

◆ Introduction

On Photography, History, and Memory in Spain

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Two black-and-white photographs grace the cover of Eduardo Haro Tecglen's *El niño republicano*, one among several recent memoirs about the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship. In the larger of the two images, the middle-aged author gazes into the distance of a visibly contemporary urban cityscape. Inset in the top left-hand corner is a smaller portrait of a smiling, adolescent Eduardo walking arm in arm with his mother on a pre-war street (visual clues include the boy's short pants and knee-high socks and the large black cars in the background). The two photographs serve as visual bookends to a life—literally a lifetime encompassing the Republic, the war, the Franco regime, and the return to democracy. Rhetorically, the images serve as proof and argument attesting to the survival of this Republican boy and his Republican ideals. What makes the cover particularly poignant is the gaze of the boy and his mother who seemingly look straight at readers. While the object of the book, purportedly, is to evoke the past, this family snapshot appears to accomplish this instantaneously and miraculously by blurring the passage and barrier of time.

Throughout its history, photography has been used to evoke the past. In the extensive cultural production focusing on memory in contemporary Spain, photographs figure frequently—either as protagonist or tool—in exhibitions and books such as histories, biographies, testimonials, and commemorations of anniversaries and events such as the civil war and the democratic transition.¹ The point of departure for this volume of *Hispanic Issues On Line* is a desire to understand how photography figures in such processes of recollection, a topic that has received relatively little attention within Hispanic studies focusing on Spain.

The contributing essays address cultural processes intersecting with photography since the inception of the medium until today. Their authors examine the association of photography with progress and modernity, the photograph as mnemonic device, how to look at photographs, and how to theorize the ethics of retrospective viewing of war images. Other lines of inquiry address how image-makers view themselves and their work in relation to historical art movements and to events of their time, how an

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analysis of photographs might enable us to understand cultural and social processes of remembrance and forgetting, and the potential of photographs to serve as proof and contestation of historical narratives.

Rebecca Haidt, in the volume's opening essay, reminds us that debates about the merits and shortcomings of photography vis-à-vis memory emerged with its invention, in 1839. Haidt situates readers in the urban, increasingly visual culture of mid-nineteenth-century Madrid where the newest type of print media—the illustrated periodical—drew on new print technologies to give readers eyewitness experiences of current events along with knowledge about the past. Through a reading of the *costumbrista* writings of Antonio Flores, Mariano José de Larra, and Ramón Mesonero Romanos, Haidt detects ambivalence among period writers and intellectuals towards the new medium of photography and towards modernity—in particular the accelerated sense of time. According to Haidt, photography presented mid-century writers with two dilemmas: how speed and mechanization would affect truth and memory, and the impact of duplication on the question of authenticity.

As Haidt and the other contributors demonstrate, viewing photographs is a civic enterprise of interpreting images in cultural and political context, as well as a personal practice drawing on and connecting to an individual history and memory in response to photographs. Indeed, this volume asserts that photographs play a constitutive role in personal as well as collective memories and that it is worthwhile to attend to the particular relationships between images and our sense of the past. The construction of collective memories is understood here as a social practice relying on a shared consciousness where memories are relevant to the present.² In a study of interest to this volume, media scholar Barbie Zelizer examines photography as a tool for the construction of collective memories of the Holocaust. Zelizer argues that memory is an instrument for reconfiguration rather than retrieval that “colonizes the past by obliging it to conform to present configurations,” (99) and, furthermore, calls attention to the needs of the present moment to recall or forget.³

Roland Barthes, whose seminal work on photography informs this volume, explains the force of photography as a function of its singular “truth claim,” or the persuasive power of the realist mode, and the camera's uncanny ability to capture an instant and freeze time. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes examines his own desire to know the past through photographs only to find that the image blocks memory and becomes an object of fascination (91). Ultimately, photographs remind him of his own mortality and the death of the subject who is so implausibly alive in the image. This conception of photography as linked to death is examined in Susan Sontag's two influential works, *On Photography*, and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which also inform essays in this volume.

