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PARALLEL STORIES, DIFFERENTIATED HISTORIES

EXPLORING FICTION AND MEMORY IN SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE TELEVISION

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Abstract: This study is part of an international project about the characteristics of historical fiction on Spanish and Portuguese television between 2001 and 2012, a time period during which historical content on television enjoyed an important expansion in both countries. The paper follows these productions as entertainment products and memory strategies. It explores a set of key-points: the similarities and differences of historical fiction productions; polarization of different historical times, more specifically, the convergent perspectives on Franco and Salazar as the contemporary Iberian dictators.

Keywords: Spain, Portugal, TV Fiction, Historical Representation, Memory

1 Two Parallel Television Products And A Similar Media Memory?

Spanish and Portuguese television was established virtually at the same time. Televisión Española (TVE) started regular broadcasts towards the end of 1956, and Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP) in March 1957. Between the 1960s and the mid-1970s, there was an increase in entertainment programmes. In the beginning of the 1990s, the broadcasting landscape changed with the emergence of new operators. Public broadcasters did not lose their prominent position on the market, but were forced to accommodate competition. Since then, the private television market has been dominated by four major channels: in Portugal, by Sociedade Independente de Comunicação (SIC, 1992) and Televisão Independente (TVI, 1993), and in Spain, by Antena 3 and Telecinco (1990).

Other broadcasters must be mentioned here, each with its own peculiar institutional characteristics. In Spain, the transition to democracy brought on decentralized territorial broadcasting (the autonomous regions), which generated a multitude of regional channels (12 in 2012). Differences between public and privately owned broadcasters started blurring. The large generalist channels faced challenges: their programming assimilated global flows of information and incorporated transnational formats and hybrid formulas of infotainment. They frequently used idiosyncratic representation elements in order to create a sense of proximity with local audiences.

Despite a significant volume of spectators still attached to traditional viewing patterns, this abundance of channels must be related to changes in the ways of watching television. The 'traditional' spectators were mainly female with barely any educational or professional qualifications, ageing populations and mid- to low-income groups. The aforementioned spectators were niche groups associated with the consumption of nostalgic television content - a type of programming that has emerged through the broadcast of repeats - or with emotionally charged programs. This often included fiction programs that became a vessel for the evocation of grand themes with empathic and emotive value.¹

This paper offers an overview of Spanish and Portuguese historical fiction programmes broadcast by public channels (RTP and TVE) and private channels (SIC, TVI, Antena 3 and Telecinco) in the two countries between 2001 and 2012. A group of ten Spanish and Portuguese researchers from Católica Portuguesa University (Lisbon), Complutense University and Carlos III University (Madrid) have been working together on this subject since early 2012, as part of a joint and comparative research framework.² Their project deals with production and programming policies, with narrative standardization, the assimilation and hybridization of dramatic patterns, and with the existing symbiosis between traditional and new approaches to historical fiction.

¹ Milly Buonanno, *Italian TV Drama & Beyond. Stories from the Soil. Stories from the Sea*, Intellect, 2012, p. 197-225

² Research linked to the project *Televisión y memoria. Estrategias de representación de la Guerra Civil y la Transición* (HAR2010-20005, MICINN, Government of Spain)

The term 'historical fiction' is to be interpreted loosely: it refers to an ample group of dramatic works which take place in settings from the past, in spite of the modality of recollection used in relation to facts and characters, be them real or imaginary. Their degrees of historicity are, therefore, variable, ranging from period pieces to the use of fiction as a vehicle for historiographical reflection. Historical fiction content can also be defined as an exercise in media memory: they are narrative works, which represent the past *in* television, but also *through* televisual mediation.³

Television content is at the same time interlocked with systems of collective memory and with cognitive *corpuses*. Fiction is connected with social recall practices, and integrating shared mechanics of comprehension, perception and moralization of passages of the past.⁴ In this manner, it expresses representations associated with a value system or identity affirmation, or it disseminates norms and rules for socialization by appealing to a pertinent past in present terms.

