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We the people shall inherit the past: The re-imagining of the self within post-Francoist collective memory in the Spanish television series *Cuéntame cómo pasó*

ABSTRACT

Departing from a synthesis of Cuéntame como pasó as a cultural memory text, this article intends to draw an open, indefinite assessment of the significance of the series after thirteen years of broadcasting. This shall result in the proposition of some key interpretative lines of enquiry that are worthy of further observation, research and debate, insofar as they reflect the complexity and dynamism of collective memory processes in post-Francoist Spain.

KEYWORDS

Cuéntame
cultural memory
audiovisual memory
historical fiction
Francoism
transición

The Spanish television series *Cuéntame cómo pasó*/Tell me how it happened (Miguel Ángel Bernardeau 2001–present) is one of the flagship productions of the Spanish Public Broadcast Corporation Televisión Española (TVE)

and is a mass media phenomenon of almost unprecedented popularity and cultural impact (Brinkmann 2010: 355; Corbalán 2009: 241). On the one hand, *Cuéntame's* enduring success and influence over its current lifespan of thirteen years of broadcasting are the result of a qualitative jump within the aesthetics of European television fiction, giving birth to what could be considered Europe's first historical soap opera or family opera (Guerra Gómez and Rueda Laffond 2009: 403), historical fiction on TV having previously been the domain of the miniseries format, at least in Spain (García de Castro 2002: 90–92). Indeed, *Cuéntame's* formula could be summed up as any major prime-time soap opera playing in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia or Mao's China during the Cultural Revolution, saving the differences between those regimes and late Francoism. On the other hand, *Cuéntame's* entry onto the stage of post-Francoist cultural memory took place at a critical moment in history. Although the series was a project that had been kept in development for nearly a decade by TVE (Sevillano Canicio 2010: 346), production and broadcasting started shortly after the mass graves of the Francoist repression became a major topic within Spanish public opinion in the year 2000 (Bernecker and Brinkmann: 2011: 292 ff.), igniting a memory boom centred on the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and Franco's subsequent dictatorship.

Well timed for the outbreak of a new zeitgeist endorsing collective remembrance, *Cuéntame* should not be seen as yet another coetaneous by-product of the Spanish memory boom of the last decade, in which historiographical studies, popular history books, novels, movies and television serials dealing with the Spanish Civil War and Franco's regime have boosted the Spanish cultural industries (López 2007: 137). Quite to the contrary, *Cuéntame* stands out as one of the cultural productions that first and best rode the new remembrance wave of Francoism (Brinkmann 2010: 366–67), while at the same time spreading and fuelling the issue of post-dictatorial memory in mass popular culture. Thus, *Cuéntame* is a perfect example within media history that suggests quite a symbiotic relation – a most fruitful liaison – between television aesthetics and markets or between cultural industries in general on the one side and the vast, multifaceted, dynamic field of cultural memory agencies, practices and discourses on the other.

At the same time, the position and significance of the series within the arena of Spanish cultural memory reflects more than the specific construct of the series itself as a collective mnemotechnical device. *Cuéntame's* narratives help elucidate the contending historical interpretations and boundaries within Spanish society today, while trying to deal with its autocratic roots and with the constraints, oblivions, traumata and taboos that are being employed, reshaped or contested within collective memory in order to stabilize the construction of the political present. Still further, *Cuéntame* may not only be all about consolidating a self-tailored past as a sediment for the present but be also about enhancing the perception that its audience – Spanish viewers of different generations (Sevillano Canicio 2010: 352–53) – has been through that process already, thoroughly and happily enough.

Departing from a synthesis of *Cuéntame's* main features as a cultural memory text, this article intends to draw an open, indefinite assessment of the significance of the series after roughly thirteen years of broadcasting. For this purpose, in what follows, I will go beyond the customary analytical praxis of media history and televisual aesthetics to examine the series under the wider lens of collective memory theory in regard to the specifically Spanish context of overcoming the Francoist past. This, in turn, shall result in the proposition

of some key interpretative lines of enquiry that are worthy of further observation, research and debate, insofar as they reflect the richness and scope of the series itself and the wideness, complexity and dynamism of collective memory processes in post-Francoist Spain.