Scholars addressing processes of memory in Spain as they intersect with photography—in particular images of the Spanish Civil War—frequently refer to the medium’s connection to death. For instance, Joan Ramón Resina refers to his encounter with Robert Capa’s war photographs as “an epiphany of life on the verge of disappearance” (“Last Look” 332). While death—as subject or as part of retrospective viewing—reverberates through this volume, several contributing authors suggest that photography is a tool rather than an obstacle in memory work. In his contributing essay, Txetxu Aguado demonstrates how the novelist W. G. Sebald turns to photography as a narrative device, because an image contains details lost in a text. Aguado reads photographs as visual memories with the capacity to connect us to the “lives that once were,” specifically in Gernika before and after the 1937 bombing. He situates his project in the context of an excess of memory in the post-transition era and turns to photography to challenge uncontested historiographies. Insisting that photographs must be interpreted in historical and political contexts, Aguado reads photographs of Gernika as “ruins of memory.” Acknowledging the barrier between viewer and the depicted victims of a disaster, he argues that it is ethically impossible for a viewer to remain distant. Instead, it is necessary to return to Gernika for the historical and political purpose of reconstructing a human link between now and then (see also in this volume Tobin Stanley, and Keller and Snyder).

The ethics of witnessing, as well as the gap between viewing and agency, are crucial problems that have been examined by critics of war photography such as Sontag who questions the ethics of looking at images of disasters. Such pictures, Sontag warns (in *On Photography*), silence a critical discourse since a response is primarily emotional. Yet, witnessing may also be part of a process of emancipation and identification. Indeed, in her recent work on visual representations of suffering (*Regarding*), Sontag allows that photographs may evoke compassion and argues that looking might be more ethical than turning away. However, the important question is what follows witnessing and how much readers can ask of photography. As a result, witnessing needs to be part of a concerted, political practice (see, in this volume, Aguado, Tobin Stanley, Hardt, and Keller and Snyder).

Nevertheless, the notions of photographic authenticity and truth have been widely questioned as a result of tensions between objectivity and subjectivity and because of the image’s vulnerability to context and explanation, including the possibility of manipulation. At times, controversy arises due to a perceived “implausibility” (Griffin 141) of the event captured by the camera. This is the case with Capa’s famous image of a dying loyalist *miliciano* in the Spanish Civil War, the topic of Hanno Hardt’s contribution to this volume. In his essay, Hardt considers memory and history in relation to photography in an international context, as he examines the potential of photographs to create agency and compassion. Specifically, he offers a new and corrective reading of Capa’s most famous image from the conflict, made

on the Córdoba front in 1936, as well as the photographer's work from Spain overall. Furthermore, in an analysis of recently rediscovered photographs made by Capa's partner, Gerda Taro, who also photographed the war in Spain, Hardt argues that she may have had a significant influence on Capa through a dramatic, constructivist photographic style, her proximity to her subject, and a strong political commitment.

Retrospective viewing of photographs raises a particular set of ethical questions. In an analysis of visual memories of war atrocities, Zelizer critiques the saturation in popular culture of images from liberated concentration camps that, when released from their original context and through the passage of time, are familiar to audiences yet do not provide comprehension of the Holocaust. However, in contrast to the extensive international circulation of Holocaust imagery that began after World War II, in Franco's Spain there was rather an absence of images and references to the Spanish Civil War. As a result, the contemporary circulation of visual memories of the conflict takes place after a forty-year delay, a circumstance posing its own challenges. One specific challenge is the loss of primary sources, which presents a challenge for historical research. Photography historian Publio López Mondéjar laments the destruction and dispersion of many photographic archives during and after the Spanish Civil War, which, in turn, makes it difficult for contemporary scholars to assess and verify the contributions of image-makers whose works have survived (95–98). The problem stems, in part, from a loss of archives or a lack of supporting documentation, and in part from the incomplete nature of memory of surviving witnesses, due in particular to the length of time that has transpired.

Nevertheless, several photographic archives have been recovered in Spain in recent years, informing histories of photography and contributing to an ongoing recovery of an historical memory. Arguably the most well known is the archive of the late Agustí Centelles, a Valencia-born photojournalist living and working in Catalonia.⁴ The collection, consisting of ten thousand negatives and numerous prints, is one of the largest personal photographic archives from the Spanish Civil War. Recovered from exile by the photographer in 1976, Centelles' images may have been the first photographic record of a Republican civil-war experience to reach a Spanish audience since the war.⁵ Addressing the significance of this encounter, photography historian Laura Terré argues that Centelles' war images confront contemporary readers, who have not experienced the war, with the faces of those who did. Drawing on the notion of "silenced memory," Terré outlines a struggle in readers' minds between a hegemonic collective memory and a forgotten, haunting memory expressed by Centelles' photographs, and prescribes a first-person plural point of view in order to empathize with the photographic subjects. Furthermore, Terré considers the Centelles archive autobiographical on two levels: that of the photographer

who lived through and photographed the war, and that of a contemporary reader haunted by the encounter.

