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Clowns, Goats, Music and the Comedic Violent: Late Francoism and the Transition to Democracy in Álex de la Iglesia's Films.

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> A positive but abrupt understanding of intelligence and human action will always underline the importance of memory in any cognitive process […] A less narrow-minded understanding of memory would easily appreciate the advantages of forgetfulness. Stoic philosophy already pointed them out when it conceived knowledge as a soft surface of wax on which different impressions accumulate, in a way that some erase others and only the stronger or more frequent remain.
>
> (Valcárcel, 2010: 49)

When analysing the late years of Francoism and the Transition to Democracy, most serious discussions of both periods in the contemporary Spanish public sphere are characterized by present-infused readings that imply 'a desire to observe the past according to the needs and postulates of their contemporaneity' (Palacio, 2012: 19). Moreover, as Paul Grainge has noted, 'memory suggests a more dialogic relationship between the temporal constituencies of "now" and "then"; it draws attention to the activations and eruptions of the past as they are experienced in and constituted by the present' (2003: 1). That is, one can only access our past from what David Lowenthal has termed 'memorial knowledge': knowledge of the past based on selective and strategic remembering in the present – a mixture of public and personal recollections that become increasingly blurred and indistinguishable (see Drake, 2003: 183).

These ruminations raise the question of how to resolve the memory/forgetfulness conundrum within the contemporary Spanish social fabric, alongside the role that cultural and, more specifically, cinematic discourses perform in the processes of mediating historical construction and reconstruction. In this chapter, I would like to grapple with these issues in relation to some films directed by Álex de la Iglesia. First, I will analyse how El día de la bestia/The Day of the Beast (1995) deals with the rise of conservative ideology in mid-1990s Spain through the utilization of a generically hybrid and popular discourse, before moving on to a discussion of two films, Muertos de risa/Dying of Laughter (1999) and Balada triste de trompeta/The Last Circus (2010), that depict the later period of the Franco regime, and the early years of the Transition to Democracy. This analysis will focus on how the film-maker constructs an

ideological discourse through the 'contiguous contamination' of two parallel discourses – the political and the popular – in order to remember and not to forget, signalling the act of mediation in the images instilled in the population's collective unconscious in relation to that era. De la Iglesia, a self-defined television junkie, instrumentalizes the political–popular culture interface, focusing on the power of the small screen and, more broadly, icons of popular culture to forge a shared narrative and collective Spanish imaginary. I will suggest, in fact, that the films explore what Alison Landsberg has called 'prosthetic memory': that is, personal memories that 'derive from engaged and experientially oriented encounters with the mass media's various technologies of memory' (2003: 148). These prosthetic tools come into existence through engagement with mediated representations, and are interchangeable and exchangeable through their commodified forms. Far from simply shaping individual subjectivity, they have a collective character. Seen within this context, the films revisit and revise the past to remember it from a contemporaneity that has not necessarily forgotten but appears remarkably immune to many of the lessons that were meant to have been learned, shielded within the fantasy framework of democratic governance. At the same time, De la Iglesia's films archaeologically revisit key icons of the mass media to rearticulate their meanings, and instrumentalize the power of audio-visual technologies of representation, in order to offer an alternative version of Spanish history.

Prosthetic Memory: The Past–Present Interface, Franco and the Transition

Channel surfing a few months ago, I came across Intereconomía's 'España en la Memoria' ('Remembering Spain').1 The host, Alfonso Arteseros, was interviewing Francis Franco, the dictator's grandson, about the book he had published recently on his (in)famous relative. Over the course of the show, both the host and his invited guest said several things that, only a few years previously, would have caused public outrage. However, in the contemporary mediascape they have become established doxa for a significant conservative segment of the Spanish population. First, Franco had not been a dictator, but Spain's 'former ruler'. Second, Francis's grandfather was 'a good man', living and painting in his residence at El Pardo palace. Following on from this comment, Francis Franco voiced his incomprehension of the current political climate in Spain: the division between Left and Right was apparently something that had been worked through long ago, as people came together to build a new and better Spain.2 This prompted the host to point to a vintage Philips microphone that saluted the spectator from the table around which the two protagonists were seated. Moreover, Arteseros stated that it was not any old artefact, but rather the 'very microphone with which your grandfather spoke to all Spaniards'. Franco nodded and congratulated himself on the fact.

