator, as well as within each spectator, who can then start questioning his/her assumptions about the world they live in and about the impact they can have upon it.<sup>30</sup> Imbert succeeds in creating what he calls a *spatialisation* where ‘[his] voice is mixed in mono sound and comes straight at the spectator (...) as though [he] was sitting next to him/her, as though [he] were softly speaking to him/her.’<sup>31</sup>

If Imbert does not shy away from associating in the same film the refugee camps of the 1940s and those of today, of which Sangatte was but an example, it is not so much because he wanted to equate the two but because he saw a parallel between the reasons why both the refugees of the past and those of today left their original countries (political oppression, war, terror in both cases) and between the ways in which they were treated in the host nations. Imbert perceptively highlights that the refugees of the XXIst century share similar feelings with the Spaniards of the 1940s when he remarks: ‘They have a hope... and this hope is going to be disappointed. As for welcome, they are going to be parked in a camp, surrounded by barbed wire, without any comforts.’<sup>32</sup> The meaning is clear: if we do not help today’s

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<sup>29</sup> Annick Peigne-Giuly, ‘J’aime découvrir des destinées’, *Libération* (19 May 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Touring French cinemas with *Demain et encore demain/Tomorrow and Again Tomorrow* (1997), her controversial filmed diary of her depression, and taking part in the heated debates sparked by this work, Dominique Cabrera called a cinema ‘the last of the public spaces (lieu public)’. Imbert also attended a number of public showings of *No Pasaràn* where he could see first-hand the impact his film had on individual viewers. See Henri-François Imbert, ‘De l’un à l’autre’, in *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?*, Trafic n°50 (Summer 2004), pp. 124-128.

<sup>31</sup> Caroline Lamarche, ‘Ce qui fait frontière’, *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Serge Kaganski, ‘Chercheur d’or’, p. 46.

refugees, we send them back to danger, not to say straight to their death, as happened to so many of them some sixty years ago. And yet the message is not developed didactically, not even discursively, but through an inventive technical construction which pushes at the boundaries of cinema. In this sense, Imbert's use of his treasured postcards is not an artifice. Rather, the postcards form a constitutive part of the director's wish to 'delve deep between past and present, between the traces of the past and the interpretation placed on them'<sup>33</sup>, in an attempt to not only remember but also understand the past in its relation to the present. As Philippe Azoury describes it, *No Pasaràn* is 'not a history based on postcards but an attempt to reflect on history through the medium of the postcard'.<sup>34</sup> In any case, Imbert does not aspire to be seen as a historian but as a filmmaker 'with a mission': 'I do all the same preparatory work as a documentary maker but I do it in order to take it further and to merge it into *un objet poétique* (i.e. a poignant work of art) rather than to recycle it as it is. I do not seek the historians' truth. The most moving attempts at filmmaking are those which invent a new form while serving fittingly the storyline and the witnesses.'<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the film raises even wider questions: what should be the status of refugees in this world? Should states send to court those who, saddened and appalled by the immigrants' predicament, show solidarity with them? Pressing questions indeed in a world where 'the second half of the twentieth century has seen in the era of the migrant'<sup>36</sup> and where, for instance, Jean-Claude Lenoir from Calais, having accommodated asylum seekers after the closure of Sangatte, was tried in August 2004,

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<sup>33</sup> Jacques Mandelbaum, 'No Pasaran, album souvenir: Les traces du prélude à la catastrophe', *Le Monde* (28 October 2003).

<sup>34</sup> Philippe Azoury, 'Des cartes aux camps catalans', *Libération*, (29 October 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Henri-François Imbert, <[www3.ac-clermont.fr/pedago/histgeo/7anime/traces/tracesdevie.htm](http://www3.ac-clermont.fr/pedago/histgeo/7anime/traces/tracesdevie.htm)> [Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> January 2004].

<sup>36</sup> Blandine Kriegel, 'Le souci d'une France commune', *Le Figaro*, (11 December 2004).

for ‘aiding people in irregular residence’<sup>37</sup> (note the understatement) – a crime incurring a penalty of up to ten years’ imprisonment.

Critics might argue that Imbert’s achievement is too little for those hankering for social transformation or more importantly, for those actually needing it. Somehow, these comments would be missing the point. Films of such a nature are unlikely to spawn revolutions the world over, as Michael Moore points out at the end of Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar’s *The Corporation* (2003), a film on the inhumanity of large businesses. They nevertheless will have been useful if somewhere, somehow, a spectator with determination and stamina manages to make a change in his/her own life. *No Pasaràn* is even less of a political pamphlet than *The Corporation*, but it is a thought-provoking means of social action. As a kind of road-movie where there is a coincidence between the exiles’ journey and that of the filmmaker in the process of making his film, it takes the spectator along with it on a parallel quest. With a minimalist technique characteristic of all his works, Imbert succeeds in creating a film at the frontier between the historical and the personal, as the title reveals, combining as it does the well-known Spanish anti-fascist rallying cry of the Thirties - *No Pasaràn!* - and *Album souvenir*, the intensely social act of collating and organizing images in order to prevent oblivion. *No Pasaràn! Album souvenir* is an innovative film, as much in form as in content. To quote Serge Kaganski: ‘In *No Pasaràn* it is not the projector which gives life to the pictures but the spectator’s imagination. The

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<sup>37</sup> Stéphanie Maurice, ‘Sangatte: la solidarité sur le banc des accusés’, *Libération* (19 August 2004). Jean-Claude Lenoir was found guilty by the courts in Boulogne-sur-Mer of aiding illegal immigrants in August 2004, but was spared imprisonment and fines. However on 2 December 2004, he was condemned as a member of C-Sur, an association for the support of refugees in Calais, to a fine of 3,000 euros (2,000 euros were suspended) and to a suspended sentence of a month-long in prison. Since the closure of the Red Cross refugee camp in Sangatte on 5 November 2002, between 100 and 300 illegal immigrants continue to roam in and around Calais in the hope of getting to Britain (Agence France Presse, 2 December 2004). See the continued predicament of the asylum seekers in the Sangatte area in, for example, Françoise Jeanson and Smaïn Larcher, ‘La grande misère de l’après-Sangatte’, *Le Monde* (24 February 2006).

film's structural form is served by the technical characteristics of the medium.<sup>38</sup> Although disconcerting at times, the film is imbued with a profound humanism and is particularly valuable inasmuch as it offers welcomed alternatives from the cliché-ridden representations of migrants in popular culture.

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<sup>38</sup> Serge Kaganski, 'Chercheur d'or', p. 44.