

THE CINÉMATHÈQUE DE TOULOUSE PRESENTS



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
CANNES CLASSICS
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2022



VIVA LA MUERTE !

A FILM BY FERNANDO ARRABAL

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VIVA LA MUERTE !

A FILM BY FERNANDO ARRABAL

RESTORED BY THE CINÉMATHÈQUE DE TOULOUSE IN COLLABORATION
WITH FERNANDO ARRABAL

WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE TUNISIAN MINISTRY OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS AND
THE ASSOCIATION CINÉ-SUD PATRIMOINE



SYNOPSIS

VIVA LA MUERTE (LONG LIVE DEATH)

FERNANDO ARRABAL. 1971. FRANCE / TUNISIA. 88 MIN. COLOUR. DCP.

Spain lies bleeding in the grip of Francoism. Fando, a young boy, discovers that his mother has betrayed his father to the authorities, accusing him of atheism and antifascism. Torn between his all-encompassing love for his mother and yearning for the absent parent, Fando goes from office to office in search of his father, getting no answers. Lingering memories and sanguinary fantasies of torture become a torrential flood of symbols and reminiscences, inextricably entwined. He is hospitalised and his heart is operated on; his cruel, violent, and sensual visions are amplified and their horror becomes unbearable. At last, Fando escapes the hospital when his only friend, a little girl, comes to tell him that his father is alive and has joined the Spanish Maquis.

Film prohibited to those under 12 at the time of its original release.





Fernando Arrabal at the Cinémathèque de Toulouse, February 2022
© Alejandra Fayad

FERNANDO ARRABAL

The Spanish filmmaker Fernando Arrabal, born 1932, is a ‘desterrado’ (exile) who has lived in France since 1955. Director of seven feature films (*Long Live Death*, *I Will Walk Like a Crazy Horse*, *The Tree of Guernica*, *The Emperor of Peru*, *Car Cemetery*, *Farewell*, *Babylon!* and *Borges, Life of a Poet*), he has also written some hundred plays, eight hundred poetry chapbooks, fourteen novels, and numerous essays, among them the famous ‘Letter to General Franco’.

Cofounder of the performance art movement *Panique*, he addresses in his works recurring themes such as ‘confusion, humour, terror, chance, and euphoria’ (Arrabal, *Panique*, *Manifeste pour le troisième millénaire*). A former member of the Surrealists, Arrabal is a genuine shatterer of conventions. *Viva la muerte!* (1971), his first feature film, in which he also acted, was an adaptation of his semi-autobiographical novel *Baal-Babylone*, which evokes the director’s childhood in a Spain torn by civil war and the Francoist regime.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Viva la Muerte! was scanned and restored in 4K by the Cinémathèque de Toulouse from the original 35 mm image negative, the 35 mm sound negative of the French version, and a 35 mm interpositive element containing the end credits, which were missing from the negative.

Image digitisation and restoration were performed by the Cinémathèque de Toulouse laboratory, with the collaboration of Fernando Arrabal. Sound digitisation and restoration were performed by the L.E. Diapason studio.

The film restoration was completed in March 2022.

This restoration was made possible by the unfailing support of Fernando Arrabal, the Tunisian Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Mohamed Challouf (Association Ciné-Sud Patrimoine), and Mr Samir Zgaya (Tunisian Ministry of Cultural Affairs).

Franck Loiret, Director, Cinémathèque de Toulouse

Francesca Bozzano, Director of Collections, Cinémathèque de Toulouse



CAST AND CREW

Cast

Mohamed Bellasoued (the colonel)

Mahdi Chaouch (Fando)

Jean-Louis Chassigneux (the grandfather)

Suzanne Comte (the grandmother)

Núria Espert (the mother)

Anouk Ferjac (Aunt Clara)

Víctor García (the young man)

Ivan Henriques (the father)

Jazia Klibi (Thérèse)

Fernando Arrabal

Direction

Fernando Arrabal

Férid Boughedir (assistant director)

