

The Legacy of Franco's Television

Josep Maria Baget Herms



1. The stages of television under Franco's influence

1.1. Francisco Franco died on November 20, 1975, after 35 long days of suffering. With his death, nearly twenty years of television under his influence ended. His powerful legacy was to be felt for a long time, and it was only with the appointment of Adolfo Suárez as President that that period ended and another, no less complex era — the transition to democracy was to begin. Paradoxically, a former director of Spanish National Radio and Television (RTVE, in its Spanish acronym) was chosen by King Juan Carlos to lead the task of dismantling the archaic structures of Franco's institutions, among which was RTVE. Suárez, after holding several lower positions in the mid-sixties, had been the director of RTVE from 1969 to 1973...

1.2. The history of RTVE can be divided into three main periods. The first covers the beginnings, including trial broadcasts, and runs up to 1962. This period, in turn, can be split into two parts. The first runs from the official inauguration on October 28, 1956 (the anniversary of the founding of the Spanish Falangist Movement and the feast of Christ the King) to February, 1959, and is characterized by absolute centralism and self-sufficiency. The second part begins when TVE (Spanish Television) sets up its Miramar studio in the city of Barcelona, because as a result the production of programming was no longer the exclusive responsibility of the studios located in Madrid. The authoritarian centralism and rigid political and moral connotations were still maintained, even though this was the time when the first Stabilization Plan to reform the economy of the country was being put into place and several technocrats connected to the Opus Dei were entering government service as ministers.

1.3. The second main period of Spanish Television, "Fraga's period", runs much longer and is much more complex. It comprises the time between 1962 and 1969, and can also be split into two parts. The first part covers 1962-1964, and finishes with the appointment of Jesús Aparicio Bernal as Managing Director and the opening of the studio in Prado del Rey (in suburban Madrid). The second stage runs from 1964 to 1969 and includes the spectacular growth of Spanish Television in a renewed political and

social framework, in which the tourist industry played an important role at all levels.

The appointment of Manuel Fraga Iribarne as Minister of Information and Tourism had a major effect on spheres of information with the 1966 Law of the Press, which abolished prior censorship of newspapers and magazines. This reform did not affect the workings of Spanish Television at all, but the opening could be seen in its presence at festivals and international television venues. Special programs that provided an image of the social reality of Spain that was quite different from that which in fact existed were produced, and the infrastructure for production quickly grew. New studios at Prado del Rey were built (they were opened on July 18, 1964 as a part of the propaganda campaign entitled '25 Years of Peace') and a second channel was begun in November, 1966 (after a year of trial broadcasts). This placed Spanish Television alongside the leading European companies that already had two channels. The launching of the second channel, known as "the UHF channel" allowed the company to partially satisfy certain demands from social groups and intellectual minorities as well as to incorporate several young writers, directors and programmers into the scene. The significant progress of this period was achieved thanks to income from advertising, which is atypical in the context of a public service that enjoyed monopoly status granted by the government. This contrasts greatly with the model that dominated European countries, in which the fee for television sets and the very limited contribution from advertising (when it was not specifically prohibited) constituted the main sources of income.

The elimination of the so-called "luxury tax" on television sets (which appeared in Spain's Official State Bulletin on December 23, 1965) and the creation of national networks of television clubs stand out as two features that were important for their popular nature. The elimination of the tax was a particularly important decision because it implied that public television would have to depend exclusively on advertising income. In spite of their limitations, the television clubs, which were primarily set up to cover rural areas and were led by the "authorities" in the towns (mayors, teachers, or priests) were not able to achieve the propaganda effects desired because of a lack of resources and specially trained personnel. However, they are a good example of the pedagogical slant of television that still reigned in the sixties.

This 7-year period is relatively homogenous in structural terms as of 1964, which is when Jesús Aparicio Bernal, who had come from the relatively liberal sectors of the labor union movement, became the Managing Director. He chose his own team, although his selections were always supervised by Fraga Iribarne, who was undoubtedly the first politician in the Franco period to realize the propaganda potential of television. Three of the four Managing Directors who were to follow Bernal, Adolfo Suárez, Juan José Rosón and Jesús Sancho Rof, all were upper level managers in this period.

The creation of a branch office in Catalonia and that of several regional production centers for news programming and prizes at international festivals are the main achievements. Nevertheless, policies concerning news programming remained

unchanged, despite the changes in the Law of the Press.

