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The Television Mini-series as Historical Memory: The Case of *23-F, el día más difícil del Rey* (TVE-1, 2009)

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History, Memory, Television

As is well known, historical memory serves many functions. On the one hand, it may aid the positive purposes of group creation through a perception of shared experience. Such group myths lead to a social cohesion that is reinforced by operational codes and systems of ethics. On the other (negative) hand, historical memories may also be containers for grievances that can be instrumentalized for contentious purposes in post-conflict situations. Conversely, once more, those same memories can be made to serve the purpose of reconstruction and the prevention of future conflict (see Margaret Smith).

If we were to adopt this more functionalist approach suggested by Smith to the case of Spanish cultural production, then attention might shift to a more historicist account of historical memory, one which paid attention to the practices of everyday life, both in the Francoist past and the democratic present. Such practices can lead, as mentioned above, either to group creation and social cohesion or to continuing grievance and contention. And beyond literature and film (the main media cited by cultural scholars), such a shift in scholarly emphasis might lead us towards television.

There is little doubt that the specific characteristics of television as a medium (its perceived domesticity, familiarity, and femininity), no less than its inherited reputation for government interference, have contributed to its enduring low status amongst cultural gatekeepers in Spain. It remains characteristic that *El País* permits no space for serious analysis of television,

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exiling discussion of the medium from the section that deals with literature and cinema (“Cultura”) and confining it to the ghetto of celebrity gossip (“Gente y TV”). A search from 1960–2008 for cinema, television, and internet in the vast Google databases of scanned books (“ngram viewer”), recently made available at the time of writing, confirms intuitive perceptions about the relative attention paid in print to the three media. In the English-language corpus, “television” is dominant during the period (eclipsing both “cinema” and “movies”); in the Spanish, it is “cine” that remains on top throughout. Yet Spaniards devote more time to television viewing each day than they do to movie-going in a year.

Underrepresented and reviled (its familiarity breeding contempt), television is nonetheless central to historical memory. Indeed the very qualities that exclude it from public cultural consecration make it suited for this more private purpose. For example, the domesticity of the consumption of television makes it central to everyday life; and its tilting towards a female audience (evident in such pervasive genres as soap opera or *telenovela*) coincides with women’s traditional role as guardians of family history.

Picking up on these unexplored opportunities, there has been a recent boomlet of academic studies on history on and in Spanish television: 2009 saw the collections *The Nation on Screen* (a comparative study which includes Spain) from Enric Castelló et al. (eds.), and *Historias de la pequeña pantalla* (solely devoted to Spain) from Francisca López et al. (eds.), as well as an exhaustive monograph from José Carlos Rueda Laffond and Carlota Coronado Ruiz, titled *La mirada televisiva: Ficción y representación histórica en España*. This last book includes rigorous accounts of Antena 3’s *20-N: Los últimos días de Franco* (from 2008) and two titles from 2009: TVE’s *23-F: El día más difícil del Rey* (the most watched drama in the history of Spanish television) and Antena 3’s *La chica de ayer*, the less popularly successful Spanish version of the BBC’s celebrated time-traveling drama *Life on Mars*, in which a present-day policeman finds himself stranded in the strangely unfamiliar (yet all too recent) 1970s.

As these titles suggest, the somewhat belated scholarly interest in historical fiction is more than matched by the proliferation of period serials in the 2000s. The two most critically acclaimed dramas on Spanish television, both from state broadcaster TVE, remain the veteran transition drama *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (a weekly series with over two hundred episodes), which began its twelfth season in 2010, and the Francoist serial *Amar en tiempos revueltos* (a daily *telenovela*), which celebrated its two thousandth episode in the same year. Both have managed the tricky feat of attracting mass audiences (the older segments of which share personal memories of the periods in question) while winning prestigious prizes at home and abroad.

Moreover, the law of unintended consequences that so often shadows

government legislation of the media has seen the resurgence of a genre once left for dead: the mini-series, a form of event or quality programming normally scheduled in a limited number of episodes over successive days. This phenomenon is doubly surprising giving the trend in the 2000s, in Spain as elsewhere, towards strongly serialized dramas that ensure the allegiance of the audience (and the profitability of the producer) by requiring that faithful fans make a date each week with the same title. The rationale for the revival of mini-series is derived from the Ley del Cine (Law of Cinema), whose provisions were reinforced in 2007, obliging television companies to invest in feature film production (Ley del Cine). The law was fortuitously defined in terms capacious enough to include a long lost television genre, which suddenly became economically viable once more.

