

Original citation:

Ribeiro de Menezes, Alison and King, Stewart . (2017) Introduction : The future of memory in Spain. Bulletin of Hispanic Studies, 94 (8). pp. 793-799.

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The Future of Memory in Spain

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Memory As ‘Un Proyecto de Futuro’

In *La literatura en la construcción de la ciudad democrática*, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán states of his theme (1998: 10), ‘no aludimos estrictamente a un determinado sistema urbanístico materializado, sino a la organización misma de la vida y a una expectativa de historia, de proyecto de futuro.’ This sense of the role of cultural production within the democratic construction of society is highly appropriate to the experience of memory in contemporary Spain, for the recent ‘boom’ in memory has become entangled with discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of Spanish democracy in recent years. Memory, in this sense, is closely linked to arguments over projects for the future, yet memory studies are frequently seen as focused on the past, as Ribeiro de Menezes argues in her article.

Glancing backwards, this special issue marks not only ten years since the 2007 ‘Ley de Memoria Histórica’, or Law of Historical Memory, as Spain’s most recent memory legislation is commonly known,¹ but almost two decades since the latest upsurge in memory debates. Then again, anniversaries in the recent past are easy to find. In 2017 we are 25 years from Spain’s hosting of the Olympics in Barcelona, the World Exhibition in Seville, and the European Capital of Culture in Madrid. We are

¹ The Law’s legal title is, ‘Ley 52/2007, de 26 de diciembre, por la que se reconocen y amplían derechos y se establecen medidas en favor de quienes padecieron persecución o violencia durante la guerra civil y la dictadura’; *Boletín Oficial del Estado* 310, 27 December 2007, online at: <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2007/12/27/pdfs/A53410-53416.pdf> (accessed 14 February 2017). An excellent summary of the legal context and main provisions of the Law is offered in Tamarit Sumalla (2011); a nuanced assessment of the Law’s achievements in the context of earlier amnesty legislation can be found in Humphrey (2014).

also 25 years from the controversial commemoration of the ‘discovery’ of America in 1992, an anniversary that, since it also marked the Catholic Monarchs’ Edict of Expulsion against Jews, posed uncomfortable questions about exclusion within Spanish society that might be seen as the early seed of the current memory discussions. We are 35 years from the first PSOE victory in 1982; 39 years from the approval of the 1978 Constitution; and 40 years from the Moncloa Pacts that transformed the economy at a time of crisis. Looking further back, it is 60 years since Opus Dei technocrats joined the Francoist government in 1957, heralding an earlier economic turning point. Seventy years ago witnessed the Law of Succession which named Franco *Caudillo* for life, and 80 years ago saw the Barcelona ‘May Days’. Finally, it is exactly a century since the 1917 crisis, with its social and constitutional upheavals. Significant dates, in short, abound, and one could begin to weave a historical narrative linking several of these dates. The question is, though, to what purpose? What might certain dates mean at any particular point in time? What is the significance, and what are the consequences, of linking them in a coherent narrative? Such concerns for the discursive construction of the past and its implications for the present are characteristic of the emerging field of Memory Studies. What is less acknowledged at times is the extent to which such a narrative is not just a reading of the past, but a projection of the future.

When, in the opening chapter of *La literatura*, Vázquez Montalbán speaks of ‘memoria histórica’, he is referring to history in a fairly traditional sense as an objective glance backwards, ‘desprendida de cualquier posibilidad de falsificación’ (1998: 48). However, in the second chapter, he moves on to speak of memory – both personal and collective – as a form of desire, designating the process of memory’s

reconstruction a 'propuesta de futuro' (1998: 77).² Vázquez Montalbán is discussing the so-called mid-century generation of writers (such as Blas de Otero, Gil de Biedma, Juan Goytisolo), and their response to living under a regime that had effectively abolished memory, yet his words are prophetic for the role of literature – and particularly narrative fiction – in the emergence of new memory debates in Spain since the turn of the millennium. If that mid-century generation forged a critical voice that was essential in the construction – albeit somewhat indirectly, in that they were writing under a dictatorial regime – of an oppositional vision of reality, Spain's new authors of memory have, over the course of the past two decades, articulated a series of at times combative responses to the memory horizon of the transition, setting their works the moral task of giving voice to perspectives that were either silenced or given little credence in civic discourse. Vázquez Montalbán writes of authors such as the three Juans – Goytisolo, Benet, and Marsé – that those who 'estaban apostando por una literatura ensimismada, casi exclusivamente pendiente de la evolución de la lógica internal de lo literario, también implican una propuesta estética de deconstrucción de la poética oficial' (1998: 80). This focus on the role of literature in offering 'pluralidad estética' (1998: 80) also underpins the best works of and on memory in contemporary Spain, some of which are analysed in the articles that follow.