1.4. The third and final period began in October, 1969, with the appointment of Suárez as Director of RTVE, after Fraga fell from grace and was removed as Minister because of his confrontations with the Opus Dei in the so-called "MATESA case." Suárez dealt directly with Franco's strongman, Admiral Carrero Blanco, and in this way avoided dealing with the new Minister of Information and Tourism Alfredo Sánchez Bella, who was not very interested in television, anyway. Suárez moved to rationalize the internal structure of the company and towards programs appealing to a wide audience, such as *Crónicas de un pueblo* (*Chronicles of a people*), which was aimed at serving the interests of those like Carrero Blanco who were already planning to maintain Franco's regime without Franco. This view was represented by the catch-phrase "y después de Franco, las instituciones" (*and after Franco, the institutions*), which was a project that Suárez himself decided to dismantle once he became President. The new team of directors mainly came from the second channel; they were better trained professionals and were ready to face challenges. This first cycle of the last period finished with the resignation of Suárez in 1973, and he was replaced by Rafael Orbe Cano. Orbe Cano was also interested in providing an institutional framework for RTVE (according to him, the company existed on the fringes of illegality), but the assassination of Carrero Blanco touched off a political crisis of which RTVE was a true reflection, to the point of being a victim of opposing interests.

The "spirit of February 12" that was designed to promote tolerance of the legalization of political groups brought Juan José Rosón to the directorship of RTVE, as part of a false political, social and even moral "opening". It proved to be a frustrated makeover that was to last only a few months. Franco would take over again, this time surrounded by his family and the so-called *bunker*, and the appointment of Sancho Rof in what was to be the last year of television directly under Franco resulted in RTVE's return to little more than its origins. This could be seen in its belligerent attitude during the executions of members of ETA and FRAP and during the October 1, 1975 rally, which was the last to occur during the dictatorship. It could not have ended any other way; the circle fatally came to a close.

2. The legacy of television under Franco

The television left by Franco can be summarized in a few specific points:

2.1. From a structural or business standpoint, the rushed designation of Spanish Television as a "centralized public service" occurred 17 years after its start and until that point it operated on the fringes of legality. The reforms that were applied to its newly acquired legal status had little effect, due to the confusing political situation brought on by the assassination of Carrero Blanco, which took place only a few weeks after the publication of the decree in the Official State Bulletin.

The lack of a legal framework for Spanish National Television lasted until 1980, when

the two largest political parties (UCD and PSOE) agreed upon statutes. In spite of their rather obvious limitations and defects, they still remain in place today, even though they do not take into account the huge changes in the audiovisual scene both in Spain and worldwide.

2.2. From the point of view of hirings, the buddy system was encouraged and rational methods of hiring staff were not contemplated. Over time this resulted in too much staff (more than 10,000 employees in 1976), many of whom were not highly qualified professionals. At that time many had not taken classes to update their knowledge of emerging technologies. The lack of a legal framework in the case of many contracts signed with external consultants for programs or series meant that many were hired full-time after a court fight. The net result was yet another increase in staffing during the transition to democracy, as labor unions had already become significant sources of power and were able to call strikes and work stoppages.

This growth also coincided with a decrease in the number of programs produced by RTVE as well as an increase in programs produced externally or in cooperation with audiovisual or film production firms from the private sector. Spanish Television has never taken full advantage of its regular staff, and this continues to date.

2.3. The technology and infrastructure of Spanish Television had a second channel that reached hardly half the population 10 years after its start-up. The Second Channel became available in most parts of Spain only because of improvements brought on by the country's hosting of the World Cup Soccer Championship in 1982.

The decision to use the PAL system for color television was not a result of a specific decision by the government, or the company for that matter, but rather came about because of a sequence of events. The PAL system was chosen over the French SECAM system at the last cabinet meeting in which Manuel Fraga took part, but the decision was not published in the Official State Bulletin because of the uproar surrounding Fraga's resignation. Nevertheless, Spanish National television made trial broadcasts during the 1972 Munich Olympics and broadcast some programs in color (the series *Si las piedras hablaran* 'If the stones could speak' and "Los libros" 'Books', some Spanish operettas and American-made movies for television), although no official decision had been made.

2.4. Spanish Television had a monopoly on the network links until 1989, which created serious problems for the channels of the Autonomous Communities which had started up in 1983 (ETB in the Basque provinces and TV3 in Catalonia) because they had to pay for the installation of their own links. The Autonomous Community channels would have taken much longer to develop they had not decided to install their own network links, because two successive directors of RTVE, José María Calviño and then Pilar Miró, denied them access to the existing network links. It was only with the authorization of private television channels that the Spanish government permitted the private firm Retevisión to enter the field and thus end RTVE's privileged situation.

