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CRIES AND WHISPERS: EXHUMING AND NARRATING DEFEAT IN SPAIN TODAY

In this paper, I will reflect on the impact in contemporary Spain of the production, circulation and consumption of narratives and images of civil war terror and suffering, specifically those resulting from the opening of mass graves from the Francoist repression. This sharing of narratives has to be seen in the context of a broader and highly controversial process of reconsideration of the civil war as a traumatic past. At a time when Spanish society is engaged in important debates regarding the singularity or plurality of our identity and the structure of our territorial organization, these exhumations are bringing to light rather disturbing information regarding our past, our present and probably our future as well. The excavation of these “crime scenes” in various parts of the country is provoking heated discussions and performances in family contexts, politics, historiography, the media, the arts and the public sphere in general. For example, the public display of skeletons, skulls and bone fragments bearing the marks of violence—from “perimortem” tortures to bullet wounds and *coups de grâce*—is bringing back tragic stories that, for many relatives but also for civil society at large, were for decades mostly silenced, told in whispers, imperfectly transmitted in limited family circles or simply ignored. The screen of silence, fear and self-censorship has been particularly strong in local, rural contexts. Exhumation and narration are inextricably entwined. Exhumations elicit storytelling; conversely, their meaning and social impact depend on the available repertoire of competing “memory plots”. These range from expert discourses, political initiatives, media reports, memoirs, and artworks to more local, fragmented, and “fugitive” memories (Steadly 119–143) that have barely survived in the interstices of the dictatorship’s hegemonic accounts of “Victory”, remaining largely ignored since the dictator’s death.

Exhuming in contemporary Spain

Exhumations are complex, troubling collective performances in cultural, political and sociological terms. Mass graves can be understood as a sophisticated technology of terror production. Despite their large numbers, they need to be interpreted in their specific context—that of their production and that of their excavation. The deliberate piling together of unidentified corpses in unmarked graves, inscribing on them the perverse condition of “quasi-disappearance”, encourages disorder, anxiety and division in any given society (Robben 93–7). This kind of burial practice is designed to obfuscate the memory of violent repression and to consolidate regimes of fear that may last for decades. But as social and political circumstances evolve and the regimes founded on the production of mass graves disappear, the latter metamorphose from

crude instruments of terror into uncomfortable evidence of barbarism with very relevant symbolic, social, political and sometimes judicial consequences. As the Spanish case shows, the disquiet provoked by the presence of mass graves, no matter how attenuated, can last for generations and trigger a flashpoint if appropriate circumstances arise. The consequences of a shift of public attention to such mass graves, whether exhumed or not, will vary according to the national and international contexts in which the remains are investigated, located and managed (Verdery 3). In all cases, the exhumation of victims of mass killings is necessarily controversial and has profound repercussions on both the living and the dead. States may have total or partial involvement in the exhumation process; they may block it; the task may be taken on by default by non-state national or international organizations or grassroots movements. In turn, exhumed bodies have a complex social, political and cultural life (Verdery 3), and inevitably challenge the historical fate of the “rival” dead killed on the other side during the period of conflict.

The current exhumations in Spain are not taking place in a vacuum. During the dictatorship, thousands of corpses lying in mass graves and killing fields, mostly those of “nationalists” killed by republicans, were unearthed, identified, relocated to more dignified burial sites, their names inscribed on plaques, and inserted into the commemorative cycles of the dominant Francoist discourse of “Victory”. Although some of these corpses entered a broader narrative of collective martyrdom in local contexts, others made it to the national press,¹ and a significant number were disinterred in order to be sent to the Valle de los Caídos,² where Franco was to build a megalomaniac monument honouring his military victory and the memory of the “martyrs for God and Spain”. Relatives of victims of the Francoist repression had also organized exhumations, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s in regions such as Navarre and La Rioja. Yet Spain had to wait until the twenty-first century to see a systematic process of excavation, documentation and dissemination of information about common graves containing the remains of the many people executed under Franco’s rule.³

For decades, the hundreds of mass graves resulting from Franco’s repressive policies mostly remained a “public secret”. Whether deliberately ignored, alongside other aspects of the war, by intellectual and political elites since the mid-1950s and during the transition to democracy in the name of reconciliation (Juliá, “Echar al olvido” 20),⁴ or retaining some of their terror-inducing aura locally, mass graves remained invisible time-bombs ticking beneath the surface of familiar landscapes, further covered over by new political pacts and amnesty laws. That these time-bombs were by no means deactivated is shown by the intense controversies and key political and symbolic capital invested in their location, excavation and management in the last few years. Once they started to be systematically opened in the early 2000s, the process took on momentum, with some pro-exhumation associations organizing more stable teams of experts, and technical protocols being developed to normalize the excavation process and identification procedures.

