

From “this country has no solution”... to *Salto a la gloria** (1959)

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Summary

Salto a la Gloria recounts the life of the eminent Spanish histologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal from his childhood in Petilla de Aragón (Navarra, Spain), until the awarding of the 1906 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine. Without avoiding stereotypes (the mischievous child, the absentminded scientist dedicated exclusively to science) and archetypes surrounding the scientist at that time, the film moulds a biography both entertaining and decidedly close to reality. It includes moral messages specific to the historical moment in which it was filmed, and humor scenes clever not only in content, but also in their placement throughout the film. The director utilizes well-implemented sharp contrasts in order to unite the events of Cajal's life: his rural childhood, his participation in Cuba's war of independence or his admission into Zaragoza's School of Medicine (Spain). From a current mentality, and in light of the true knowledge of Cajal's life, scenes that attempt to emphasize his greatness seem comical, like the cabaret scene where the only thing that remains for him to say is “sin, sin....” In short, a good movie considering the financial resources provided and the time in which it was filmed.

Keywords: Cajal, Histology, Neuroscience, Nobel Prize

Technical details

Title: *Salto a la gloria*

Country: Spain

Year: 1959

Director: León Klimowsky

Music: Isidro B. Maiztegui.

Screenwriter: Vicente Escrivá, Ramón D. Faraldo and Manuel Pombo Angulo.

Cast: Adolfo Marsillach, José Marco Davó, Asunción Sancho, Ángel Luis Álvarez, Antonio Alfonso Vidal and Rafael Bardem.

Color: black and white

Runtime: 115 minutes

Genre: biographical

Production Companies: Aspa Producciones Cinematográficas S.A.

Awards: In the Festival de Cine de San Sebastián, *Salto a la Gloria* won the award for best Spanish film and Adolfo Marsillach, the Zulueta award for best actor.

Synopsis: Biographical film about the Spanish histologist and Nobel Prize winner Santiago Ramón y Cajal.

Background and new version

In his excellent book “Ciencia, cine, e historia. *De Méliès a 2001*”, Alberto Elena relates the steps that preceded the the creation of *Salto a la Gloria*. In the summer of 1952, a script entitled *Cajal* was submitted to the Dirección General de Cinematografía y Teatro. This step was required in Spain during those years in order to film a movie. This script seems to be the one that was used seven years later to film *Salto a la Gloria*. At that point, the ministerial censors and civil servants in charge of its authorization gave the script an unenthusiastic reception. Apart from some isolated objections (robbery of skeletons, his use as a coat stand, as it occurred in reality, and other similar banalities), it was not highly regarded overall because it failed to adapt to the propaganda expectations that the Franco regime had for the biographical genre. Even so, in his written report one of the censors says, “Nothings opposes the approval of this script, seeing that nothing is against our fundamental principles. Nevertheless, I find it necessary to insist that when dealing cinematographically with figures important to our Homeland, they should create films rich artistical-

* Jump to Glory

ly, literally and technically, and not, as in this case, productions that do not pass mediocrity in the slightest aspect. It would be logical, considering Cajal's universal figure, that the production company would use the best screenwriters of our cinema to make a script and afterwards a film that held the importance of the biographical person, yet sacrificing the historical truth in favor of exaltation of the character" ¹.

Despite the previous comment, seven years later the first cinematographic version of Cajal's life, *Salto a la Gloria*, was submitted in the San Sebastian's Film Festival and was debuted commercially on February 11, 1960 in the Madrid's Capitol Theatre. On this occasion, the government did not find fault with the filming, carried out from January to April 1959, nor found reasons to prohibit its public exhibition. Notwithstanding, the authorities denied it the classification of "National Interest", which meant important grants¹. This history is framed by what was cinematographic censoring, and in other aspects of life, the Franco regime.

His excellent interpretation and his similar physique to Cajal marked Adolfo Marsillach, the film's protagonist. Years later, he would return to interpret the same character in the series *Ramón y Cajal* (1982), produced for Public Spanish Television (TVE) and directed by José María Forqué.

The film

It opens with Cajal's departure from Cuba, where he had participated in their war of independence. He abandons the island, ill with malaria, aboard a hospital ship. On the large ship, one grasps the overcrowding, the depersonalization of the ill and the roguery of the male nurse that attends them. Cajal reflects with a voyage mate, in a decadent tone, not to be outdone, about the absurdity of this and other wars (figure 1).