While the mini-series is thus testimony in a production context to the increased blurring of the divide between cinema and television into a single sector of the “audiovisual” (a trend also attested by the fact that it is now not uncommon for Spanish television series to hold movie-style season premieres in theaters), the genre also hybridizes fact and fiction. The majority of such dramas stage recreations of historical events, however distant or recent they may be. Indeed with the fall 2010 season boasting both Antena 3’s *Hispania* (set during the Roman conquest of the Peninsula) and Telecinco’s *Felipe y Letizia* (dramatizing the love life of the current Crown Prince), it seems that there is no period of Spanish history untouched by the big budget historical drama of the newly prominent mini-series. As these two shows were typically counter-programmed (scheduled simultaneously by rival networks as spoilers), Spanish viewers are increasingly offered the opportunity to experience widely varying re-workings of the national past at the same moment of consumption. As Milly Buonanno, one of the most influential theorists of the medium, has suggested, television is not just a window on the world; it is also, beyond its much-discussed “liveness,” a time machine (119–32).

As shown by the example of *20-N*, a series on the apparently unappealing topic of the extended death throes of the Dictator, the Francoist era, and its conflicted inheritance, remains especially attractive to both producers and public in Spain. In this essay I focus on case studies from one of the productions first transmitted in the unusually rich season of spring 2009 (Smith) and available at the time of writing both on DVD and online. This is the previously mentioned *23-F*, which for the first time on Spanish television dramatized King Juan Carlos as he faced a definitive moment of the Transition. As we shall see, the fictionalization of public figures serves as a focus for historical memory: for group creation and social cohesion, as for continuing grievance and contention.

Two Theoretical Models

While Spanish scholars have indeed begun to treat the historical fiction that it so prominent on their television screens (and I will return to Rueda Laffond and Coronado Ruiz's pioneering account of *23-F*), it is fair to say that they have not reflected on the theoretical questions of history of (and in) the medium as consistently as scholars in other media territories. Before coming to my case studies I will thus briefly sketch some pointers taken from a volume on British television, where the presence of a strong public service broadcaster (the BBC) provides parallels, *mutatis mutandis*, with the Spanish media ecology.

In the introduction to her collection *Re-viewing Television History*, Helen Wheatley gives an account of the current state of the field (1–12). She takes it for granted that it is no longer necessary to “legitimize” television studies in a UK context and presents her book as a “self-reflexive intervention in a growing debate” (1) and an attempt to “bring into view a medium that has all too easily been regarded as ephemeral, transient or somehow beyond a historical materiality” (3). Citing British television studies authority John Corner on television and history, she argues that “an enriched sense of ‘then’ provides, in its differences and commonalities combined, a stronger, imaginative and analytically energized sense of ‘now’” (3), enriching our sense of current television’s social impact and aesthetic potential and breaking its “present-ist momentum” (4). Feminist scholars have also disrupted the “partiality” of a television history that has tended to exclude women’s “cultural competences” and “creativity” (6), and proposing, with Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, a notion of “conjunctural histories” (8).

While methodology has become somewhat codified (attempting to address in turn and together the “triumvirate” of production, text, and reception), four key problems remain: that of national specificity (visible in the lack of comparative national histories); the over-privileging of the institutional (especially in the case of excessive focus on the BBC and its extensive archive); access to material, much of which is lost or wiped; and (most important for this essay) “the problem of nostalgia and the need to confront the connection between popular and academic histories of the medium” (Wheatley 8). Thus, on the one hand, nostalgia can be read in a mournful or sentimental television context as “a symptom of loss of faith and interest in the present and the future” (Wheatley 8); but on the other, it is a key site for the interrogation of the relationship between the individual and the collective. Wheatley cites Spigel once more who introduces the term “memory” into the debate: “Rather than deriding the popular and returning to a more ‘legitimate’ historical cultural canon movie . . . we need to

examine the relationships between popular memory and professional history” (qtd. in Wheatley 10).