Political leanings have played a major role in shaping debates on the appropriateness, legitimacy and significance of the exhumations. Generally, right-wing politicians accuse them—and the whole “memory recovery” process, including the recent Law of Historical Memory (as it has come to be called in the media) approved on 31 October 2007—of dynamiting the “spirit of the transition” by promoting a resurgence of the

“two Spains” with a new brand of *guerracivilismo*. On the left, positions are no less contentious, including generational disagreement over the management of the “historical memory” of defeat and its main sites: battlegrounds, graves, monuments (Ferrándiz, “The Return” 11–12). In the context of these controversies—which have degenerated into slanging matches on some TV and radio talk shows, and in parliamentary debates—exhumations have been crucial to a crude visualization of the mass killings, fuelling a broader debate regarding the scale and extent of the Francoist repression and its short- and long-term consequences. Thanks to the fast-track, high-visibility dissemination afforded by the new information and communication technologies, images of the disturbing massacres committed by Franco’s troops and supporters started to spill over into public discourses and imaginaries, impacting on public opinion and particularly on the relatives—especially the grandchildren—of the defeated. For quite a few of them, the new image of their country as a landscape strewn with mass graves and untold stories has been unsettling, and many have become activists in local or national grassroots organizations or, at an individual level, have started to pay attention to their elders’ war stories or to search for their buried relatives. While this groundswell continues in many locations across the country, stimulated by new institutional modes of financial and political support (Ferrándiz, “La memoria” 126–129; “The Return” 10), public interest has proved more spasmodic, as the originally shocking images of piled-up bodies and skeletons with marks of torture and bullet wounds are increasingly absorbed into a global pool of images of horror and violence (Ferrándiz and Baer). After the initial disbelief experienced by many, a steady process of normalization of the exhumations and their imagery is turning them into established performances—a predictable ingredient of the summer holiday news and investigative reports. Exhumations continue to be powerful memory triggers in local contexts, and more occasional animators of broader debates; nevertheless, one can anticipate that their nationwide impact (as expressed in media interest, for example) is likely to decrease, or that the media will increasingly treat them as one among many related initiatives, alongside institutional projects, museum exhibitions, academic conferences, documentaries and a wide range of cultural productions, from theatre performances to novels to conceptual art.

The mass graves of defeat have in the last few years changed from emotional and political wastelands into distressing minefields available for public exposure and debate. Most importantly, exhumations provide a bridge between the political production of terror and the intimate experiences of those defeated in the war. Broader, long-term analysis is needed to understand what kind of sociological, symbolic and political performance exhumations are becoming in contemporary Spain, and how long they can remain a hot spot for debates on the memory of the civil war. Even if public attention shifts away from them, they will continue to be performed. Elsewhere I have emphasized the ever-transformative, unstable quality of civil war memory production and debate in contemporary Spain (Ferrándiz, “La memoria” 109–16; “The Return” 10–12), and the same can be said of exhumations as social, cultural and political performances of a ghastly public secret. The hugely sensitive horror stories they contain seem to assure them a decisive place in the “nervous system” (Taussig 1–10) of the civil war, as a finite network of excitable synaptic terminals circulating from the hard data of the repression (torture evidence,

malnutrition, bullet wounds) to highly charged personal objects and still unbound emotions.

Narratives of defeat

Besides the ongoing work they perform in making available concrete data on the repression—particularly through forensic and archaeological reports, and still and moving images disseminated via the media or internet—such exhumations provide an emerging context for the telling of narratives of defeat, on a scale unprecedented in Spain. Exhumations elicit many different types of discourses and public performances, ranging from on-site technical accounts by forensic scientists and archaeologists (later consolidated into scientific reports) to minimal but emotionally explosive gestures on the part of relatives and onlookers. In the complex, many-sided process of the “recovery of historical memories” (I deliberately use the plural form), many different things of dissimilar intensity—ranging from the public to the intimate—are being narrated at the same time, whether before, during, or after the exhumation process. The excavation period is, logically, the most intense moment for the emergence, circulation and interaction of such narratives. In turn, these narratives often feed into the broader, currently booming cultural industry of civil war memories, particularly if there is some kind of media impact.