In these surroundings, and to make the most of a family photo, the director transfers the action to Cajal's childhood (figure 2). An atmosphere opposite to that of the boat appears, a spacious room where the harmonically placed family is waiting to take a family portrait.

Scenes follow regarding his childish mischief in his tiny hometown of Petilla de Aragón. The shots show a town that, during the years of filming, is not far from what Cajal truly saw as a child: unpaved roads, peeling facades, etc.

His room as a child (Ángel Luis Alvarez) in Jaca is made the most of in order to highlight traits that characterized his entire life: an enormous curiosity and a great work ethic combined with an important

dose of self-esteem. Cajal's father sent him there to work as a shoemaker's apprentice as punishment for his poor performance in school and for his misbehavior. Similar circumstances can also be seen in the lives of other illustrious characters such as Albert Einstein, to whom something similar also occurred (figure 3).



Figure 1: Cajal abandons Cuba ill with malaria

The figure of Cajal's father, masterly interpreted by José Marco Davó, is treated with great realism and delicacy. His character perhaps softened slightly, already shows, in this part of the film, great strictness and deep affection.



Figure 2: A family portrait utilized to transfer the film's action

Once again a photograph serves as a resource to fast-forward to university life. During this period, the relationship with his father changes. The paternal severity of his childhood becomes an attitude of support, with follow-up at a discrete distance. The support becomes apparent through the most precious gift given to a medical student, a skeleton that his father himself unearthed and cleaned. The follow-up reveals itself in the slight reproach that is made for Cajal's failure to attend class. Here the director takes advantage

of Marsillach's humoristic ability to include a small joke, originating in the gift of the skeleton, and emphasizing certain complicity between father and son.

At this point, a few scenes are inserted, more than likely superfluous, where Silveria, (Asunción Sancho) his future wife, appears for the first time when she searches for her sisters in order to go to mass. Shortly afterward she appears again. She is at a party playing Blind man's buff when Ramón y Cajal appears, watching through a window and, "the things of destiny", Silveria runs into it and upon removing the blindfold sees Cajal, who leaves at that very instant.

Cajal travels to Zaragoza by train. As he is carrying the skeleton in his suitcase, there is a humor scene in the compartment, with a series of close-up and background shots based on the mime and specific to the first years of silent film. On the train, Cajal meets the young lady that will be his girlfriend prior to Silveria.



Figure 3: Cajal is sent to Jaca as a shoemaker's apprentice

The Facultad de Medicina of Zaragoza is perfectly set, its classes appear filled by respectful students as it corresponds to the decade. In one of them, Cajal demonstrates a certain juvenile pomposity that collides with the measured, thoughtful response and humble tone of the Professor Casas (Rafael Bardem) (figure 4). When Cajal goes to apologize for his impulsive behavior, a short but deep dialogue that marks the point of inflection in his life occurs between them. There Cajal perceives the austerity of Casas' laboratory: one table, one chair and one bookshelf almost completely empty.

In order to reduce the density that the film has entered, a series of love and courtship scenes, with an evident moralizing character, very specific to the time of filming, follow the previous sequence. Again

the action shifts abruptly, seeking the contrast, to the arrival of the hospital ship in Spain. The laconic military atmosphere confronts the welcoming, affectionate family ambiance. During the convalescence, in his parent's home, Cajal ends the dating relationship initiated in Zaragoza and reunites with Silveria. Here Cajal begins his research thanks to a gift from his father, a microscope (figure 5).



Figure 4: Cajal in the School of Medicine of Zaragoza



Figure 5: Cajal receives a grand gift from his father

Once Cajal achieves the Professorship of Valencia and recently married to Silveria, he appears freed from academic life. Cajal begins to submerge himself in microbiology research, with the cholera epidemic as motive (figure 6), competing with Jaime Ferrán (a Spanish microbiologist) (figure 7). This presents the illusion of an eccentric and absentminded researcher, pouring heart and soul into his work. Economic precariousness hinders his labor, and he appears as a self-sacrificing servant to humanity that does not hesitate to run the risk of self administering the vaccine that he created (figure 8). This displays the lack of understanding towards Cajal's work and the confrontation with his colleagues, something very typ-



