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Cécile Fourrel de Frettes, *Vicente Blasco Ibáñez et le cinéma français 1914—1918*. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2015. 243 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €29.90 (pb). ISBN 978-2-87854-635-4.

Review by Barry Nevin, Technological University Dublin.

To scholars unfamiliar with Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's writing and the period in question, the novelist's name is arguably associated less with French cinema than with Rex Ingram's epic screen adaptations of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), which propelled Rudolph Valentino to stardom, and *Mare Nostrum* (1926). Cécile Fourrel de Frettes's book aims to fill a fundamental gap in present chronicles of the writer's life: Blasco Ibáñez's involvement in the French film industry during the First World War, prior to his departure for Hollywood, where Ingram's war dramas were produced.

Blasco Ibáñez was in his fifties by the time war had been declared and he had already led an illustrious life prior to his arrival in France. A militant Republican partisan in his youth, he founded a newspaper, *El Pueblo* (*The People*), in his native Valencia, established himself as a major writer in the 1890s and worked as a war reporter in Cuba in 1898. He later travelled across South America and established two colonies in Argentina. On the one hand, Blasco Ibáñez's arrival in France was well timed. He was a prestigious international figure, especially in France, having received the Légion d'honneur in 1906. Furthermore, his investments in Argentina were destroyed in 1914 and he was eager to reach new heights following the lacklustre response to his most recent book, *Los Argonautas*. On the other hand, the French film industry was seriously dented on the eve of war and would never again occupy the dominant position it had held beforehand. Fourrel de Frettes illustrates how Blasco Ibáñez negotiated these sea changes, revealing a gifted writer who was also an astute businessman seeking to work in a medium that demanded aesthetic and financial acumen within the context of seismic political change.

The book is divided into three chapters. The first centres on Blasco Ibáñez's relationship with the cinema prior to becoming a screenwriter. More specifically, it considers his previous illustrations of warfare in drawings and photography, focusing particularly on his richly illustrated *Historia de la guerra europea de 1914*.^[1] Following this discussion, Fourrel de Frettes situates Blasco Ibáñez's growing interest in developing "romans cinématographiques" (p. 14) within a global context in which theorists and practitioners such as Louis Delluc and Henri Diamant-Berger were exploring the poetics of cinema and debating its artistic legitimacy. The author's list of Blasco Ibáñez's staggeringly ambitious, ultimately unfilmed projects—among them *Don Quixote*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Tales of Hoffmann* as well as biographies of

Mozart, Beethoven and Hugo—clearly indicates that he sought to enrich cinema through literary works, including his own novels as well as other canonised classics produced in a variety of national contexts. Details of the writer's life from the turn of the century to the war are clearly illustrated so non-specialists are acquainted with the personal context in which Blasco Ibáñez developed this interest in cinema.

The second chapter illustrates Blasco Ibáñez's output during the war. Fourrel de Frettes details his work as a reporter in Paris, where he channelled his writing talents towards propaganda targeting Spanish readers wishing for news of their neighbour, most notably through his articles detailing everyday life in France in the pages of *El Pueblo*. In the same chapter, Fourrel de Frettes resists concluding that Blasco Ibáñez was motivated exclusively by a desire to defend republican values, arguing instead that the writer was also incentivised by support provided by Raymond Poincaré's government for Prometeo's publication of *Historia*, and that this government was certainly the key driving force behind *Debout les morts!* (directed by Léonce Perret), the company's little-known (and unfortunately lost) adaptation of *Four Horsemen* made during the war.

The third chapter focuses on the appeal cinema held for Blasco Ibáñez as a tool for propaganda, focusing particularly on *Debout les morts!* This is followed by further analysis of other projects, paying particular attention to their female characters and macabre imagery. Fourrel de Frettes subsequently situates *Debout les morts!* within cultural representations of the First World War and also points to the film's influence on classics such as *J'accuse!* (directed by Abel Gance, 1919) and *Metropolis* (directed by Fritz Lang, 1927).

The author faced two substantial challenges in writing this book. First, the scope of Blasco Ibáñez's career necessitates in-depth knowledge of the technological, economic and cultural contexts of the French, Hollywood and Spanish film industries. Such an awareness is clearly demonstrated by Fourrel de Frettes as she addresses the various stages of Blasco Ibáñez's career and the projects that he undertook. The second major obstacle faced by the author was her discussion of *Debout les morts!*, since the film is now lost. However, this and other lacunae are deftly substituted by extensive primary research on production files, including screenplays, drafts and unpublished correspondence curated in archives in Valencia, Madrid, Paris, Los Angeles, Toulouse and Menton. All quotations from English and Spanish sources are translated into French in footnotes.

Owing to Fourrel de Frettes's in-depth primary research, convincing arguments and palpable enthusiasm for her subject, this book builds significantly on the work of scholars such as Rafael Corbalán (*Vicente Blasco Ibáñez y la nueva novela cinematográfica*, 1998), who have addressed the writer's engagement with visual arts but have overlooked this particular phase of his career.^[2] Overall, her analysis not only sheds light on a critically overlooked transitional period in Blasco Ibáñez's career but also complements Laurent Véray's work on representations of the First World War in cinema (*La Grande Guerre au cinéma: de la gloire à la mémoire*) and Richard Abel's ground-breaking research on French cinema's aesthetics and modes of production during the silent period (*French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915—1929*).^[3] Throughout this book, the author situates Blasco Ibáñez's work in cinema within the context of the other media—among them reports, illustrated books and novels—to which he contributed, and ensures that the aesthetic, political and commercial aspects of his filmed and unfiled projects remain in view. As a result, the author clearly demonstrates that the war years constitute a key turning point both in Blasco Ibáñez's career and in his evolution as a screenwriter. What also emerges is a richly illustrated

portrait of a writer and publicly engaged artist who occasionally basked in bohemian myth, and clear evidence that *le récit blasquien* within and beyond the war years merits further attention.

A special word must be said about the author's bibliography. Fourrel de Frettes's list of works cited is divided into a number of clearly labelled sections that provide ample direction for further reading regarding Blasco Ibáñez's life and cinema more broadly. For example, his novels are divided thematically categories such as First World War narratives and psychological novels. Also included is a list of films based on Blasco Ibáñez's work, which is particularly useful to scholars of Hollywood cinema, where his influence remained salient beyond the silent years. Secondary texts are divided into groups such as biographies of Blasco Ibáñez, his political outlook and other texts examining his relationship with cinema. This book will be useful primarily to postgraduate students and researchers working on Blasco Ibáñez's life and work, including those focusing on the genesis of the Hollywood projects for which he arguably remains best known in anglophone film criticism. Nevertheless, the impressively compiled bibliography, most of whose texts are written in French, is also likely to be of use to scholars with a broad interest in French silent cinema.

NOTES

[1] Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *Historia de la guerra europea de 1914* (Valencia: Prometeo, 1914-1919).

[2] Rafael T. Corbalán, *Vicente Blasco Ibáñez y la nueva novela cinematográfica* (Valencia: Ediciones Filmoteca, 1998).

[3] Laurent Véray, *La Grande Guerre au cinéma: de la gloire à la mémoire* (Paris: Ramsey, 2008); Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915—1929* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

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