Indeed, a plurality of memories seems fundamental to the construction of a cohesive future society in Spain, and the lack of public recognition of plural memories is the main failing of the socio-political settlement which underpinned the country's transition to democracy. The mid-century generation's aesthetic-political rebellion emerged out of 'coraje histórico y un cierto sentido de la impunidad civil'

² This chapter originated in a presentation in the Centro Cultural Bancaixa de Valencia on 28 November 1991. It was first published in 1992 as the titular essay of a collection expressing disillusion with the political and social direction of post-Franco Spain, and in particular with the left.

(Vázquez Montalbán 1998: 81); likewise, the current memory boom is influenced by a rebellion against a historical impunity perceived by many to be the direct consequence of a transition to democracy that did not involve comprehensive attention to transitional justice.³ The culture of the transition, emptied of politics, has now returned to demand restitution by means of a new aesthetic that, as Davis and Buffery demonstrate in their articles, demands an affective response from the reader or spectator. This poses a challenge for the researcher since it means ‘balancing the critical endeavour of reading and evidencing effects against the identification of the affective, which inherently eludes our cognitive grasp’. Davis further contends that ‘an important operative logic of the recent Spanish Civil War novel is the detective-like investigation of the past based on the discovery of material evidence and oral testimony in order to uncover hidden facts, to right injustices and to heal unsutured wounds’ (Davis reference). So if, for Vázquez Montalbán, detective fiction served the purpose, not of revealing the immoral nature of criminality in the style of Agatha Christie, but the bankruptcy of the social order as per the hardboiled novel of Chandler and Hammett (1998: 95), then for writers of the contemporary memory boom, the quasi-detective search has become a form of material reparation. In this sense, memory, as Vázquez Montalbán argues, is about conserving ‘el recuerdo de cuales eran nuestros deseos personales y colectivos y de la lista de los culpables de las frustraciones personales y colectivas’ (1998: 95). Public, collective memory (which is nourished, at times unevenly, by individual and group memories as well as by cultural and historical memories) is an emotional debate about past choices, and about how

³ As a result, many of the memory debates and campaigns that have exploded in Spain since 2000 have focused on the issue of the Civil-War ‘disappeared’, mass-grave exhumations, and the fate of monuments, street names, and commemorative plaques associated with the dictatorship’s framing of the Nationalist victory. Much has been written on these aspects, notably by Ferrándiz (2014). For a more culturally focused assessment, see Ribeiro de Menezes (2014).

those determine present and future options. While the emergence of a memory boom in turn-of-the-millennium Spain can be explained in terms of generational pressures, including the loss of the experiential generation of the Civil War and the concerns of grandchildren about their own family histories, it can also be seen to be a result of the failure of left-wing politics to articulate an alternative vision in the post-Cold War context. In the wake of Fukuyama's supposedly victorious 'end of history', memory has come to replace politics as a form of social dissensus.

Nevertheless, Spanish Memory Studies have yet to fully embrace the implications of this, and have perhaps too often focused on the past in itself, rather than on memories of the past as a means to transform the present and the future. At a time when initiatives towards restorative justice have stalled with economic austerity and the politics of the Rajoy administration, it is entirely understandable that there should continue to be a focus on the past. Nevertheless, acknowledging that past should not preclude rethinking the future. Each of the essays in this issue thus explores new approaches to researching the past, whether through deploying and transforming structuring metaphors such as the palimpsest (King) and delayed cinema (Faulkner), or through explorations of affective encounters with narrative (Davis, Lough), performance (Buffery), and space (Ribeiro de Menezes). The essays together might be taken as contribution towards a form of memory work that looks backwards and forwards at the same time, and that thus builds on the past to articulate Vázquez Montalbán's 'proyecto de futuro'.

The Anxiety of Memory, or the 'Nessus-Shirt of Spanish History' (Again)?

The task of sketching a future for memory in Spain is far from easy, for a number of serious questions surround memory at the present moment. The first is the

increasingly commercialised nature of cultural products that address the thematics of memory. If memory sells, does that intensify its reach or blunt its demands? At what point does popularity turn potential dissensus about the past into an ineffective consensus? Indeed, must memory be viewed as a series of ‘contests’ in the manner that Germanists have recently argued (Fuchs, Cosgrove and Grote 2006), or can a consensual approach still throw up silenced and sidelined perspectives? This brings into relief a second major concern: whose memories gain civic recognition? Is there space in public discourse for the acknowledgement of multiple victim categories without the construction of victim hierarchies, or is victimhood inevitably competitive? Finally, in contexts in which moral accountability is of major concern, how do we deal with the uncertainties of memory? What of the manipulation of memory, and of memories that are explored as impostures?