Figure 6: Cholera outbreak in Valencia



Figure 7: Jaime Ferrán

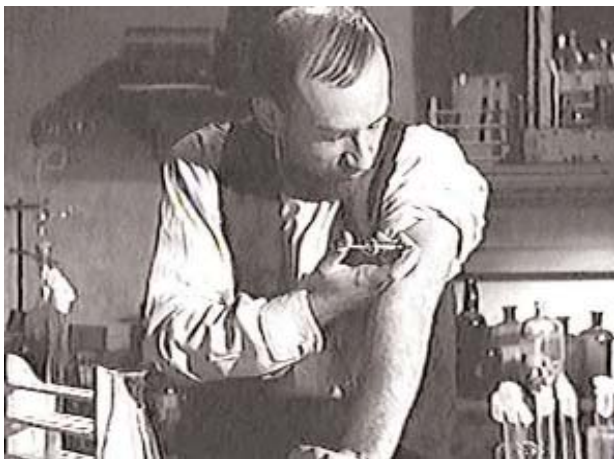


Figure 8: Cajal vaccinates himself with a *Vibrio cholerae* culture

ical and highly unoriginal.

When Cajal takes the histology professorship at Madrid, a series of scenes show his brusque character, softened by an incredible sequence in which his daughter appears on a carousel ride, much to the surprise of Cajal's patient wife.

The following scene is excellent from start to

finish. It is set in a cabaret where Cajal watches from his table with Silveria the dance steps of a chorus girl. Cajal makes a show of his disdain for the frivolousness, making slights to both the cabaret and the chorus girl as he is concerned only about his research, about the future modifications to the histological technique for the silver nitrate. In any case: "an exemplary life", "great", without commentary.

The scenes of family life are followed by the death of Cajal's daughter, which for a more melodramatic effect, is presented together, in both space and time, with the scientific discovery of his life (figure 9). The laboratory and microscope are placed at the head of Cajal's weakening daughter's bed so that in one single shot we can grasp the sage, the microscope and the dying daughter (figure 10). Could one ask for more?

As a result of his striking discovery, Cajal gives an exposé to the scientific community that

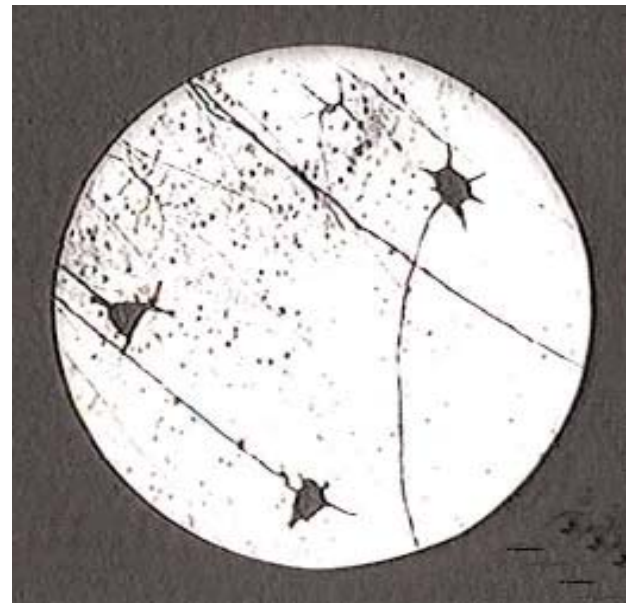


Figure 9: Cajal's great discovery



Figure 10: Triumph and death. Cajal makes a grand discovery in the moment that his daughter passes away

occurs, at his thirty-seven years of age, at the 1889 Congress of the German Anatomical Society in Berlin. He had to be encouraged into attending, almost pressured by his wife and students as Cajal, pleading his lack of rhetoric and poor speaking abilities, has no desire to go. When he arrives in Berlin, Cajal is almost unable to go through with the Congress; his performance is placed at the end of the program, postponed by a concert. Once Cajal does present his speech, one colleague twiddles his thumbs, another looks out the window and still another at his watch.....

Cajal requests that Kölliker (Antonio Alfonso Vidal) look through the microscope (figure 11) and the latter is tremendously impressed by the images of neurons and their synapses⁷. Very intrigued by the work, Kölliker inquires how much time and how many researchers have been dedicated to this project. Cajal responds that he has toiled alone for ten years, no question considering that Cajal was always a lone worker. Here transpires the “*Salto a la Gloria*” (Jump to Glory).