WE'VE COME A LONG WAY (HAVEN'T WE?)

At the time of writing, *Cuéntame* comprises 14 seasons and about 250 episodes. The series occupies a prime-time slot on Thursdays; since it first aired on 13 September 2001, its time and station have remained more or less unchanged. It enjoys no less than a third or a fourth of the Spanish television audience share, and it reaches peaks of half the share with in excess of six million viewers (Guerra Gómez and Rueda Laffond 2009: 401–02).¹ In the diegesis, the first episode commenced on 6 April 1968, climaxing in the artist Massiel's victory for Spain in the Eurovision Song Contest in London that evening, and the series has progressed by about one year per season to the spring of 1980, its whole temporal story arc having covered the convulsions of late Francoism, Franco's death and most of the Transition to Democracy (Spanish: *transición*). At the centre of the plot spanning all that time are the everyday lives of the Alcántara family members, as well as their friends and neighbours, interwoven in different ways with pivotal historical events. In the fourteenth season, which began in the autumn of 2012, *Cuéntame* deals with the crisis in the Suárez government in late 1980 and the crucial attempted coup d'état of February 1981. This prompts the question of whether the series – with its focus on cultural memory and its retro design (López 2007: 140) – will be able to extend its life beyond late 1982 and, therefore, beyond the *transición* and into Spanish democracy in its current political form, becoming in the process a seemingly paradoxical memory text of contemporaneity.

Starting with an analysis of *Cuéntame's* production design, the influence of two American models is conspicuous: From the series *The Wonder Years* (Carol Black and Neal Marlens, 1988–1993), the Spanish series took its adult voice-over narrator looking back at his childhood, his mood ranging from nostalgic to enlightened to worldly wise, as well as its use of popular music hits from the narrated time for the sake of retro flavours, nostalgia and soundtrack merchandising.² From the Oscar-winning movie *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), *Cuéntame* allegedly mirrored director Zemeckis's usage of computer-generated imagery (CGI) to insert the main fictional characters into documentary or newsreel footage of the period depicted. This technique allows the viewers to see, for instance, Toni, the eldest son of the Alcántara family, as a bystander at the assassination of Prime Minister Carrero Blanco (Episode 114), as well as several family members and their friends viewing Franco's corpse at the funeral chapel at Madrid Almudena Cathedral (Episode 154). Compared with both American productions, though, the specificity of the Spanish series lies in something more than its location of culture; more than the music or the archive material used, the most characteristically Spanish feature of *Cuéntame* is the fact that the whole series develops under the shadow of a repressive, dictatorial regime and its legacy during the convulsive and uncertain interregnum of the Transition to Democracy after Franco's death.

The significance of the post-autocratic flashback into dictatorship entailed by *Cuéntame* for the collective memory of Francoism is enhanced by some key features of its format. Predominantly, *Cuéntame* is a soap opera specimen

1. Previous studies deal more specifically with the groundbreaking, still wider success of the series in its earlier seasons (Lacalle 2002: 43–49; Smith 2004: 373).
2. All these televisual features of *Cuéntame* have been widely acknowledged in recent studies (Corbalán 2009: 344; Guerra Gómez and Rueda Laffond: 2009; López 2007: 142; Sevillano Canicio 2010: 350). Further notable characteristics of *Cuéntame* are the recurrent incursions into the 'docufictional' (Sevillano Canicio 2010) and its claim of historicity (López 2007: 141), not the least of which is the very title of the series itself (Estrada 2004: 549).

combining the aforementioned CGI innovations with a comedy component and a family or social group character structure, elements that have not been untypical for Spanish televisual fiction since the early 1990s (García de Castro 2002: 189 f.), resulting in a so-called *dramedia familiar* or family comedy-drama (García de Castro 2002: 129). It has been noted that the collective protagonist in televisual fiction entails a strong self-identification potential for the social collective (Corbalán 2009: 347; García de Castro 2002: 19–20), therefore strengthening – when dealing with the past – a focal factor of community representation and consensual cohesion throughout time.