2 Some Illustrative Aspects Of Historical Fiction In Portugal And Spain

2.1 Mnemonic Strategies

The above-mentioned aspects can be observed in Spanish and Portuguese works of fiction. In the case of Spain, they are reflected in the interconnection of television and the system of 'historical memory'. This expression alludes to a group of politically, legally or historically motivated initiatives intending, in the last few years, to establish a critical interpretation of the Francoist repression. 'Historical memory' strives for a juridical and symbolic rehabilitation of the victims of the dictatorship. Its televised translation is configured in a dramatic vision of the post-war era, of which the telenovela [Amar en tiempos revueltos](#) (TVE1, 2005-2012) is an example. This system of memory, however, coexists with other *corpora* of memory, such as the *Transition to Democracy* (1976-1981). In this case, different values are used, considering this period as the root and the legitimizing axis of the present. These values have been incorporated in works of fiction regarding the political issues of the 1970s and 1980s, such as the one dedicated to the reaction of King Juan Carlos I to the attempted *coup* of 1981: [23-F. El día más difícil del Rey](#), TVE1, 2009.

In Portugal, there were also several methods for the selection and expression of the past. The traumatic memory was expressed through the revisiting of certain historical events - e.g. the colonial war(s) and Salazar's repression - from the perspective of the spectators' system of memory based on democratic values. The condemnation of the *Estado Novo* (the New State) was dominant in a series on the effects of the Spanish Civil War on the other side of the border: [A Raia dos Medos](#), RTP1, 1999. Criticism of the dictatorship was also present in the adaptation of Communist Party Secretary Álvaro Cunhal's autobiography: *Até Amanhã, Camaradas*, SIC, 2005. Systems of memory, however, do not function as mere compartments or closed signification structures. Besides these examples, it is worth noting other nostalgic allusions, which emotionally evoke the overseas territories, such as *Equador*, TVI, 2008.

These works of fiction indicate an idea of inclusive communities, which is also supported through other re-memorization formats and genres, such as commemorative chronicles or biopics. The former include productions dedicated to the centenary of the proclamation of the Portuguese Republic (*República* or *Noite Sangrenta*, RTP1, 2010), and the latter includes biographies of emblematic personalities, such as the TV movie [Clara Campoamor](#) (TVE1, 2011), which presented the Spanish suffragist Clara Campoamor as a supporter of gender equal rights in a manner connecting her to the later policies of Socialist Prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

Recent historical fictions in the two countries present shared as well as specific features. Together, both countries have produced one hundred programmes, forty made by the Portuguese and sixty by the Spanish. The historical moments evoked vary from classic ancient times ([Hispania](#), Antena 3, 2010-2012), to modern times ([Águila Roja](#),

3 Motti Neiger et al., 'Introduction,' in: Motti Neiger et al. eds., *On Media Memory. Collective Memory in a New Media Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 1-25

4 Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets*, Cambridge University Press, 2009

TVE1, 2009-2013; *O Processo dos Távoras*, RTP1, 2000), and to contemporary times, although more recent periods settings are dominant. The 19th century is the historical period most represented in Portuguese series and TV movies, such as: *Mistérios de Lisboa* (RTP1, 2011), while the 20th century is a period covered by circa fifty Spanish productions.

2.2 Plurality Of Formats, Uniformity Of Visions

Public and private networks have participated in the making of all these historical fiction programmes; however, the majority of them were broadcast by RTP and TVE. In that sense, there has been a transition from the adaptation of classic authors (e.g. Pérez Galdós, Blasco Ibáñez, Eça de Queirós, Júlio Dinis), to storylines based on original scripts. This change reflects the transition from traditional television broadcasting conceived as public service and legitimized by high cultural products, to a different broadcasting environment dominated by competitive and commercial interests.

Iberian fiction programmes are based on a plurality of formats, combining short narrative structures (telefilms, TV movies, miniseries), with longer ones (series and *telenovelas*). The latter has had good viewing figures in Spain as well as in Portugal. The Portuguese-Brazilian coproduction *Paixões Proibidas* (RTP1, 2007) was the 8th best fiction in terms of audience share in 2008, while *Anjo Meu* (TVI, 2011) came in 3rd in 2012.

Although there's no a defined formula, elements from the traditional *telenovela* - melodrama, emphatic storylines, the evocation of recent times, didactics and a moralistic packaging – are to be found in all successful productions in the form of spin-offs *La Señora*, TVE1, 2008-2010; *14 de Abril. La República*, TVE1, 2011.