Franco's Philips microphone, 'talking' and 'looking' at the spectator from a privileged position of speech, not only dismantles any kind of democratic legitimacy in regard to the show's ideological fabric, but also positions both Arteseros and Franco as contemporary ventriloquists of Francisco Franco's voice. Thus they simplify the complexities of Spanish society, turning their heads towards nostalgia for the good old times when the 'good father' spoke to his children. Viewed in this light, the show's message about 'Spain's former ruler' and nearly forty years of dictatorial rule seems to be based upon a double ideological perversion: the effacement of any memories in relation to the political and social repression carried out during Franco's regime; and legitimization of the performance of remembering the dictator as a just

ruler who did his best to maintain Spain's territorial unity and guide his 'flock of sheep' in the right direction. In this respect, Franco mobilizes the so-called consensus of the Transition – that is, 'let's seal all our collective wounds and move on to a democratic Spain', forgetting the differences, acts of injustice and traumas of the past – as a discursive tool to re-legitimate the dictator, humanize his figure beyond the ideological dichotomy of Left and Right, and erase the fascist connotations that taint his period in power. In Amelia Valcárcel's (2010) words, Arteseros and Franco attempt to mobilize the 'advantages of forgetfulness', accumulating 'new impressions' about General Franco with the purpose of effacing others, which have been recently legitimized through the Ley de Memoria Histórica of 2007 (Law of Historical Memory – an official condemnation of Francoism by the Spanish state).3 Extending this argument to the recent rise of media such as Intereconomía, or Federico Jiménez Losantos' Libertad Digital, which champions an extremist right-wing ideology, it could be argued that pundits of these media outlets are trying to effectively rub out the lasting impressions of Franco and reinvent his figure in the present.

At this point, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, as several cultural commentators have already noticed, the Transition's ostensible amnesia is somewhat questionable. For example, Stanley Payne (2007) remarks that the 'pacto del olvido' is an absurd concept, since anyone living during that period was witness to 'a wave of publications, programs, and symposiums about the Civil War' that repeatedly revisited Spain's political past. Sánchez-Biosca talks about a widespread analytical drive during the Transition which 'revised, debunked, shred into pieces and examined with a microscope the inherited discourses' (2007: 110). Álvarez Monzoncillo and Sendra (2013 remark that Francoism was subject to a fierce process of de-legitimization. In this regard, both cinema and state television channels played a decisive role in the creation of symbolic values of democracy and the cultivation of new social imaginaries for a modern Spain (see Palacio, 2006). During Franco's time, the dictatorship instrumentalized television as a key tool to construct mythologies that seemingly embodied 'life' under the regime's governance. Icons and stars of popular culture (from sports champions such as Bahamontes to folk and pop singers such as Joselito and Lola Flores or toreros (bullfighters) such as Manolete) were utilized to deliver a skewed version of Spain. Progressively, state television became 'a decisive instrument that widened its public importance' (Sánchez-Biosca, 2007: 97–98) in the dissemination of these dominant and ideologically tendentious values.

However, from the 1960s onwards, during the period known as desarrollismo, Spain became more open to the cultural and social forms of other democratic societies. An immediate consequence of this process within the artistic field was the accentuation of the aesthetic principles of 'posibilismo': strategies of opposing the regime from within. In cinema, films such as Carlos Saura's La caza/The Hunt (1966) or Peppermint Frappé (1967) began to explore deviant forms of political resistance and action by experimenting with the medium's expressive and aesthetic possibilities. Later on, throughout the mid-1970s, internationally recognized staples of art cinema such as El espíritu de la colmena/The Spirit of the Beehive (Erice, 1973), La prima Angélica/Cousin Angelica (Saura, 1974), Furtivos/Poachers (Borau, 1976), Bilbao (Luna, 1978), and documentaries such as El desencanto/The Disenchantment (Chávarri, 1976), Canciones para después de una guerra/Songs for After a War (Martín Patino,

1978) or Ocaña: un retrat intermittent/Ocaña, an Intermittent Portrait (Pons, 1978) firmly implemented a resolutely anti-Francoist discourse.