Similar notions of “haunting” and “ghosts” are recurring in current scholarship on memory, including Jo Labanyi’s examination of how the past haunts the present in transition-era fiction and film. According to Labanyi, there are two ways to deal with ghosts: shutting them out or “offering them cohabitation and mourning them” (65). Citing Derrida in an argument that also echoes Sontag, Labanyi prescribes the latter because of the moral imperative, in contemporary Spain, to bear witness to the traces of “those who have not been allowed to leave a trace” (66). Noting that ghosts frequently appear in photographs, Labanyi suggests that the non-narrative character of a photograph corresponds particularly well to a fragmented past.

A recent controversy concerning the Centelles collection illustrates the politics of the archive according to Allan Sekula, who argues that the meaning of single photographs is subordinated to the ideology of the archive.⁶ Specifically, according to Sekula, an examination of images needs to address archival ownership and control, processes of selection, labeling and categorization, and the conditions in which images circulate. The controversy was sparked by the decision of Centelles’ heirs to sell the archive to the Ministry of Culture of Spain for depositary in the Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica in Salamanca, rejecting an offer from the Generalitat de Catalunya (Junquera; “Los Centelles se niegan”). Some Catalan politicians interviewed by the news media argued that the archive belongs in Catalonia, and that in the negotiation process the Ministry had engaged in overreach and oppressive tactics against Catalonia and the victims of Franco (Graell). The Minister of Culture, on the other hand, argued that the purchase would make the archive accessible to all citizens (Vallín). The fact that the archive was private property was sometimes overlooked in the debate dealing with conflicting definitions of national identities, the legitimacy of institutions such as the Civil War Archive associated by some with the Franco regime (Bru de Sala), as well as the ownership of artifacts considered part of a cultural heritage.

Indeed, critical perspectives on photography emphasize the medium’s alignment with repressive power throughout history. For instance, John Tagg considers mug shots of prison inmates as part of a visual regime regulating the body and erasing individual histories. In this volume, Maureen Tobin Stanley addresses a particularly blatantly ideological and repressive archive that justified and reproduced oppression: a series of photographs from the Mauthausen concentration camp that eventually became evidence against SS officers who originally created the archive. Specifically, Tobin Stanley focuses on the Catalan photojournalist and Republican Francesc Boix, a prisoner of the camp who, in his capacity as darkroom technician, and in collaboration with fellow prisoners, salvaged photographs made by SS officers. After World War II, the archive served as evidence at the

Nuremberg war crimes tribunal. This essay outlines the ethics of witnessing and agency on two levels: the contemporaneous subversive acts by Boix as bystander and subject, and the ethics of retrospective viewing. Tobin Stanley reads the salvaged archive and photographs authored by Boix after liberation as a visual memoir, in a manner akin to Terré's reading of Centelles' work.

The politics of memory is in equal measures about *desmemoria*. The deliberate *pacto de olvido* in the political transition to democracy in Spain, in addition to a desire to forget the past, delayed or displaced memories of the war and the dictatorship. Writing in *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy*, Resina argues that, despite a proliferation of recuperated memories in contemporary cultural production, a new master narrative about the success of the contemporary democratic system ignores a necessary critical examination of residues of the dictatorship ("Introduction" 11–14). Photography has been an instrument for such a master narrative, such as the exhibition and book *25 Años después: Memoria gráfica de una transición* (Fundación Telefónica) celebrating a quarter century of post-Franco photojournalism. Although the project includes several depictions of social and political conflict, the selection and sequencing of images, as well as the accompanying catalog texts—by authors representing the political spectrum—nevertheless suggest that there is a widely shared consensus about the course of the transition and the inevitability of the direction of post-Franco society.