It is salutary to compare Wheatley’s account of the relationship between television and history with Rueda and Coronado’s version of the representation of history in television, focusing on the case of the *23-F* mini-series. The latter start from the position that the world of popular series is that of the “dominant ideology” (not a term used by Wheatley), but also one in which historical residues are dramatized in forms that trigger the recognition of present day television genres (178). The Monarchy is thus to be read “from [within] television fiction.” Beginning, classically, with production and emphasizing (overemphasizing?) institutional factors, the authors note how the then Director General of TVE stressed how the show formed part of TVE’s mission as a public service broadcaster to ensure “important facts” about the attempted coup reached the greatest number of citizens; how its executive producer insisted also that the script was based on “proven facts”; and its stars took care to assert the “responsibility” they felt in embodying historical figures, even given the “seal of quality” allegedly guaranteed by TVE’s involvement (178–9). The authors also link the production circumstances to the reform of the state broadcaster then underway and to TVE’s “contradictory” status as a public service whose financing was part private (179).

Turning briefly to reception, however, Rueda and Coronado note that, in spite of its alleged cooption by the dominant ideology, the mini-series at once gave rise to controversial or oppositional readings from unsympathetic viewers (179). Internet postings by, say, self-identified republican groups attacked the drama’s perceived ideological bias and hegemonic discourse, intended to burnish the public image of the King even as it indulged in nauseating sentimentalism (180). This, then, is a clear case where, as we saw earlier, memory struggles give rise to appeals for both group creation and social cohesion (here, from the proud producers of *23-F*) and for continuing grievance and contention (from some of its unwilling consumers).

Focusing finally on the text (the third part of the television studies methodological “triumvirate”) Rueda and Coronado argue for the “ahistoricism” of this historical re-creation, branding its model of democracy “teleological” and its depiction of the monarchy “providential” (180). Thus an early reference in the dialogue to the disloyal military men who had “cost the Royal Family [its] exile” falsely implies that there had been a constitutional monarchy comparable to that of the present prior to Primo de Rivera’s coup in 1923 (183). The legitimization of “today” is thus based on an “anachronistic” manipulation of “yesterday” (183).

The presentism of television is however most clearly visible for Rueda and Coronado in the historical drama’s appeal to current television genres. Thus, mainly restricted to the single setting of the Zarzuela Palace to which the King is confined with his family, *23-F* resembles in turn: a reality show,

in which private and personal relations are placed on display; a *telenovela*, which overemphasizes the dramatic potential of domestic space; and a competition or contest, in which the common man (the King is presented as all too human) finds himself beset by surprises, obliged to overcome obstacles, and confronted by betrayal, trickery, and grief (184).

As the examples of these genres suggest, the King is associated, somewhat unexpectedly perhaps, with positive characteristics that are gendered as feminine: affection (towards his wife, children, and even the friends who betrayed him), emotional intelligence, and sincerity in a domestic setting (185). Conversely, Jaime Milans del Bosch (the main military conspirator) is identified with a “reactionary masculinity” (*machista* and authoritarian) which is considered, more so in the present than in the past, to be unacceptable and anachronistic. In this re-working of the past, public history is thus surprisingly privatized, with the home both the setting for the drama of the coup and the “natural” space for the reception of a show that sought “empathy” from its audience (186).

When Queen Sofia was asked if she and her husband had seen the mini-series she replied that they had done so; and that it was “well made” (186). Discreetly disregarding television’s social impact, she thus called attention to its aesthetic potential and aspiration to quality. Privileging the institutional and the nationally specific (two of Wheatley’s “problems” for historical television studies), Rueda and Coronado offer an intriguing reading of *23-F* in the context of TVE and contemporary Spain. But, in their stress on presentism (the manipulation of “then” in the service of “now”), they neglect Wheatley’s third question of nostalgia. Moreover their notion of a “dominant ideology” to which popular television fiction will necessarily belong, an ideology flexible enough to incorporate even parodic treatments of the King in satirical shows, is as capacious as the “pact of silence” and “return of the repressed” beloved of Hispanists. It is less flexible and analytically agile than Wheatley’s model of “conjunctural histories”: fluctuating or overlapping narratives of national, institutional, and personal perspectives. We can now go on to read *23-F* as a cultural resource that crystallizes the relationships between popular memory and professional history.