Screenplay

Fernando Arrabal

Claudine Lagrive

adapted from the novel *Baal-Babylone*

by Fernando Arrabal

Production

Hassen Daldoul

Jean Velter

Technical advisor

Jacques Poitrenaud

Sets and sculptures

Hechmi Marzouk

Drawings

Roland Topor

Cinematography

Jean-Marc Ripert

Sound

Pierre-Louis Calvet

Editing

Laurence Leininger

Music

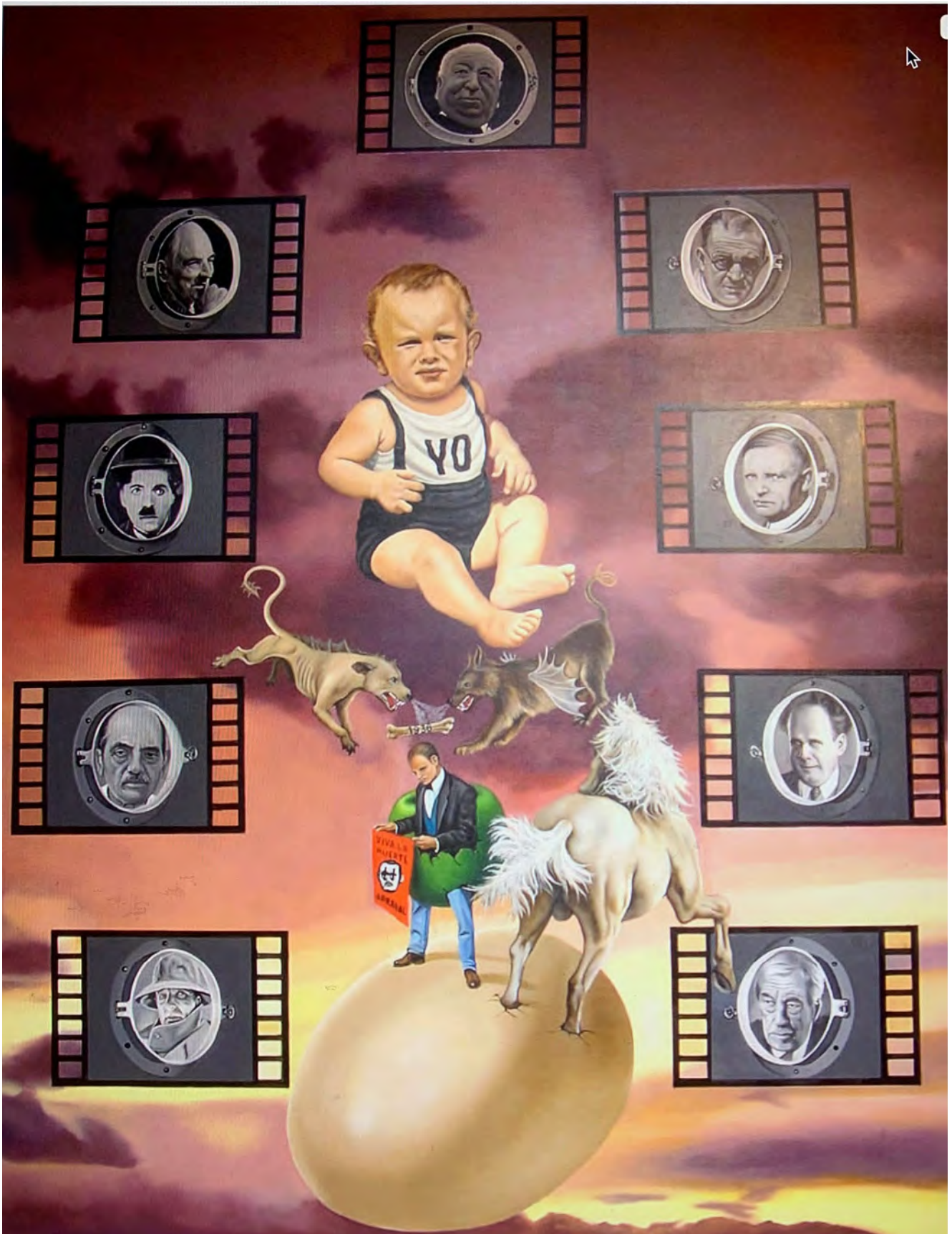
Jean-Yves Bosseur

Production companies

Isabelle Films (France)

SATPEC (Tunisie)





The Great Interplanetary Cinema, oil on canvas, 195 x 130 cm "glose" de Fernando Arrabal

The nine poets, icons of the cinema, are: Henry Ford, Luis Buñuel, Charles S. Chaplin, Ingmar Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, David Wark Griffith, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein, and John Huston.

The Great Interplanetary Cinema

By Fernando Arrabal

In the middle of the painting, fa (Fernando Arrabal as a child)... I am on the beach at Melilla in July 1936. Unaware that my father has been sentenced to death, I seem helpless. Alone in the world, I hide within myself from the uncivil furore. On my white bathing suit I bear the pronoun 'yo'... my sole refuge?