From 'El Maligno' to Nino Bravo and Raphael

Although a few Spanish critics dismissed El día de la bestia as a trivial, over-the-top 'gamberrada' by an able craftsperson but ultimately pedestrian director (Rodríguez Marchante, 1995), the film was recognized generally as a positive step towards the establishment of a commercially viable and aesthetically inventive new type of Spanish cinema. For example, M. Torreiro states in El País that de la Iglesia's effort is built 'with intelligence despite erasing with a single stroke the distinction between auteur cinema and genre films' (1995: 44). Similarly, Beatriz Santori (1995) acknowledges the film's multifarious set of influences encompassing Taxi Driver (Scorsese, 1976), trashy Tele 5 programmes, García Berlanga's Plácido (1961), Fernán-Gómez' El extraño viaje/Strange Voyage (1964) and William Peter Blatty's satanic novels. Lluís Bonet Mojica adds Rosemary's Baby (Polanski, 1968) and Blade Runner (Scott, 1982) to the list, while also noting the presence of Spanish screenwriter Rafael Azcona and his highly influential 'esperpentic' comedies (1995: 39).4

Some scholars have tended to classify El día de la bestia alongside a broad cross-section of Spanish films such as La flor de mi secreto/The Flower of My Secret (Almodóvar, 1995) or Nadie hablará de nosotras cuando hayamos muerto/Nobody Will Speak of Us When We're Dead (Díaz Yanes, 1995), released in the same year which, according to Marsha Kinder, 'show a growing disillusionment with the libertarian ethos and an attempt to recuperate conservative traditions, yet […] gain international attention by preserving a radical surface of outrageousness' (1995: 2). Alternatively, for others, the film bears all the traces of 'transnational postmodernity': that is, the deployment of video-clip aesthetics with an emphasis on a well-crafted, yet superficial visual and aural style that is lacking in substance (Moreiras Menor, 2000: 139).5

Other cultural commentators have theorized a more nuanced critique of de la Iglesia's film, indicating both its political stance and subtle utilization of generic hybridity. For Josetxo Cerdán (2004), El día de la bestia epitomizes the disappearance of the Transition's optimism during the latter days of Felipe González' Partido Socialista y Obrero Español (PSOE) adminstration. Building on Cerdán's arguments, Buse et al. (2007: 57) affirm that El día de la bestia is first and foremost a film comedy that draws on a range of other generic models, and is far from being a neo-conservative take on contemporary Spain. On the contrary, they argue: its unwillingness to provide a fixed political position for the liberal viewer, alongside its generic hybridity, serve to make it one of the most radical Spanish films of the decade. Thus El día de la bestia is indebted to both a series of globally effective generic modes disseminated through Hollywood, and several idiosyncratic and culturally specific traditions characteristic of Spanish cinema. As a multi-generic work comprised of disparate, in-your-face references pointing in multiple directions, the film partakes in a series of popular audio-visual forms of representation to offer a commercially successful, politically engaging cinematic product. Operating within the parameters of a prevalent slapstick comedic mode, de la Iglesia composes a multi-referential tour de force that offers a poignant critique of the state of affairs in a country, Spain, which recently had embraced its integration into the borderless European

Union (EU), and yet reveals the traces of rampant racism towards non-desirable ethnic others. Thus the film juxtaposes the comedic and the violent while mobilizing other generic conventions – such as low-angle framing, grotesque iconography and musical cues of the horror genre – to compose a hybrid product that frames the specificities of mid-1990s Spain within a European context.