23-F: Conjunctural Histories

The first episode of *23-F* was shown by TVE1 on Tuesday February 10, 2009. It achieved a rating of 6,491,000 and a share (the proportion of all those watching television at the time of its broadcast) of 31.5 percent. The second and final episode, shown on the Thursday of the same week, increased those unprecedented figures to 6,920,000 and 35.5 percent. The peak or “golden” moment of the night was an astonishing 8,425,000 viewers

at 11.23 p.m (formulatv). Significantly, the highest rated mini-series of all time (defined by TVE in promos broadcast at the time, in line with the *Ley del Cine*, as a genre-blurring “TV movie” or simply “película”) trounced its rivals all over the Peninsula: the autonomic channels throughout the Spanish state (in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, and the Canaries) registered historic lows in their respective ratings.

In a failed attempt at counter-programming, private station Antena 3 had scheduled its own poorly-rated miniseries on the attempted coup (*23-F: Historia de una traición*.) Set in the present time, when children of historical participants were shown investigating the coup, it indulged in conspiracy theories about the causes and effects of a recent event whose basic “facts” were (as TVE had stressed) extensively documented by professional historians.

As mentioned earlier, *23-F* is to be seen within a production context as part of the attempt to rehabilitate an indebted and embattled public service broadcaster that was undergoing a process of high profile reform. But on the other hand, it also played its part in the network’s policy decision (identical to that of its private counterparts) to funnel the cash transfers from television to film that were required by the *Ley del Cine* into mini-series based on subjects taken from recent Spanish history. Thus public service and private enterprise are here inseparable.

23-F’s national ubiquity, at least on the two nights that it was shown, would seem initially at least to confirm Rueda and Coronado’s suggestion that the mini-series was a vehicle of the “dominant ideology,” co-opting all opposition. Certainly the overt textual strategies of the mini-series would appear to suggest the tyranny of uncontested “facts” and a claim to unimpeachable professional history in, for example, the use of on-screen titles to identify locations (“The Palace of the Zarzuela”) and exact times (“18.23”). Here chronology tends to become teleology with the complex action moving swiftly and inevitably towards an already anticipated conclusion.

Yet, as Rueda and Coronado also suggested, there is a barely disguised engagement here with current television genres. *23-F* stages the primacy of everyday life familiar from transnational reality franchises such as *Big Brother*; indeed the very first sequence shows the royal family, mildly conflicted over the request of a teenage daughter to attend a party, at their communal breakfast. Public policy is consistently shown in terms of private loyalty and rivalry. The King cannot bring himself to believe that General Armada has conspired against constitutional democracy; and the story arc of the mini-series as a whole traces the replacement of this valued old friend who has betrayed the King by another new friend who has proved his loyalty (head of the royal household, Sabino Fernández Campo). Historic events surprise the King (like a reality show contestant) in incongruous costume: hearing of the coup he is dressed for squash and clutches a racket.

The (heightened and structured) everydayness of the reality show is combined at climactic moments with the frankly emotional engagement of the *telenovela*, the link being the dramatic potential of the enclosed domestic setting (like the *Big Brother* housemates, once more, the cast of the mini-series are not allowed to leave their home). The King and Queen invoke tragic family memories (exile and sacrifice); Juan Carlos tenderly tends to his troubled son and weeps bitterly as he speaks on the phone to his distant parents. He vows to protect democracy “for you, *papá*” (Episode One). Conflating the person and the nation once more, in providential fashion, Sofia tells her husband: “You don’t deserve this [the coup] and nor do the Spaniards” (Episode One).