At the child's feet, two furious dragon dogs fight over *Viva la muerte*?... ready to devour each other and to devour us?... they struggle for possession of the bone, time?... from the egg of the universe there surges towards the heights a white steed?... he goes 'like a crazy horse'? ... does he suggest the ascension towards the Most High of the exactitude and modernity of marvels?... does he embody the nostalgia of virginal apparition: levitation?...

Inset in the sphere of the eternal return, green as hope, does fate abide?... At his feet on the universal egg, the moment?... Does he invite us to chaos with his red cape?... Does my father have his eyes hidden by the black tape of intolerance?...

... Yo ('I'), is that also the title of the ensemble of my seven 'only' feature films, must I admit, 'unmeritedly'? ... has time always watched us go by? ... does the poetic work of the nine great ones achieve, in the cinematographic world, its apotheosis?

Fernando Arrabal

2022

Becoming Fando

by Mehdi Picquart-Chaouch

It must have been the spring of 1970, during school holidays.

That morning I had read in the local daily paper, *La Presse*, a little advertisement that fascinated me: a film production company was looking for a young boy for a part in a Franco-Tunisian film. Its title was not mentioned. I later learned that at the time the name chosen for the entrance into History of this work, now recognised as a classic, was not yet *Viva la Muerte!*, but still *Baal Babylone*, the title of Fernando's 'autobiographical' work.

On the day and time indicated, I went to the 'Seventh Art', a cinema near the SATPEC offices, in an especially lively street in the heart of Tunis.

There must have been twenty other boys, none of them more than ten years old, also come to audition. The advertisement specified children from 8 to 10 years old. I was 13, but I was, to my sorrow, small for my age. I was generally thought to be no more than 8 or 9 years old.

I had come without dream or hope, more as a spectator curious to draw near to the backstage of the cinema world, not really in the state of mind to face the hostile competition of the other candidates for... who knew what? Hollywood and fame? No, that wasn't really my thing, I liked to watch films on telly or at the pictures, but I didn't dream of red carpets and sequins; I had stars in my eyes, but seen through the eyepiece of the little cardboard telescope I had put together and placed almost every evening on the balcony of our building to observe the moon and the planets. [...] I had answered the advertisement out of sheer cheek, to colour the daily monotony of my schoolboy existence by doing extraordinary things, without saying anything about them to anyone, to avoid any witness to my humiliation if this adventure in film-land went badly [...]

And a few months later, in October – November, I had become Fando: I had to miss the first two months of class at the Lycée Carnot in Tunis, which, need it be said, did not sadden me overmuch.

They dyed my hair jet black, they dressed me in moth-eaten old rags the location manager had bought for a few millimes in a local second-hand clothes shop... and old leather sandals that tore up my feet... I had tuberculosis, I smoked the 'Dr Plumb' pipe of my film papa, lost on the border between reality, nightmares, dreams and fantasies, I set fire to my school against a background of turquoise-blue sea, and the last image of the film showed the arid, near-desert stretches of North Africa into which Fando disappeared, stumbling through the dust of fate's stone-strewn paths.

As scenes were not shot in sequence, I never really understood, throughout the shoot, the film's meaning or its scope. And I was still too young to grasp the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, or to understand that the village of Hergla stood in for the Spanish colony of Melilla, on the Moroccan coast. It was only some years later, in the early 1980s, that I could see *Viva la muerte!* for the first time, in a Latin Quarter cinema where it played for years. I could see my name every week in Pariscope's cinema listings!

And at last I understood who Fando was.

Mehdi Picquart-Chaouch

2022



In Hergla with Arrabal

by Férid Boughedir, assistant director

I was lucky enough to be assistant director to the famous Franco-Spanish dramaturg Fernando Arrabal for his first feature film, *Viva la muerte*, shot in Hergla, Tunisia, in 1970. [...]

Tawfik Torjeman, president of the national film company SATPEC, a great sponsor of art and culture in Tunisia [...] chose me again, this time to be assistant director on the first feature film of the Spanish dramaturg exiled in France [...] This first feature film, adapted from his autobiographical novel *Baal-Babylone* about his childhood during the atrocities of the Spanish civil war, was going to be filmed in Tunisia, which he had chosen to stand in for Spain, where he could not work, being considered a 'subversive pariah' by the dictatorial regime of General Franco.

Imagine my feelings as assistant director, professionally obligated to prepare everything for the film months in advance, when, during the shoot, Arrabal one day said to me in his inimitable accent: 'Férid, last night I had a marvellous dream, we're going to do an extra scene, even if it wasn't planned in the script! Now: I dreamed that the boy has a vision of his lost father, he sees him submerged to the neck in an immense sea of blood, with children all around throwing live frogs at him!' Where could I find frogs in Hergla in the middle of summer? Fortunately, my friend Kacem Nakaa, known as Larbi Kacem, the location manager, came with me to give the children of Hergla pocket money (not included in the original budget) to find us a frog pond in the area. So the scene was shot – and, in the end, cut! [...]