The growing tangle of memory plots and discourses transmitting and re-elaborating the “visions of the defeated” in the civil war cannot be explored fully here (see Ferrándiz, “La memoria”; Ruiz Torres; Aguilar). I will focus on the memories that emerge during the actual exhumation process, especially those narrated by relatives of those being exhumed. Exhumations create a unique, short-lived environment where testimonies of repression and suffering, direct and indirect, are particularly valued and in high demand. The presence at the excavation of witnesses or relatives raises the expectation that they may reveal or confirm details about the events (the arrests, the moment of execution, the aftermath); share biographical information, photographs or other personal objects of those shot; contribute to the debates on the (contested) appropriateness of grave openings; or reflect on the now standard topics of the decades-long silence, fear and suffering. While not everyone feels like speaking up or reaching back to painful memories (and many refuse to do so), some of those directly affected by the past shootings and the present excavation of the crime scene may find in the exhumation a privileged public space for the telling of their stories—one that in many cases has been totally lacking to them previously.

Thus at most exhumations there is a potential pool of storytellers—whose informal measure of “authenticity” is largely proportionate to age and closeness to those whose bodies are being recovered—and usually also a sympathetic audience of “first-hand consumers” comprising other relatives, friends, onlookers, memory activists, journalists, plus various experts including forensic scientists, archaeologists, cultural anthropologists or psychologists, in what can turn into a competitive scenario in terms of relationships and narratives. In turn, particularly if there is media interest, fragments of the stories being told can selectively spin off into the public sphere, to the extent that the civil war “graveside testimony” has become a subgenre in national

and international TV, radio and press coverage. Attendance at an exhumation is for most people—apart from certain professionals, journalists and activists—a once-in-a-lifetime experience. They are undoubtedly tense scenarios, progressively exposing, if only for a few hours, the brute evidence of cruelty and violence. The presence of the skulls and bones, the piled-up bodies, the marks of death and often mistreatment, colours the moods and testimonies throughout. Furthermore, exhumations take place in a sort of social limbo and symbolic vacuum. Apart from certain rules laid down by the organizers and the technical experts in charge—mostly for safety reasons and concerned chiefly with regulating access to the grave and organizing the testimony-recording process—there are no explicit guidelines governing the interaction of relatives with each other or with others present. Nor do the relatives' ways of relating to the unidentified bones follow any clear pattern. No available symbolic protocol can fully cover the exhumation's complexities. Rituals of introduction and mutual recognition, and tiny or more visible commemorative acts, are commonly improvised in such a way that the various social actors at the site develop roadmaps—political, symbolic, emotional—for navigating the exhumation process, modulating their involvement in keeping with their personal or professional interests. Against the ever-present backdrop of the uncovered bones, conversation (informal and more structured), the giving and receiving of testimonies and the collective sharing of memories and participation in commemorative acts are crucial performances constructing a particular network of symbolic channels and social relations.

Alongside the location of gravesites, the creation of commemorative landmarks and rituals, the compilation of lists of those murdered, the dissemination of information and the act of exhumation itself, there has in the last few years been a rush to record the voices of witnesses of the killings and relatives of those killed. Reports on such on-site narratives at the earliest exhumations have generated a demand for further narratives, which are now resonating with other voices circulating in other formats, from the media to politics to art. For many of those involved in the “recovery of memory” effort, the gradual disappearance of the mostly untold, unrecorded and unclaimed (yet crucial) experiences of those defeated in the war or affected by the repression, as the members of the oldest generation of victims gradually die, impoverishes the quality of Spanish democracy today. Many relatives and activists claim that the absence or minimal relevance of these voices in public discourse more than 30 years after Franco's death points to the long-term success of his regime of fear and to the persistence, albeit in altered form, of a hegemonic narrative of the war which largely excludes the defeated. There has been a recent, telling polemic among historians over issues such as the nature of collective memory; the tensions between history and memory; and whether the wartime and post-war repression has been over- or under-analysed, over-remembered to the point of saturation or shamefully forgotten during the last years of the dictatorship and since the transition to democracy. Also at stake is the role of politicians, intellectuals and historians in the process (Espinosa; Juliá, “De nuestras memorias”; Ruiz Torres, “Los discursos” and “De perplejidades”). This polemic illustrates the divergent opinions that exist in contemporary Spain over the interpretation and contextualization of the different accounts and representations of Francoist despotism and its consequences—victims' narratives, historical texts, artistic recreations, media products—while also questioning and demarcating their respective spheres of influence. This last issue is a

major one. For example, while tens of thousands of pages have been written by historians, it seems clear that their expert accounts have not resolved all the anxieties on the ground. Conversely, while local narratives work very well in local contexts and have a strong appeal in certain media products, some historians feel that memory narratives are not always or necessarily an adequate companion to historiography.