As the so-called memory boom has gone on, there has been growing unease with the past as product, packaged and repackaged to sell books, cinema tickets and DVDs to an eager public. A healthy dose of cynicism, for example, can rightly be administered to the 40th anniversary edition of Eduardo Mendoza’s generation defining *La verdad sobre el caso Savolta*, which publisher Seix Barral has republished with the original title that the Francoist censors had unsurprisingly rejected: *Soldados de Cataluña*. While this might be interpreted as an act of restorative justice, with the rebranding of the novel as a rejection of the Francoist intervention into cultural production, much as foreign films have been redubbed since the return to democracy, it is also hard not to see this act of historical recovery within the context of claims for Catalan independence surrounding the 300th anniversary of the fall of Barcelona in 2014. So we find ourselves with yet another anniversary. A similar commercial use of memory as what Davis calls here an ‘implantable

commodity' is evident in the Catalan daily *Ara*'s selling of over 50,000 DVD copies – at €9.95 – of Agustí Villaronga's *Pa Negre* with the Sunday newspaper over three weeks in March 2011.

Cynical commercial uses of memory like these have no doubt contributed to the delegitimization of historical memory that we see in Javier Cercas' *El impostor* (2014), which draws on the real-life case of Enric Marco Batlle, who had falsified his past in order to pass as a survivor of German concentration camps.⁴ This text points to the possible manipulation of memory and raises doubts about the role of the cultural industries – film, television, literature and art – as producers of collective memories. To what extent, for example, are fictional memories potentially an affective imposture, the identification with a victimhood that does not belong to the producer or the consumer?

Javier Cercas' *El impostor*, the story of a false hero, raises two issues: first, the uncertainty that surrounds memory, and therefore memory narratives; second, unease about the establishment of historical comparisons, victim hierarchies, and absolutist or relativist discussions of the Holocaust. What Cercas' narrative exposes is less the lies of an impostor than an anxiety about society's willing self-deception in the face of a story that it collectively finds attractive. Hence, for the narrator of *El impostor*, sporting Cercas' habitual Cervantine disguise of a failed author worrying the bone of literary mediocrity (but with less elegance than his illustrious forefather), 'lo que había empezado como una necesidad profunda del país', that is a thirst for a better understanding of the past, had become nothing more than 'otra moda superficial' (Cercas 2014: 305). Spain's transition to democracy, the narrator maintains, was built on a lie not in terms of the conventional argument that it was characterized by a

⁴ In the Catalan context, Maria Barbal also represents a fictionalised account of Batlle's deception in *En la pell de l'altre*, also published in 2014.

‘pacto de olvido’, but because it was a time when large sections of society white-washed their own past (an activity satirized in Juan Marsé’s 1978 novel, *La muchacha de las bragas de oro*) and embraced European modernity as a means of forgetting their socio-economic backwardness as well as their moral debts with the legacies of the civil war and dictatorship (Cercas 2014: 301). As memory debates emerged, they became swallowed up by the kitsch of the memory industry: ‘La industria de la memoria resultó letal para la memoria, o para eso que llamábamos memoria y que era apenas un cobarde eufemismo’ (2014: 307). Cercas’ novel thus explores the impotence of memory itself as much as it does the impostures of false memories, in in this sense it echoes Vázquez Montalbán’s earlier concern that in the 1990s in Spain, as elsewhere, literature no longer undertook serious criticism of ‘el nuevo gran hermano de la ciudad democrática: el gran Consumidor’ (1998: 94).

What lies behind Cercas’ newly found unease with memory is perhaps the troubling intersections between imposture on the one hand, and victim and perpetrator identities on the other. Todorov has explored the dangers of viewing memory as a remedy for absolute evil, a position that seems to run counter to the injunction, ‘Never Again’, and its many international variants including the Latin American ‘Nunca Más’. The term is generally regarded as the primary moral lesson of the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity. As Todorov notes, we have a tendency to want to put extreme distances between evildoers and ourselves (2009: 461). Yet, if the memory of the past is used to establish an ‘impassable wall between evil and us’, it cannot easily fulfill a preventative function within public morality. For Todorov, the issue is not one of morality, but ‘egocentricity and Manichaeism’ (2009: 462). We must therefore ‘keep in mind that good and evil flow from the same source and that in the world’s best narratives they are not neatly divided’ (2009: 462). Looking beyond

Cercas' hesitation over the memory industry in Spain, his novel might have been an opportunity to explore this dilemma more explicitly. As Todorov argues, the question is not so much a problem of memory, as one of understanding the role that it might effectively play within the public sphere and within discussions about the present and future. Unless Spain grasps the essentially presentist and futurist dimension of memory debates, the country risks creating a second Nessus-shirt, rather like the early and mid-twentieth-century arguments over cultural identity that Peter Russell lambasted half a century ago. Of the protracted debates over Américo Castro's reading of the heritage of Muslim Spain, and Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz's refutation of his arguments, Russell wrote:

If their national history is to cease to be the Nessus-shirt it now is to them it would seem that they must first do what other peoples have mostly learnt to do: that is accept their past for what it is rather than continue the present frustrating demand that is should be made to reveal something at once more flattering and less confused than is there.

While we are in no way proposing that Spain should leave the past behind, we do hope that the essays in this special issue point to the importance of harnessing an honest, open, and plural evaluation of that past alongside an appreciation of the ways in which memory can be not only a worrying over the wounds of the past, but also a means of using the insights of the past to construct new visions of the present and future.

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