As a priest alights from a bus arriving in Madrid, two ostensible disparate images appear on the right-hand side of the frame. First, a billboard of the infamous Kio Towers that labels them "Puerta de Europa": Gateway to Europe. Second, under the billboard, a Gypsy family performs a typical keyboard routine accompanied by a goat (a popular culture signifier of the devil). The Gypsy family is undoubtedly a marker of Spanishness that roots the fabric of the Madrid cityscape within the contours of folk culture. At the same time, de la Iglesia plunges the spectator into Spain-in-Europe, a country that has left behind Francoist tyranny and embraced active membership within the EU. Furthermore, the unfinished Kio Towers not only epitomize the modernizing openness towards the integration of Spain into the EU that the PSOE government had championed; they also remind the spectator of the property scandal that had halted the construction of this emblematic site for a new transnational Spain, thereby self-consciously flagging the downward spiral of corruption that the socialist government had fallen into since the early 1990s. The film's foregrounding of emblems of global capitalism, such as the Kio towers, points to the fact that the enemy that the priest confronts many not necessarily be "El Maligno, but powerful and unchecked capitalism of flexible accumulation and the effects it produces through the way it urbanizes capital and consciousness" (Compitello, 1999: 212). In addition, armed police viciously beat up a group of North African immigrants as soon as the priest begins walking the Madrid streets. As they perform this brutal act of unjustified aggression, de la Iglesia's 'Satánica' poster for the disco where the priest and his companions subsequently seek the devil is in the background. The director thereby signals the equation between satanism and racism that the film fully exposes in its narrative's closing section.

El día de la bestia later shifts gears to depict a country criss-crossed by racial prejudice and hatred towards non-Europeans. Less than a year after its release, the fourteen-year Partido Socialista y Obrero Español (PSOE, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party,) administration came to an end when the Partido Popular/People's Party (PP) won the national elections, obtaining a majority in congress. Early in the film, de la Iglesia links the racism latent in mid-1990s Spain – represented within the diegesis through the homicidal Limpia Madrid (Clean up Madrid) group – with a rise in right-wing ideology. El día de la bestia thereby signals the blinding effect that the Europeanization of Spain has triggered, in as much as it has intensified a culture of widespread elitism in the collective Spanish unconscious in relation to those unprivileged bodies who migrate from economically and socially disadvantaged countries. In short, 'the beasts are still here'. I would argue that even though its ostensible focus is on the present, the film constantly signals towards the past by linking, both ideologically and iconographically, the Limpia Madrid group with the remnants of Franco's regime. This connection between Spanish history and the contemporary provides the underlying structural logic for both Muertos de risa and Balada triste de trompeta.

Muertos de risa follows the rise of a comedy duo, Nino (Santiago Segura) and Bruno (El Gran Wyoming) from a tacky rural club in 1972 to their attempts to kill each other on live television in post-Olympic Spain. Balada triste de trompeta takes the Civil War as its point of departure, following the psychological and physical transformation of a sad clown, Javier (Javier Areces), as he carries out the revenge he promised to his father (himself a clown and a prisoner of Franco's regime). Javier engages in a killing spree that eventually takes him to El Valle de los Caídos, the supreme signifier and landmark of Franco's power, in the waning days of the dictatorship. As was the case in El día de la bestia, the film is characterized by excessive violence, foregrounding bloodletting and the repeated 'penetration' of the wounded body. As Julián, Nino and Bruno's manager, notes in relation to the unexpected success of their 'slap routine':

It was an act of total anarchy, an absolute liberation of any kind of ethical commitment, as someone whose name I can't recall said in a newspaper. On stage, they did everything we had all wanted to do more than once: slap someone with total impunity, without giving this act any importance, without getting punished. There was something completely amoral in all these acts – something sinister – but couldn't we say the same thing about all of life's pleasures?

Audiences perceived this cathartic reaction to four decades of repression for what it truly was (Muoyo, 2000): a representation but also a vindication of a liberated human subjectivity, escaping the punishing mechanisms of the paternal dictator. Seen in this light, remembering is not enough: acting (violently) seems to be its derivative and necessary consequence. By contaminating the violent with the comedic to the point of becoming an esperpentic tour de force that thrives on generic hybridity to establish their positions of speech, both films are largely articulated through the impossibility of forgetting. In Muertos de risa, the reciprocal pranks that Nino and Bruno play on each other escalate at first as a symptom of their mutual envy, then ultimately the epitome of their inability to forgive and forget. In the end they become completely mutually dependent: reciprocal hatred keeps them alive.

In Balada triste de trompeta, Javier's romantic failure to seduce Patricia (Carolina Bang) and his desperation in regard to her self-destructive relationship with Sergio (Antonio de la Torre) trigger a psychological breakdown that leads him to embrace an animalistic lifestyle that eventually catalyses his transformation into a punishing clown who, in his own monstrous appearance, bears the very nature of those surrounding him: Sergio and Colonel Salcedo in particular.6 It is only on reaching this state that he is able to fulfil the promise made to his father.