Férid Boughedir, assistant director, with Fernando Arrabal on the set of *Viva la muerte!* in Hergla
© Collection Férid Boughedir

Arrabal, coming from a Spanish family of modest condition, who had known poverty and suffering – unlike some of his predecessors, who sometimes came with an air of condescension, just to be supplied with extras and camels on the cheap – had from the beginning a truly fraternal attitude towards Tunisia and Tunisians. So much so that he decided not to import a little Spanish or European actor to play the leading role, but to choose, on site, a Tunisian child. I thus had the pleasant task, as assistant director, of organising a children’s casting session whose unanimous winner was little Mehdi Chaouch (the older brother of the future Tunisian radio star Donia Chaouch!). Similarly, the actor to play the role of the grandfather was chosen in Tunisia in the person of a priest belonging to the order of White Fathers! And, above all, Arrabal was literally fascinated by the physique and personality of the Tunisian sculptor Hechmi Marzouk, the film’s set builder and decorator, to the point not only of featuring him in the cast of this first film, but giving him the lead in his second feature film, *I Will Walk Like a Crazy Horse!* All this under the guidance of the Tunisian executive producer, the director and producer Hassene Daldoul, who managed to make *Baal-Babylone* (the film’s first title, becoming *Viva la Muerte* well after filming was over, which explains why Abdellatif Ben Ammar’s documentary short on the making of the film is called *Sur les traces de Baal*) a genuine co-production, egalitarian on the artistic and technical levels as well.

Thus Arrabal could give free rein to his desire to involve Tunisians, the village of Hergla, with its inhabitants and its specificities, in his creation: discovering that the village barber still practised 'relief bleeding' by putting cupping glasses on the back of the neck (previously given a few razor cuts), he decided to add a scene where the little boy saw his grandfather undergo this treatment at the barber's. The White Father playing the grandfather was visibly reluctant to undergo these 'health-giving' razor cuts on his nape, but Hamda, one of the Tunisian drivers on the crew, volunteered his neck as stand-in for a closeup, because, as he explained, he himself needed a 'relief bleeding'. Arrabal thus brought the real barber of Hergla, and his traditional practice as he had preserved it, into the eternity of the world's cinematographic heritage; just as he did with the Hergla villagers' technique of making fish-traps from woven cane, in one of which the little hero hides; or again with the architecture of Hergla's traditional houses, with their beds hollowed out high on the wall with storage hollowed out below; the beautiful seaside cemetery where the young hero runs; and the Tunisian tradition of ram fights, which appear in his dreams!

For Arrabal was creative: not for him the notion of preparing absolutely everything in advance (as we've seen in the anecdote of the 'last-minute frogs'). He always had to leave himself free to improvise or change things while filming. And above all, his vision of creation was collective, directly involving the Tunisian technicians on the crew, regularly invited to be actors in the film as well: that is how, in parallel with my work as assistant director, Arrabal asked me to appear as the young blind mailman who brings the child-hero of the film a package containing a wooden airplane probably made and sent from prison by the father, a present that the mother confiscates! Because she wants nothing to recall the memory of the father, while the child suspects that she, as a fervent Catholic, denounced to the authorities her Communist-sympathising, and thus impious, husband! [...]

Férid Boughedir



Memories of Half a Century

By Hassen Daldoul, producer

I asked myself what I could write about my friend Fernando Arrabal, a character out of a novel, multi-talented, at once poet, writer, cartoonist, painter, sculptor and filmmaker. I must go beyond the fortuitous circumstances that contributed to our encounter during the filming of his first feature, *Viva la muerte*. Work relationships, intense as they may be, do not favour friendship. So we must look elsewhere to explain what drew me to this creative genius. I think it was simply accidents of the soul that maintained the shared virtue of a pure friendship. [...]

It was in the office of Taoufik Torgeman, president of SATPEC, that I met Arrabal for the first time, in 1970: a small man but an immense character, an elf with a sly gaze that made him at once impressive and appealing. From the first glance I seemed to hear him murmur: '...but we already know each other!'. The meeting was brief, Taoufik Torgeman simply said: 'I know that SATPEC is low on money right now, but I trust you and I know you're a professional. Forget our troubles, just take care of the interests of the film and of SATPEC. We are co-owners of the film, 50/50. Jacques Poitrenaud, the French co-producer, says he thinks the world of you and insists that you be the film's executive producer. Shooting must be wrapped in 6 weeks at the latest. The film will be distributed in France in 1971, with plans to show it at the International Critics' Week of the Cannes Film Festival. If you run into problems, let me know. Good luck!'