The television representation of the past, as an expression of current identity values, is also present in mainstream productions which have been adapted from foreign formats, as is the case of *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (TVE1, 2001-2013), which is a Spanish transposition of the American series *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988-1993). Its plot, historical composition and character profiles, have been transferred later to the Portuguese culture, through a second exercise of adaptation in *Conta-me como foi*, (RTP1, 2007-2011), which incorporated new 'Portuguese-style' idiosyncratic characteristics.

Cuéntame cómo pasó was the first public TV series to deal with the last years of Francoism and the transition to democracy in Spain. It featured the everyday life of a middle class family, the Alcántara, in a working class neighbourhood of Madrid between 1968 and 1981. In the case of the Portuguese adaptation, the historical period is shorter (1968-1976), and the main characters are from a middle class family, the Lopes, living in a working class neighbourhood of Lisbon. Both series use the idea of history as a testimony and as a narrative of progress.

The story is told, in both cases, through the voice of Carlos. He is the youngest member of the family, and his narration is not situated in the 1960s, but it occurs he is already an adult. Carlos' narration allows, through the use of flashbacks, for a mixture of historical experiences and fictional situations. It doesn't matter if Carlos refers constantly to scenes or events he could never have witnessed. The subliminal fact is that the voice belongs to someone 'who was there', and, consequently, what the fiction presents as a dramatization were real facts, and not the sentimental interpretation of a man - of an undefined age - remembering his childhood. This process of remembering is a representational mechanism allowing for fictional situations to attain credibility. History is not just a scenery, nor are the historic events abstract and impersonal. *Cuéntame cómo pasó* and *Conta-me como Foi* offer, on the other hand, a vision of the past lived with a strong affective imprint. This representational strategy facilitates the audience's recognition of specific events, increasing the nostalgic perception among the older spectators. In this sense, the documentary images used in the final cut of every chapter aim to legitimize the verisimilitude of elements in the screenplay, such as the scenery, the wardrobe, and the *attrezzi*. The frequent allusion to advertising, to popular products and to television and radio programming of the time reinforce the verisimilitude of the screenplay.

At the same time, the 1960s and 1970s are shown as a mere projection of the present day. The television narrative suggests that the market economy (presented as a system of values) was the point of departure for the arrival of political democracy. In doing so, both series construct a collective memory where the connatural violence of dictatorship has disappeared. The consumer society is shown as the best alternative. Both families are described as the very representation of a new emergent democratic middle class. This assumption of progress as something 'natural' is never discussed.

3 Deconstructing Franco And Salazar: The Private Life Of Iberian Dictators

Our comparative research also includes a study of the fictional approach to the private lives of Francisco Franco and António de Oliveira Salazar. The Spanish and Portuguese television networks provided a new look on this issue, which dramatically changed the previous media constructions and social perceptions of the dictators' private lives. Spain and Portugal endured the longest dictatorships in Europe. Both Franco and Salazar were historical references in the nation(s)' collective memory and were constructed by the media as the myth(s) of providential ruler(s): Franco was seen as a victorious general who built dams in the desert, and Salazar as the intellectual 'married' to his nation.

In Spain, *NO-DO* was the official newsreel projected in cinemas from 1943 to 1975, which showed nationalist propaganda content and contributed to the creation of Francoist official image. It also created a distinctive rhetoric for the new political circumstances (*caudillaje*), which focused on the leader's heroism above and beyond his military maturity in Africa. This can be seen in films such as *Franco, ese hombre* (J. L. Sáenz de Heredia, 1964). Nevertheless, Franco's official representation has varied throughout the dictatorship: from the invincible leader with a military stance, to the politician, statesman and *peace builder*, to the triumphal *Generalísimo* turning into an old man, to the nation's grandfather in his later years. In these representations, his most human side was revealed, as he was shown surrounded by his nieces, hunting or fishing.