The cable television project of Spanish Television and the National Telephone Company of Spain, which began in 1973, was never put into operation by Spanish Television, which was responsible for supplying the programming for the new channels. Nevertheless, the telephone company did begin installing cable in several different areas of large cities. The fact that Spanish Television decided to withdraw from the cable television business had very negative effects on cable TV, since the Government had awarded the company a monopoly for cable TV. As a result, private companies or social groups were forced to adopt alternative types of television systems such as local broadcasting systems, which would grow extraordinarily in Catalonia.

2.5. The manipulation of news and the confusion between opinions and information were the dominant feature of the journalism presented on Spanish Television. The Law of the Press did not have a positive effect; rather, control over the press was increased as a means to counteract the still tame criticism that was beginning to appear in the written media. The use of international information, full of conflicts, violence and corruption, as opposed to the idyllic panorama of the national news, was only one of the ways this systematic manipulation was put into practice. Televised information became identified with the government and professional journalists who came to work at TVE were unable to overcome this problem; the attitude was accepted and not conceived of as a serious error that had resulted from Franco's politics. The famous statement by Rafael Ansón, the first managing director of Spanish Radio and Television during the transition to democracy, says it all: "whoever disagrees with the Government disagrees with Spanish Television," and this view would remain true during the governments of the UCD, the Socialists, and now the Popular Party. TVE ignored its cultural and educational roles. Well-known people who did not support the party line never appeared on television or did so very infrequently, there were "blacklists", sometimes for nonsensical reasons and in general all criticism of Franco's regime was silenced.

Educational programs, as a result of the total lack of communication between the pertinent ministers or in university circles, were only able to reach a level reminiscent of *Reader's Digest* and were an irregular succession of "lessons". The educational possibilities of television were not exploited in the years following Franco's death and were limited to programming on the second channel, which became a sort of cultural ghetto.

2.6. This entire period was characterized by centralism, as demonstrated by the fact that up to 1975 only three hours of programming a month for Catalonia were broadcast. Oddly enough, Catalonia was the only regional area that could have produced programming with a certain complexity. The opening of regional centers in the other parts of Spain, which occurred especially in the last years of Franco's life, was more symbolic than effective because these centers were nothing more than centers for local news correspondents. They could neither make any decisions on their own nor were they in a position to produce their own programs.

The effects of this centralist approach to the news and programming production are still in place to a great extent. Only the boom of regional television, which resulted in competition to a certain degree, forced the company to undertake decentralization. Spanish Television had to promote its broadcasting for the Autonomous Communities.

2.7. Spanish Television encouraged a triumphalist picture of itself based on prizes won at international competitions, especially as of 1965. This created a false sense of liberalism which, in fact, did not exist because censorship was still under the control of departments euphemistically called "content analysis". Programs such as *Historias de la frivolidad* (*Frivolous stories*) *La cabina* (*The cabin*) and *Juan Soldado* (*Soldier John*) were conclusive examples of this policy aimed at hiding reality, since for these as well as other programs, the full-length version was shown at the festivals but the heavily censored version was shown on TVE (censorship was particularly severe in the case of the program *Juan Soldado*).

Some programs were jointly produced with Italy during the last years of Franco's regime, but the relations between TVE and most European television channels were few in number and full of problems. Subject to the whims of Franco's politics, which prevented the consolidation of any stable cooperation and even the participation in the popular game show *Games across borders* which was broadcast by several European channels simultaneously but its broadcast coincided with the Burgos trial of political prisoners in 1970.

2.8. The uncurtailed growth of broadcast time and the dependence on income from advertising, and thus a high degree of acceptance due to a lack of direct competition, forced Spanish Television to purchase many series, most of which were from American producers and distributors. Spanish Television thus became a symbol of a company that was culturally and economically dominated. At the same time, its policies ensured that its public was accustomed to a certain type of audiovisual product with a specific structure, rhythm and contents, and this has been maintained in later periods.

We have thus seen that the legacy of television under Franco has had substantial influence on the future of Spanish Television and on the audiovisual scene in Spain as a whole. Twenty-five years after Franco's death, the period in which the regime ruled remains a grey, mediocre time which contributed little to art, serious thought and culture in Spain. A television system that was one of the mirrors that best reflected the political scene could do little to escape such mediocrity, as its directors attempted to shape it in their own image and to their own ends. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to not mention the contribution of a small group of professionals who, to the extent possible, tried to create quality work. Their efforts were admirable, especially given the stifling context in which they had to work.

