Vicitus and the Creation of the Catalan Subject
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Introduction

In 2012, Catalan author Albert Sánchez Piñol published the novel Vicitus. The novel is his first work published in Spanish rather than Catalan, and focuses on the life of a young engineer, Martí ‘Zuvi’ Zuviria, as he grew from a poorly behaved child into a top tier engineer during the War of Spanish Succession.

While the novel may focus on a tale that takes place in the 1700s, a lot of its messages are relevant to recent discourse concerning the independence movement in Catalonia. The entirety of the novel Vicitus is leading up to one event – the siege and fall of Barcelona – a day well remembered by Catalan separatists today.

The Spanish Constitution

Much of the modern day Catalan conflict relates to the Spanish Constitution. TheFR Spanish Constitution was written in 1787 (specifically Title VIII Chapter Three, which concerns itself with the autonomous communities of Spain). The Constitution lays out the guidelines for exactly what falls under the jurisdiction of the autonomous communities, and what is the responsibility of the Spanish State. It also discusses the responsibility of the Spanish State in ensuring the preservation of the cultural, linguistic and historical characteristics of these autonomous communities (in such a way that does not infringe upon their autonomous rights). This is a hot button issue that is touched upon throughout the novels, as well as in the discourse concerning Catalan independence.

Modern Catalan Conflict

The modern day push for Catalan independence draws its legitimacy from a 2014 referendum in which more than 80% of people voted in favor of independence. The vote was a significant one – it backed up the findings of public opinion polling which had shown that a majority of the Catalan people were in favor of a formal separatist vote. The Catalan Parliament, at the time of the vote, Artur Mas, argued that the vote proved that Catalonia wanted to rule itself. However, the vote itself has been riddled with controversy, with the Spanish government arguing that the referendum was rushed and didn’t accurately reflect the true opinions of the Catalan people (estimates indicate that roughly 40% of those eligible to do so voted in the referendum). The Spanish government also argued that the referendum was nothing more than propaganda, and “devoid of any kind of democratic validity.”

To the Catalan people, however, it was much more than that – it was a step towards assuming the independence they lack and believe to be theirs.

Zuvi’s Story

Vicitus begins in 1705, when Zuvi is only 14 years old. After being kicked out of his Spanish boarding school, he has been sent to France to study under the Marquis de Vauban. Under Vauban’s tutelage, young Zuvi learns how to be a proper engineer – mastering the art of war so he can be prepared no matter who he may be called upon to fight for. During the novel, Zuvi finds himself fighting for both sides in the conflict – both the Habsburg and Bourbon armies. He eventually returns home to Barcelona, where he fights to defend his homeland in the years that ended on September 11, 1714 when Barcelona fell, and the War of Spanish Succession concluded.

The second novel, Vae Victus, begins where the first left off – September 12, 1714, with Barcelona in the hands of the Bourbon army. Zuvi, as a faded bourbon defector, is billed as a traitor and exiled from Catalonia to face his fate in America. While there, Zuvi finds himself an outsider amongst the Yamasee Indians, many of whom don’t trust him. Eventually he gains their trust, and they reuniue to him with some of his Bourbon enemies from Europe, many of whom are now living in Florida. Almost immediately Zuvi finds himself taking part in another war – this time between the Yamasee and the English.

Defining the Subject

To put it simply, the subject position of a person is the position in society that has been ascribed to them, as well as the way in which they have adapted to and use that position as their own. Because of the subject position in which a person is placed and functions, they are going to have a certain viewpoint towards the rest of the world that is colored by their experiences within this position. These positions exist and function because of the way in which society functions, and the way in which these positions are seen is determined primarily by the way in which society on the whole chooses to see them. In the Vicitus universe, Zuvi’s subject position allows him to function both as an engineer during the War of Spanish Succession to help maintain his nation’s independence, as well as in present-day Catalonia as a Catalan citizen fighting to regain independence.

Throughout the two novels, Zuvi’s identity is constructed and reconstructed so as to situate him in both the present and the past – a subject in both time periods. Each novel, since it takes place in a different time period and focuses on a different way, seeks to do this in a different way.