In Portugal, the film industry was also at the service of propaganda for the *Estado Novo*. Responsible for this was *Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional* (SPN) and filmmaker António Ferro was the main contributor to propaganda films. The national newsreel agency, *Sociedade Portuguesa de Actualidades Cinematográficas* (SPAC), was responsible for the image of the regime and showed content about rural and public works advertised as top national achievements, and about Salazar as the protagonist of political and cultural events or major celebrations. Documentary was also used for the official representation of contemporary Portugal and the two films directed by 'salazarist' António Lopes Ribeiro *A Revolução de Maio* (1937) and *Feitiço do Império* (1940) are telling in that respect. Both films emphasize *Estado Novo*'s great achievements and construct the image of the leader, which has lingered on for decades in the collective memory of the Portuguese.⁵ Filmmaker António Ferro has also contributed to portraying the myth of Salazar as a lonely and bashful man obliged by history to bear the heavy burden of the government, whose private life was a mystery to the people – Salazar rarely spoke in public or addressed them directly.

Beyond these representations, other images of Salazar or Franco surfaced: from the image of the Spanish dictator as victorious leader to that of an old man with Parkinson's disease; and from the image of a Portuguese dictator, religious and withdrawn, to the image of a 'womanizer'. Television directors and filmmakers used alternative subplots to demythologize official images on one hand, and to humanize or ridicule them, on the other hand. These representations offer an innovative point of view, which substantially alters traditional values and imaginaries in the collective memory. This demystification started upon Francisco Franco's death in 1975 and dismantled previous

5 Alberto Pena-Rodríguez, 'Cine, fascismo y propaganda. Una aproximación histórica al Estado Novo portugués,' in : *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 67, 2012, p. 209, http://www.revistalatinacs.org/067/art/953_Vigo/09_Pena.html. Accessed 20 May 2013

images of the Spanish leader. Basilio Martín Patino's clandestine film *Caudillo* (1976) is a valid example of an early counter documentary treatment of Spanish civil war footage. Moreover, fiction has recovered Franco's character from a variety of genres and repurposed it from the symbolic political military representations inherited from 1936. In that sense *Espérame en el Cielo* (A. Mercero, 1987), *Dragón Rapido* (J. Camino, 1986) or *Madregilda* (F. Regueiro, 1994) are good examples of satirical humour used as an alternative genre to dictatorial representations.

These representations coexist with the radical change that Franco's image has undergone since 1976. We note a significant disappearance of references to dictatorship on the new democratic television, while the old political system is now called the 'former regime'. This explains the absence of a comprehensive documentary project on Franco's dictatorship, as well as the delay in the production of a fiction programme that would show a personality as polemic and significant as was the Spanish *Caudillo*. The first TV movie on the subject was produced by the private network Antena3 only in 2008: *20-N. Los últimos días de Franco*.

In this TV film, the story aims to capture Franco's most private moment: his own death. Veteran actor Manuel Alexandre stars in the main role, beside a selected group of actors portraying the dictator's close family. The action takes place in El Pardo Palacio, Franco's private residence for many years, which was also the centre where national political decisions were made. *20-N. Los últimos días de Franco* ponders on the association that may exist between the mystic of death and the mythic of the protagonist. Franco is not portrayed in the TV film as a career military man, nor as a political leader, but as an old man falling in an endless agony, which mirrors the image of his own regime. This modality of representation of the protagonist reinforces the Spanish collective imaginary from the end of 1960's: the image of physical decline due to aging, Parkinson's disease ravages, loss of lucidity - in short, *20-N. Los últimos días de Franco* shows Franco's last moments from a strictly private point of view.

This was the first time in the history of Spanish media that a film recreated the *Caudillo*'s last days in a very different way to the image that had existed in the public memory, following the release of photos of his agony. By showing the friendly face of a dictator dying in his bed, the film contributed, without a doubt, to humanizing him: Franco, the nation's grandfather, the hunter and fisherman as portrayed by NO-DO throughout decades, was shown as a dying human being. The film also reinforced ideas and values from the country's recent past, a country that was now contemplating its future. He is shown lying in state, in his military uniform, with the self-awarded San Fernando Laureate Cross on his chest, the insignia that epitomizes his whole story as general and warrior. While on his deathbed, Franco dictated his last will in a cold conscious manner, as the soldier he always was.