The formal scripting problem of holding audience interest in a plot with a known outcome is addressed by the creation of surprises and obstacles reminiscent of a reality competition (ironically, the King says at the start of his “most difficult” day that he wants “no surprises” [Episode One]). Arbitrary time limits are imposed (Fernández Campo tells the King to wait “one hour” before they phone the *golpistas* directly [Episode One]); and successive challenges are set up (the final one is Juan Carlos’s much delayed television speech). Some devices are reminiscent of a genre unmentioned by Rueda and Coronado, the thriller. Thus repeated enigmas are posed (what is the “event” the conspirators are expecting?; who is the “military authority” whose arrival Lieutenant Colonel Tejero awaits?). And the climax to the first episode is marked by a frank cliffhanger: advancing slowly towards the King, and strangely mirrored in glass fronted cabinets, Fernández Campo tells Juan Carlos that he bears “bad news.” We must wait two days for the final episode to learn that outgoing President Adolfo Suárez and the leaders of the opposition have been led away by the conspirators, an event which in fact has little significance for the outcome of the plot.

More striking, however, is the feminization of the monarch. This household is overwhelmingly female (the sisters of both King and Queen have featured roles); and the political pedagogy of the Prince is presented with sensitivity (Juan Carlos interrupts the writing of his vital speech to explain its significance to his son, who clutches a doll throughout). The King is thus no patriarch and the continuity of the monarchy is safely in the hands of newly sensitive men. It is striking that conspirator Milans del Bosch is the only character to indulge in bad language (frequently invoking male “balls”) and is associated with an emblematic prop that is all too obviously phallic (a metal tipped cane that leaves his grasp only when finally he is taken into custody: the camera lingers as it rests against his desk). The fact that Milans is played by José Sancho, who had just spent eight years as a deeply unsympathetic Francoist boss on TVE’s *Cuéntame*, provides an additional, intra-televisual reason for viewer hostility to his character.

The “feminine” television genres of *telenovela* or soap opera, on which the mini-series draws, have of course been vindicated by some feminist

scholars. And I would argue that they serve here as containers for historical memory and bridges between the public and private spheres. *23-F* would then be read, in ways suggested by Wheatley's account of television and history, as a self-reflexive intervention on the nation and the medium. TVE was, of course, historically prominent in the course of the coup. And we are shown how the broadcasters' headquarters were temporarily taken over by *golpistas* (a precious videotape of the invasion of the Congress is hidden by brave professionals); and how a unit ventured out to the Palace to record the King's decisive speech. The dialogue contributes to this enhanced role of television in the life of the nation: Sofía predicts that her husband's appearance will "calm" Spain at this critical moment.

But even this most public performance is privatized through the shooting style adopted by the mini-series's director. As the King reads his historic speech straight to camera we consistently see in reverse shot his attentive son and approving wife, the first privileged audience for a spectacle that the Spanish people will wait some time to witness. The institutional and the familial are thus fused together, but with the latter preceding the former. This sequence could be read as an interested strategy (a common defense of a public broadcaster and a monarch whose authority was and is contested by some Spaniards). But it also points to the coexistence and mutual constitution of a public sphere coded as masculine (uniquely, the King wears military uniform here) and the feminine domestic space to which Juan Carlos is confined throughout the extended length of the drama.

Dissonant readings are also embedded in the textuality of the show. The credit sequence, which features plentiful domestic help preparing the Royal Family's lavish breakfast (oranges sliced just so), hints at a pampered and blinkered existence at odds with the "ordinary people" rhetoric of reality television and confirmed by the King's subsequent and sustained inability to comprehend what is happening outside the Palace. The urgency of the exterior sequences (military men and material filmed with hand held camera and quick cuts) contrasts with the handsome lassitude of the interiors (static shots of muted beige decor dressed with lavish displays of white flowers). Meticulous recreation of the past is juxtaposed with clear (too clear) address to the present: Juan Carlos uses the word "crispación" (Episode One) (tension) to describe the political climate, a term characteristic of recent conflict between PSOE government and PP opposition; and he notes that he never knows if he will be received with applause or boos (at the time of the broadcast of the mini-series republican groups in Catalonia were publicly burning portraits of the King). Problematic nostalgia (associated within the drama with the generals' yearning for still recent Francoism) is here combined with unapologetic presentism.