Figure 11: Cajal requests that his colleagues look at his slides

From this moment on, the film engages a frantic pace, employing various fade-in and fade-out shots: Paris, New York, London and the return to Madrid, where Cajal is received as a triumphant bull-fighter. The Spanish people, needy for icons in order to reclaim their lost pride, attach his name to products such as: Anís Cajal, Perfumed Cajal Soap, Don Santiago Candies and The Microscope Tavern. It is here where Cajal's famous prophetic phrase is inserted: “This country has no solution.”

The relative indifference with which he receives the news of the 1906 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine, is understood when years later, Cajal is referred to as the life preserver thrown to a castaway as he arrives at the shore.

At the Nobel Prize presentation in Stockholm (figure 12), it is not mentioned that the award was shared with the Italian histologist, Camillo Golgi. Perhaps it was done purposely to not play down the importance of the scientist from the director's home country.



Figure 12: Cajal receives the Nobel Prize

The commentary

The awards of the Festival de Cine de San Sebastian justly merit the quality of the film and its protagonist. The quality is acceptable considering the era and the financial resources provided. Under the circumstances of the Franco regime, the figure of Santiago Ramón y Cajal was used, as it could not be outdone, for internal consumption and exportation. The enumeration of Cajal's merits in the Nobel Prize presentation seems the narration of Spain's greatness.

The means of utilizing photographs to change scenes in time is very appropriate. Cajal was a photography enthusiast, and if he had seen the film, undoubtedly it would have been a detail to his liking. With this resource, the director unites the events of Cajal's life with strong contrasts, achieving an interesting narrative agility.

The film lacks Cajal's relationship with his teacher, Aureliano Maestre of San Juan, the great microscoper, and any reference to his humanist facet. Cajal is presented as pure scientist but he was a great enthusiast of astronomy, archeology, chess, hypnotism, literary and philosophical essays, among other things². Perhaps it is due to the lack of time in the 115 minutes.

In the film another Spanish scientist, the bacteriologist Jaime Ferrán appears in isolated scenes. He developed a cholera vaccine utilizing live bacteria unlike that which Cajal studied.

The film collects in two moments Cajal's con-

tributions to the knowledge of the nervous system's histology. The first coincides with the death of his daughter. While caring for her, Cajal sees its structure for the first time. The second occurs when Cajal presents his finding at the 1889 Congress of the German Anatomical Society in Berlin. In the specimens, one can unequivocally see how the neurons are individual cellular elements (neuron theory) that touch one another but do not unite to form a continuous network (reticular theory) as was thought (photo 9).

Vázquez Tapioles in the analysis that he carry out on Cajal's work indicate that it's monumental: "14 book and 252 monographic papers. They are crowned by the great masterpiece *Textura de Sistema Nerviosa del Hombre y de los Vertebrados*, cornerstone to the Anatomy of the Nervous System and a required reference work in the study of Anatomy and Neurobiology. Hence, in the modern scientific world, as in past times, justice is done to Don Santiago. To prove this, it will suffice to consider only one piece of information, in the year 1984, Cajal was the classical author most often cited by the 3000 most important scientific magazines. In the Science Citation Index alone there were 382 citations, far above Einstein (336), Darwin (239), Claude Bernard (151), Rudolf Virchow (108) or Charles Sherrington (95)"³.

"NASA, in its program Life Sciences, called the comprised period between 1991 and 2000 the "brain decade". In order to proceed with the closing ceremony, NASA dedicated to Cajal, whom it recognizes as the "Father of Modern Neuroscience", a complete laboratory, Neurolab. It was debuted on April 16, 1998 aboard the Space Shuttle Columbia at Cape Canaveral and carries on board several of Cajal's original drawings and twelve of his most relevant specimens (photo). With this well-deserved tribute, Cajal reached the stars and projected himself into the future, far from mistakes and oversights, from ignorance and ingratitude"³.

In Spain, the people continue believing the above myth as José María López Piñero explains: "I have repeated over and over again that Cajal is a victim of false mystification and of ideological manipulation. Although he continues to be the one and only scientist of international standing with out a critiqued edition of his complete works, any commemoration is an excuse to spend enormous quantities of money on publication and conferences that opportunists take advantage of, in order to reiterate hackneyed stereotypes and crude errors about his biography and work..."⁴.

Returning to the film, one last thought: initially permission was denied to film the script as it was not considered adequate to attain the finished product desired by the Franco regime for a person of Cajal's caliber. When it was finally debuted, the government remained firm in its attitude, not granting any subsidy or the classification of National Interest despite its achieved success and awards received in the Festival Internacional de San Sebastian. In any case, as Cajal himself said "this country has no solution".

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