The recent televisual representations of Salazar were also very different from the image fabricated by the propaganda machine of his political regime: from his modest origins as peasant and former seminarist, to a charismatic leader who lived an austere existence. A significant case of a revisionist trend can be observed in the television miniseries and film production *A Vida Privada de Salazar* (Jorge Queiroga, 2009). The miniseries followed the intimate life of the dictator and revealed what had already been known in the recent years: his strong life long passion for women. For almost 40 years, one of the myths around Salazar was that he was married to the nation, having no time for a family life. Nevertheless, the film shows his exuberant sexual life, whose secrecy was in tune with his 'invisibility'. The main effect of this physical invisibility was that his presence as a leader was felt everywhere.

As depicted in the film, the women with whom Salazar had intimate relations, came from different social backgrounds, e.g. one young woman was an offspring of the local landowner bourgeoisie, while another was a descendant of the high aristocracy, the most intimate circle of the Portuguese monarchy overthrown in 1910. The film narrative is more concerned with the dictator's sexual conquests, highlighting the difference with what had been known about the dictator: a man who was cold, calculated and who hated women.

The series reveals other psychological aspects of the Portuguese politician: his depressive character, as well as his misogyny. This particular media representation clearly breaks with the Portuguese collective memory. The official image created by the regime's propaganda contrasts with that of Diogo Morgado's performance of Salazar, who appears to the spectator as a modern, sophisticated and friendly man.

4 Conclusion: Historical Fiction As Meeting Point

The Spanish television channel Antena 3 and the Portuguese television channel SIC have shown the Iberian dictators' private lives: the construction of the main characters, Francisco Franco and Oliveira Salazar, matched established characteristics of recent historical fiction. Both characters showed empathy and humanity. There were differences, however, between the two cases: while Spanish television put Franco's agony onto stage, the Portuguese series revealed Salazar's secret sexual life. In doing so, small screen fictions contributed to breaking taboos, at a time of change that could provoke morbid pleasure and interest among the audiences. They allowed for a reinvention of the ageing audience - the main target group for these productions - as the ones who lived through these times and had crafted their memories of the statesmen on the basis of official propaganda sources.

As we have pointed out in this paper, contemporary fiction programmes can provide us with alternative imaginaries. In that sense, both related stories, Spanish and Portuguese, suggest to us a thorough revision of the existing social memory on the basis of contemporary media historical constructions.

Historical fiction programmes have performed didactic and expressive functions, while seeking out the acknowledgement – the subjective empathy and moral appreciation – of the viewer. Morality and empathy have provided a framework for remembering dictators as ordinary people, while on the other hand, legitimizing current democratic systems.

Both in Portugal and in Spain historical fiction can be viewed as a generalist memory practice that puts forward forms of inclusive representations. Thus, television has become a forum for negotiation and interaction between mnemonic keys and narrative standards. On the basis of this, we can consider these programs as meeting points that are consistent with mainstream audiences as communities of recognition and memory.

The main practice on Spanish and Portuguese television has been to evoke relevant characters and times situated, for the most part, in representations of the 20th century. In the period from 1999 to 2012, TVE and RTP released over thirty productions each. That means that over half of Spanish fiction, and two thirds of Portuguese, were released by public networks. Three reasons explain the predominance of public stations here: first, their capacity to boost productions during a period as expansive as 2001-2012; second, their skill to identify historical fiction as a product clearly associated to a public television service; third their rich archives which allowed for these productions.

The productions mentioned are, sometimes seen as 'self-reference' television practices. This can be observed with recalling recent events in Spain, such as the *coup d'état* in February 1981, or the terrorist attack of March 11th 2004, both covered live, or as part of a television marathon.⁶ Afterwards, the same events were subject to documentary treatment. Such historical fiction relies also on previous television practices, on representative styles and proposals for making meaning for the audiences.

Finally, despite the insistence on evoking national personalities and events, Spanish and Portuguese fiction must be valued in terms of global television memory practices: as productions with international standards and drama, and with a 'cosmopolitan' view on evoking past times by means of ethic values. Issues such as the Spanish Civil War, Franco's and Salazar's repression, or the Portuguese colonial war(s) are part of a sort of traumatic memory that encapsulates other main international issues, like the history of totalitarian states or imperialist violence in the past century.

6 See for this concept: Tamar Liebes, 'Television's disaster marathons: a danger for democratic processes?', in: Tamar Liebes and James Curran, eds., *Media, Ritual and Identity*, Routledge, 1998, p. 71–85

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