Such dissident or dissonant elements suggest *23-F* can be read as a conjunctural television history: a refracted reflection on the medium and the monarchy. And one subtext here, unnoticed by scholars, is precisely the

Catalan. Although broadcast by Madrid-based TVE, the show is produced by Barcelona company Alea Docs & Films in partnership with Televisió de Catalunya. The Zarzuela Palace location is in fact the Palau de Pedralbes, also in Barcelona, where Franco stayed on his visits to the Catalan capital; most of the featured cast is Catalan (six out of the ten first listed); and the director is heard directing that cast in Catalan on the “making of” included with the DVD release. It is not perhaps surprising that a “dialogue coach” is listed in the final credits for a drama that would seem to be so quintessentially Spanish. Lluís Homar, who plays the King, has had a long and distinguished career with the Catalan-speaking Teatre Lliure.

Now there is no reason why Catalan natives should not impersonate or dramatize Castilian characters. But, beyond this accident of birth, it seems possible that Catalans have a comparative professional advantage in producing quality historical television fiction. Daily *telenovela*, *Amar en tiempos revueltos*, although set in Madrid, was based initially on a Catalan original and boasted Catalan writers and crew. Catalan television has also pioneered soap operas whose subdued everyday register (not dissimilar to the generally restrained performance style of *23-F*) could not be further from the more emotionally extravagant *telenovelas* made in Madrid or indeed Mexico.

While this Catalan connection is muted, another aspect of conjunctural history is self-evident. In its programming and distribution *23-F* presented itself not as the sole authorized version of national history but as just one in a line of re-workings of a dramatic moment. The broadcast of each episode of the mini-series was book-ended by documentaries on the same topic in which participants (and some common citizens) bore witness to their memories. The rapidly released DVD contained a second disk collating no fewer than four documentaries made at different historical moments: 1986, 1996, 2001, and 2006. Comedy shows staged humorous recreations of the coup. And, as we have seen, rival private network Antena 3 aired its somewhat eccentric fictionalization of the coup at exactly the same time as the public service broadcaster. It is surely to over-privilege its institutional power to suggest that TVE, as vehicle of a “dominant ideology,” could have co-opted all of these multiple variants. Certainly popular and academic accounts of a single event were juxtaposed in ways recommended by Wheatley in her prescription for televisual history. And after all it is Rueda and Coronado themselves who transcribe the oppositional readings posted by hostile viewers on the Internet as soon as the mini-series was broadcast.

Finally, *23-F* also engaged women’s cultural competence and creativity. Not only did it rewrite grand political history within a small-scale domestic sphere and appeal to genres gendered as feminine, it also (unusually) was the product of both a sole director (Silvia Quer) and single screenwriter (Helena Medina) who were both women. While (as in the case of Catalanism) this factor clearly did not determine the nature of the drama, it remains the case

that *23-F* maps a changing history of gender (the feminization of male authority figures) on to the evolving national history of the Transition to democracy, with *machista* authoritarianism shown by the end of the mini-series to be safely confined to a now distant past.

To conclude, at its best (as in the case of *23-F*), the historical mini-series is uniquely placed to perform its role as a self-reflexive intervention that shatters, intermittently at least, the present-ist momentum of the television medium. The heightened presence of the past in television fiction in Spain, unmatched in other European countries, would thus confirm that television is the most voluble and visible refutation of the “pact of silence” or repressive hypothesis often made by scholars and activists alike as a case against the legitimacy of Spain’s democracy. Moreover the formal and industrial innovations we have seen in the mini-series, the genre that best embodies historical memory in the 2000s, suggest that this concentration on a dramatic past refuses nonetheless to let that past determine the democratic future.

If television is thus a time machine, as well as a window on the world, then it may well purvey group myths that tend to promote a social cohesion that is somewhat at odds with the historical record. However it also reinforces a perception of shared experience and of collective memory that is, as we have seen, by no means incompatible with positive ethical codes or progressive political change.¹

Notes

1. This essay is written within the context of a collective research project devised by Norberto Mínguez of Madrid’s Complutense University entitled “New Trends of the Fiction/Non-Fiction Paradigm in Spanish Audiovisual Discourse, 2000–2010” (reference number CSO2009–07089). This project is financed by the Spanish government’s VI Plan Nacional de Investigación Científica, Desarrollo e Innovación Tecnológica 2008–2011.

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