That very day, I read the thrilling screenplay in one sitting. [...]

As fate would have it, the film shoot coincided with a moment of great upheaval in Tunisia. We were in early 1970, a year of enormous political and socioeconomic significance. It was the year of the sensational trial of the great economic reformer Ahmed Ben Salah. To make things worse, Nature took a hand: catastrophic rains fell on almost the entire country, causing terrible flooding and destruction: bridges, roads, dams, fields of growing crops, trees swept away, and on and on.

In the midst of these scenes of devastation, Fernando discovered the region of Hergla [...] a tiny, almost unknown village. [...]

Joy, surprise, and curiosity accompanied Fernando as he experienced his encounter with Hergla, the twin of Melilla, its alter ego. He couldn't stop gesticulating, walking up and down the little streets, disappearing into blind alleys and turning back again as though to recall bits of his childhood, opening doors which were customarily kept ajar in this place where everyone had known everyone else for generations. In the midst of this whirlwind of euphoria, we went to sit outside the village's only café to sip a coffee. A great moment of shared happiness, so contagious was Fernando's emotion.



Enough nostalgia. The most important thing is that this film remains essential and revolutionary in terms of freedom of expression. In a country of profoundly Christian and Islamic culture and influence, where the relationship to the body is still imbued with conservatism and shame, even uncleanliness, the scenes of the mother, naked in the cadaver of a bull hanging upside-down and butchered, as well as the scene of the aunt, naked and sunk in the quicksands of Hergla, are essentially edifying in questioning the idea of original sin.

This daring work allowed Tunisian cinema to take its place in the global avant-garde, giving it the freedom to discuss subjects that are still socially and politically challenging.

Add to that a cinematographic language simplified to the utmost because imagined by a child, 'Fando', less than ten years old (Mahdi Chaouch) with his playmate and friend Thérèse (Jazia Klibi), and which allowed the image to perform its most incisive function.

No need to remind us that *Viva la muerte* was banned in Tunisia and France after its screening at the Cannes Film Festival and did not receive its visa d'exploitation until 22 June 1981, thanks to Jack Lang's great cultural openness. Had it not been for these circumstances, the fate of this masterpiece would have been to remain shut away, in cannisters sealed by the good graces of a cloud of conservatives, and cinephiles would have been deprived of these glowing images, dream reflections of a real life.





Hassen Daldoul starring as the torturer

Finally, before closing, I must evoke one last memory. Towards the end of the shoot, Fernando said that I was extremely tough in managing the crew, especially towards Férid Boughedir. I replied that it was essential for everyone to learn his trade on a solid foundation and that working in film is as hard as being in the army. Facetiously, he then asked me to play the role of a torturer to immortalise the memory of this shoot, which I accepted on condition he himself be in the scene, which he was.

Memories of a first half-century, with the seeds of eternity.

Hassen DALDOUL

October 2021

From the book *ROSSELLINI, HERGLA ET LE CINÉMA*
with the kind permission of Mohamed Challouf



PRESS REVIEWS

« A fascinating experiment, *Viva la muerte!* returns cinema to its deepest ambitions and recalls an era when a film sought first of all to be a work of art, whose creator did not care a fig whether it would one day turn a profit...»

Henry Chapier, 'Le film du jour, *Viva la muerte!* d'Arrabal', *Combat*, 14 May 1971

« This cinema belongs to the noblest of its kind. No shot, even when horrifying, is gratuitous. Arrabal doesn't give the slightest thought to provocation. The only scandal here is that of truth. Beauty is never scandalous. »

Claude Mauriac, 'Sur un chef-d'œuvre interdit', *L'avant-Scène Cinéma* n° 116, July 1971 (from the article written by Claude Mauriac for *Le Figaro* before the ban on the film was lifted)

« A poem of tenderness and maternal love (Arrabal goes almost as far in this direction as Louis Malle), which soon becomes a poem of wrenching cruelty and barbarousness. Is the work autobiographical? Certain touches suggest it, which does not prevent the story from rising to the level of symbol and reflecting in its tumult the still living drama of civil war. It is, in any event, the work of a man who has suffered, whose heart has bled, and who cries out to us unrestrainedly his suffering and hate.»

Jean de Baroncelli, 'Viva la muerte ! d'Arrabal a ouvert la Semaine de la critique', *Le Monde*, 19 May 1971

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