Muertos de risa and Balada triste de trompeta politicize the past from the present not only to remember it, but fundamentally to make sure that we do not fall into the easy temptation of forgetting it. Both films deal with the persistence of the past in the present, an anachronistic but insistent remnant of Franco's dictatorship in the ostensibly modern Spain (Buse et al., 2007: 98). Moreover, popular culture – more specifically, televisual and musical discourses – becomes the privileged shaper of historical memory, functioning as a heuristic lens through which to structure perceptions, ideological positions and affective memories within the public sphere. In this respect, each film mobilizes a key figure within the history of Spanish popular music – Nino Bravo and Raphael, respectively – in order to erect a discourse of nostalgia which

then is immediately debunked and rearticulated through violence. Whereas Muertos de risa begins with the aggressive reaction of a group of Falange soldiers to Bruno's accidental killing of his beloved mascot, the goat, while impersonating Nino Bravo, Javier experiences a catharsis watching Raphael performing the song 'Balada triste de trompeta' during a screening of Javier Escrivá's Sin un adios/With No Farewell (1970).

Nino Bravo, a romantic balladeer, was one of the most successful pop icons of Francoist Spain who died tragically in a traffic accident on April 16 1973 when he was just twenty-nine years old. His hits include 'Libre' ('Free'), a timeless song inextricably linked with the imminent arrival of democracy to Spain. Raphael remains one of the most internationally well-known Spanish musical icons. He is characterized by an excessive performance style and his sympathy towards the Franco regime (see Wheeler, 2013). In fact, during a political rally in the 1990s, Raphael not only expressed his admiration for the dictator, but also encouraged then-candidate José María Aznar to win the upcoming election and 'return Franco to the place he deserved' (Colectivo Eloy Herrera Pino, 2008), thereby explicitly remarking on the direct connection between Spain's 'former ruler' and Aznar's Partido Popular – a link that the conservative party actively was trying to downplay in order to bolster its democratic credentials. In the film, Raphael's singing functions as a catalyst for Javier remembering his promise of revenge, and the familial ties that the national army took away from him. The song's lyrics read as follows:

Balada triste de trompeta

For a past that died

And cries

And moans,

How it cries.

Javier interprets the lyrics in a personal and literal fashion. The song's paradoxical understanding of the past that has died, yet continues to cry, is the precise motivation for Javier's rampage. His deceased father, brutally murdered by Colonel Salcedo, continues to cry, calling out for the revenge that his yet son has yet to exact. Possessed from that moment on by Raphael's excessive and sentimental iconographic and musical power – in an manner akin to the cult worship of Nino Bravo in Muertos de risa, where the attempt to achieve a complete symbiosis with the hero figure results in a grotesque imitation – Javier recontextualizes Raphael's intervention in Escrivá's film to transform him into the embodiment of painful memories from the past.7 In other words, the character remembers his father's plea to avenge his honour and memory through Raphael's performative sorrow, which precludes any possibility of forgetting.

The combination of the political and popular is, in fact, the structural principle at work in Balada triste de trompeta's opening credits. Accompanied by Roque Baños' superb in-crescendo score, de la Iglesia, after showcasing the three main protagonists of the film, fast-forwards through the dictatorship via the juxtaposition of a parade of heterogeneous 'monsters': political figures such as Franco, Hitler, Fraga, Arias Navarro, Carrero Blanco or

Ronald Reagan; religious ones, such as images of a suffering Christ on the cross, the hooded religious fraternities of Holy Week, El Valle de los Caídos; cinematic references such as Frankenstein, wolfman, Max von Sydow, Christopher Lee, Rachel Welch or stills of Cannibal Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1980); alongside other images from popular culture such as flamenco singer, Lola Flores, comedians Tip y Coll and TV personalities such as Jiménez del Oso. It is no coincidence that the final image of the opening credits is of José Luis López Vázquez in Antonio Mercero's La cabina/The Phone Box (1972), a science-fiction horror film that has been widely recognized as one of the defining cultural artefacts of the late Francoist period, through its allegorical depiction of the regime's repressive nature and unwillingness to allow its citizens freedom of thought.