Regardless of this controversy, the collection of testimonies by witnesses and relatives has become one of the primary aims of the grassroots movement for the “recovery of historical memory”. These narratives are presumed to have a double healing effect. At a personal level, they break with years of shame, humiliation, fear and forgetting. At a social level, they feed into public discourse, producing a collective recognition of their authors’ suffering, in a long-overdue act of historical justice. Yet, for many, it is already too late. Most of those who experienced the war as adults, on both sides, are already dead.

Corpses and narratives in Villamayor de los Montes (Burgos)

Drawing on over four years’ fieldwork into the excavation of mass graves and their consequences, in what follows I will explore how these public performances are serving to unlock and elaborate memories of the defeated in the civil war. Although similar excavations are taking place throughout the country, I will focus my analysis on testimonies collected during the exhumation of forty-six bodies at Villamayor de los Montes (Burgos) in July 2004, organized by the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (ARMH).⁵ The ARMH wanted to set up a testimony-recording process that was as systematic as possible. Drawing on the experience of previous exhumations, a designated “interview space” was created a few meters away from the grave, to which only interviewers and potential interviewees had access. This marked a departure from earlier exhumations, where the testimony-taking had been less formal or there had been no one available to make systematic recordings.

In Villamayor, Inez Bootsgezel—a Dutch historian—and I were present throughout the excavation hours and beyond, in a sort of outdoor studio set with two video cameras and chairs (Figure 1). We also offered to carry out interviews in alternative locations should that be considered more appropriate (as happened on a number of occasions). The prospect of recounting personal histories in public in an unfamiliar and rather complex and emotionally stressful setting aggravated some people’s hesitation and mistrust, while others were encouraged to speak by the presence of a concerned audience (other relatives and academic experts), and by the public legitimation enshrined in the act of exhumation and the emergence of an *ad hoc*—if short-lived—community of solidarity. Many people occupied in-between positions, modulating their stance in response to minute shifts in the interactive context, or switched from reluctance to willingness, or vice versa, as the exhumation progressed. In some cases, possible interviewees were brought to us by other members of the exhumation team: some of these went through with the interview, others did not. We ourselves talked to many people at the gravesite, and would suggest to some of them that they might offer their testimony. As the days passed and

Notes

- 1 See *ABC*, *Arriba* or *Alcázar*, which after the end of the war ran frequent reports on the exhumation, identification and reburial of “martyrs”, single or *en masse* (for example, on 25 February 1940 *ABC* covered the exhumation of 1,500 “patriots” in Barcelona’s Moncada cemetery), alongside public funerals, masses and the erection of monuments and commemorative plaques.
- 2 Julián Casanova has recently expressed astonishment at the secrecy still surrounding the number and origin of the bodies brought to the Valle de los Caídos, mainly in 1958 and 1959, from different mass graves in Madrid’s Carabanchel and Almudena cemeteries and other cemeteries in the provinces, including bodies of executed republicans. Although Daniel Sueiro calculates that at least 20,000 bodies were there by early 1959, the number may total 70,000.
- 3 Debates on the number of victims in the civil war, military and civilian, are still an open issue and much research remains to be done. An appendix to Juliá’s collective volume *Víctimas de la guerra civil* estimates the number of victims of Republican repression at around 50,000, and the figures for the victims of Francoist reprisals during and after the war as likely to total 150,000, at least half of which were not recorded in civil registers.
- 4 In this article, Juliá distinguishes between “caer en el olvido” (a passive process) and “echar al olvido” (an active process of willfully ignoring something, felt to be necessary precisely because it is remembered all too well).
- 5 See the photo essay by Francesc Torres in this volume, documenting the same exhumation.
- 6 Although these narratives obviously lend themselves to rhetorical, psychoanalytical or discourse analysis, such interpretations are beyond the scope of this article.
- 7 *Olvidados* (2004).
- 8 Jesús Zamora used this expression in a phone conversation on 18 January 2008.
- 9 Unión General de los Trabajadores (Socialist Trade Union).
- 10 This point relates to a bigger argument that cannot be developed in this paper, although it is part of my research project. The evolving categories of victimhood regarding the civil war resonate with new globalized discourses of victimhood and an updated transnational “mystique” of the Spanish civil war. They are also being constructed (and can only be fully understood) in the context of a broader and highly partisan politics of victimization in contemporary Spain, including most particularly those affected directly by ETA terrorism and the train bombings of 11 March 2004.

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