Vicitus:

One of the most important scenes in Vicitus begins when Zuvi arrives in Madrid ahead of the allied army. The first person he speaks to in the city is an innkeeper, who immediately assumes him to be a Frenchman due to his Catalan accent. It is a situation we see throughout the novel – outside of the people of Catalonia, nobody recognizes Zuvi as a Catalan. He’s always a part of this generalized “other” – always grouped in with the French by those he interacts with. This runs him into trouble a few times throughout the novel, as on one more occasion the fact that he’s seen as French opens him up to various types of conflicts, whether because people think he’s a Bourbon sympathizer, because of his ancestry for the Castilian Spanish people.

Of course, we also must take note of the novel’s finale – the siege of Barcelona. In this, we see direct reference to the Catalan national anthem: “Oис, Segadors.” The anthem refers to farmers working hard in the fields of Catalonia, who use their sickles to defend the land of Catalonia and the nationhood that it brings with it. In the siege of Barcelona, we see exactly this attitude, with Zuvi leading the charge. Although Zuvi has been extensively trained in the art of war, he’s also had some training in the law, which he uses to argue to the international community fails to even recognize them, yet they push on, ever vigilant in an attempt to create their own future.

Vae Victus:

While Vae Victus takes place in North America, we still see many of the same themes in creating Zuvi’s subject position. Notably, there’s the perception of the Yamasee Indians concerning Zuvi’s nationality. Just as those in Europe in the first book, Zuvi is portrayed in a way that is not that of a Frenchman. In the Yamasee mind, Zuvi is not Spanish. As the Indians stand on the battlefield, Zuvi is able to reflect to his countrymen – a group of Spaniards living in Florida under Bourbon rule. Naturally, Zuvi despises these people and goes on a rant about how much he can’t stand these people or the “bourbon scum” that rules Spain. Yet again, Zuvi thinks like a man, not a Spaniard. The Yamasee people aren’t allowed their own nationality – they’re made out to be people of Spain.

Later in the novel, Zuvi has the opportunity to reflect upon the events of September 11, 1714 when he meets up with his old enemies from Europe while with the Yamasee in Florida. He argues that, since Barcelona fell, the Catalan people were left fighting without a constitution, and claims the only way for that situation to be rectified is for them to regain their independence. While the location and the people have changed, Zuvi’s message has not. The Catalan people are not properly recognized by the international community, as they are forced to be a race within a race, and the Catalan people can’t do no ties while taking part in a struggle for independence which first began during the War of Spanish Succession.

Conclusions

Clearly one of Albert Sánchez Piñol’s concerns is whether or not the Catalan cause is seen as one of nationhood, and through his development of Zuvi’s subject position we can see the ways in which this question of nationhood carries through from the War of Spanish Succession into the present day. Zuvi’s position as a hard-working and dedicated Catalan is portrayed strongly in the novel, juxtaposed alongside the international community which is consistently trying to force him into being a part of a nation which he holds no ties to, whether that nation be France or Spain. This problem directly reflects modern Catalonia – trying to break free of Spain, to whom the Catalan people feel no ties.

Further Research

Since it was first published in 2012, the popular success of Vicitus has been astounding. With a third book in the works, two tabletop games, a graphic novel and rumors of a movie, the influence of Vicitus has reached far and wide. To continue my work analyzing the Vicitus universe, I plan to look at both of the game versions of the first novel, as well as looking at the graphic novel that was written based on the same novel. The games especially provide a lens into the subjectivity of the player and in which the player’s position in the game affects their interaction with the story, thus manipulating the player’s own political position. I also plan to analyze the subject position of Zuvi’s caretaker, Waltraud. As his silent caretaker, she has an important place within the narrative – we know from Zuvi’s comments in the novel that Waltraud has somehow changed and influenced the words he dictated to her, but he never expressly says how. In Vae Victus, she does speak to a reader through footnotes that are implied to have been added in by her after the novel was written to clarify Zuvi’s ramblings, but outside of that we only know what she thinks says if Zuvi directly comments on something that she says to him.

References


"En el fondo, los mismos, felpudos rojos que nos habían metido en una guerra mundial no crean en las Libertades y Constituciones catalanas" -Vae Victus, p. 311

"Como comprendemos que el tabernero había confundido mi acento catalán con francés." -Victus, p. 249

"En tanto que en Cataluña quede algun solo catalán, y piedras en los campos, hemos de tener enemigo y guerra." -Victus, p. 128

"El ambiente catalán se ha sometido a un control total" -modern Catalan Conflict