This set of juxtapositions attempts to organize diachronically the often chaotic mechanisms of our prosthetic memories in the same way that Muertos de risa and Balada triste de trompeta utilize the constant presence of the televisual within the diegesis. A diverse set of excerpts from television, such as footage of the circus performer Ángel Cristo, the spoon-bending trick performed by the illusionist Uri Geller or General Antonio Tejero's 1981 coup attempt, constantly frame the film's narrative and character development within the history of the Spanish media. De la Iglesia resorts to an active and shifting interplay between foreground (the story of the chief protagonists) and background (the use of the televisual screen and icons of popular culture)in order to anchor the films within the specificities of Spanish audio-visual history, thereby vindicating prosthetic memories as valid, history-building mechanisms. Taking this process even further in Muertos de risa, de la Iglesia employs digital effects so as to insert Nino into the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, where this figure, who continues to be iconic in democratic Spain, is shown lighting the Olympic torch. Rewriting Spanish history via televisual mediation, both Muertos de risa and Balada triste de trompeta recurrently insert the small screen within the diegetic space, thereby signalling Spaniards' personal and shared experiences of their country's historical events via the technologies of audio-visual representation.

Conclusion: Remembrance, Spanish History and the Dangers of Amnesia

Vladimir Jankélévich taught us that, when confronted with the temptation or alibi of forgetting:

There is only one solution, to remember. There where nothing can be done, at least you may resent, forever […] The feeling that we experience is not a grudge but horror […] a protest against a moral amnesty that is nothing but an embarrassing amnesia.

(cited in Valcárcel, 2010: 92)

De la Iglesia's films will not allow us to forget, precisely because we should never unlearn the lessons of the past. If we do, history not only could repeat itself, but also may evolve into a culture of amnesia that legitimates the violence, destruction and cultural bankruptcy fostered by dictatorship.

In order to avoid the dangers of amnesia, de la Iglesia vindicates violence – or at least enjoyment of the representation of violence – as a legitimate framework through which to re-

semanticize the historical past. In this respect, the films analysed all emphasize the key role of popular discourses in the rewriting of history. Within the Spanish context, utilizing nostalgia to apprehend the past invariably seems to trigger violence as its inseparable companion. De la Iglesia's engagement with the popular becomes not only a means to evaluate the past ideologically, but also a mnemonic tool that stubbornly places the 'bloody trauma of violence' at the core of Spanish history.

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Notes

1 Intereconomía is a conservative channel that belongs to the Intereconomía Group, a multimedia corporation created in 1995.

2 This claim was somewhat undermined by an advert for La Gaceta newspaper (which belongs to the same media group that owns Intereconomía) aired during a commercial break, which boasted that they were 'proud of being right-wing'.

3 More Information about La Ley de Memoria Histórica can be found at the Spanish Ministry of Justice's official website: http://leymemoria.mjusticia.gob.es/cs/Satellite/LeyMemoria/es/inicio.

4 Azcona is one of the most important screenwriters in the history of Spanish cinema, with a career that spanned more than four decades. His credits include El cochecito (Ferreri, 1960), Plácido (García Berlaga, 1961), El verdugo/The Executioner (García Berlanga, 1963), Peppermint Frappé, La prima Angélica and La lengua de las mariposas/Butterfly's Tongue (Cuerda, 1999).

5 Moreiras-Menor proceeds to mobilize Jean Baudrillard's theories in order to argue that these films present a collapse in the signifying process. While I do concur with Moreiras Menor that many of these films have turned their gaze towards a horrific space of violence, in my view at least, they do engage directly with the sociocultural problematic of mid-1990s Spain. In addition, the pejorative use of the term 'video clip' in her text is over-reductive and simplistic.

6 In my view, Colonel Salcedo stands for the regime's brutality and violence. Franco is represented as a weak individual who seems to have little control of the regime that he ostensibly commanded.

7 The film’s narrative self-consciously instrumentalizes Raphael’s contemporary standing and recuperation among the musical buffs, bloggers and opinion-makers of the digital age (the hipster musical credos of today’s Spain) as a key icon of popular culture.

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