An examination of marginal practices can inform our understanding of processes where images are deployed to justify rather than to question power. Teresa Vilarós argues that marginal creative work—including certain photographs—have the capacity to expose fissures in the official history, thus revealing a continued dependence on Franco (213–20). In this volume, Susan Larson addresses such works by transition-era artists who turned to the photomontage as an expression of outsider status. In her examination of the avant-garde photography magazine *Nueva Lente* (1971–1983), Larson demonstrates how a group of young artists consciously distanced themselves from established norms in photography and from the previous generation of image-makers. She interprets their self-proclaimed indebtedness to a more distant generation, the historical avant-garde—in particular to surrealism—as an attempt to reformulate goals for photography beyond capturing reality, and as a sign of the magazine's and its contributing artists' connectedness to international movements in philosophy and art. In order to explain the appeal of the historical avant-garde for artists in the 1970s, a time of political and cultural change in Spain, Larson draws on Kracauer's work on photography, history, and memory, including the notion of historian and photographer as "imaginative readers" in their respective endeavors.

While Larson argues, "history and photography should be valued for their resistance to closure," Patricia Keller and Jonathan Snyder, in this volume's concluding essay, consider certain photographs marginal spaces in

history that are part of a social consciousness, yet are publicly “unseen.” Specifically, their essay addresses Alberto García-Alix’s photographs of a culture of experimentation with identities in post-Franco Spain during the era of AIDS. The authors’ point of departure is the tension between being drawn to a photograph and being repelled by it and tempted to look away. They argue that the poignancy of García-Alix’s photographs stems from the way he turns to the obscene by confronting viewers with an autobiographical and shockingly explicit focus on his drug use and sexual practices. Keller and Snyder read the work as a metaphor for the official response in Spain to AIDS and to marginal communities. A retrospective contemplation of the photographs, they argue, becomes a performative act enabling viewers to rediscover “liminal spaces of history that are collectively recognized yet rendered unfit for viewing.”

This volume aims to stimulate debate, contribute to scholarship in the growing field of visual studies, and assert the need for more research on photography within Hispanic studies. Rather than providing an exhaustive treatment, the goal is to suggest strategies for considering photography in the contexts of history and memory, and to demonstrate that an examination of photographs can inform our understanding of other aspects of cultural production and practices. Photography is a rich resource for future research on Spain in a number of areas, including: the impact of photography on literary style and narrative as well as visual aspects of the memoir; the recovered photographic archive, an important issue given the continuing emergence of previously unpublished images of the civil war; and institutional production of visual memories, including museum exhibitions and publications.

Notes

1. Examples of recent publications showing the variety of uses of photographs include: *De la Transición democrática al siglo XXI. Treinta años de la fotografía de la Agencia EFE*, a photography exhibition from 2008 showcasing the work of EFE, the major photography agency in Spain; *Agustí Centelles: Las vidas de un fotógrafo*, a retrospective exhibition and book presenting the work of Agustí Centelles; *El nieto del lector de periódicos*, a richly illustrated biography of the community organizer Manuel Martínez and his life in post-war and post-Franco Barcelona (by Joaquina Utrera Redondo); *La División Azul: Las fotografías de una historia*, a visual history of the División Azul by Luis Togores and Gustavo Morales; and Carlos Ruíz Zafón’s novel *La sombra del viento*, whose cover photograph (by Francesc Català Roca) of a man and a young boy on a fog-enveloped, rainy street, evokes the melancholy post-war spirit.
2. See Halbwachs. Also see Zelizer (99), who applies the work of Halbwachs and other memory scholars to an examination of photography in the construction of collective memory.
3. Here, Zelizer cites memory scholar Patrick Hutton (314.)

4. In addition to Agustí Centelles, other photographers whose civil-war images have been published and exhibited in Spain in the last three decades include: Alfonso Sánchez Portela (one of the Alfonso-family photographers in Madrid; his work can be seen in *Memoria de Madrid: Fotografías de Alfonso*); Los Hermanos Mayo (the name refers to an agency formed in Madrid by the Souza and Del Castillo brothers who went into exile in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War. An exhibition of their civil-war photographs toured in Spain in 2008); and Luis Ramón Marín (see *Marín: Fotografías 1908–1940*). For more information about Spanish photography during the civil war, see López Mondéjar.
5. This is according to Jordi Socías, one of the first editors to publish (in the periodical *La Calle*) Centelles' recovered war photographs in the post-Franco period. I interviewed Socías on July 3, 2002 in Madrid.
6. I thank Luis Martín-Estudillo for bringing recent events in this controversy to my attention.

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