It is precisely through its central articulation of the collective that *Cuéntame* manages to validate its fictional narrative as both representative of and identifiable for the nation-state community, therefore succeeding in making that very narrative complex suitable for insertion into the realm of collective cultural memory. Indeed, dealing with public remembrance of the civil war during the Spanish Transition to Democracy, Paloma Aguilar reminds us that to understand the complex phenomenon of collective memory, one must depart from a Durkheimian, sociologist-anthropologist perspective with its focus on the collective, adding that terms such as ‘social memory’, ‘public memory’, ‘dominant memory’ and ‘collective memory’ are interchangeable (Aguilar 2002: 6–7). Any member of society ‘who has not yet experienced the event personally is able to share this collective memory because the version he has received may, in some way, have become predominantly *accepted within the community as a whole*’ (Aguilar 2002: 6–7, my italics), which is possible because ‘the collective memory of a society becomes a kind of common patrimony, which the individual experiences since the moment he is born’ (Aguilar 2002: 6–7). And for his part, when clarifying collectivity as both the agent and recipient of cultural memory practices, Jan Assmann points out the essential, intimate and reflexive relationship between shared memories, collective identity, social imaginaries and the identification of the community with its constructed images of the self (Assmann 2007: 132–34). In the Spanish context, as has been suggested, top-down cultural agencies such as TVE have shown a precise understanding of collective identity configuration in times of memory readjustment, making of *Cuéntame* ‘one of the biggest successes in the new millennium, both in terms of critics and audiences, in a time when a collective identity actively had to be constructed [...] in order to *consensually imagine the group*’ (Cueto Asín 2009: 137, my italics and my translation).

However, *Cuéntame*’s articulation of the collective does not stop at its capability for community representation and identification, because even more than the featured historical events, the community itself is the principal *sujet* or story of the series. The tale is, therefore, not one of a single turning point, but one of gradual social transformation (Brinkmann 2010: 358–59; Cueto Asín 2009: 139; López 2007: 145–46) from a range of middle-class perspectives, and the collective is its protagonist, its hero, its agency, its subject: the new, democratic middle-class of post-Francoist Spain. Through the seasons, we thus see the Alcántaras and their friends prosper in all material aspects of life (Guerra Gómez and Rueda Laffond 2009: 403). In particular, the charismatic patriarch, Antonio, advances from a working-class ministry concierge who dreams of buying a Seat 850 in the very early seasons to a well-connected business owner and local UCD party cadre who, in Season 13, is offered the position of governor of the Albacete province. At the same time, we also witness an opening and evolution of the characters’ mentalities and growing freedom in their daily lives – cultural influence from abroad, miniskirts, contraceptives,

free love, rock music, leftist literature and so on – leading on certain occasions to what we could call pop dictatorship or, more specifically, ‘pop Francoism’ (Rueda Laffond 2011: 175).

Simultaneously, however, *Cuéntame* repeatedly makes an effort to show the awful truth that Franco’s regime is still in place, in relatively good health and in perfect control of the situation throughout the whole story. Repression, censorship, propaganda, exile, the underground, class struggle, political mobilization, terrorism and corruption all play a pivotal part in the lives of the Alcántara family members, as well as in the lives of their friends and neighbours. They struggle to live their lives as freely as possible, but the regime’s long arm always reaches them in one way or another, as there is no way to avoid being caught up in the turmoil of political developments and even sometimes becoming involved. The life of the collective is thus constantly assaulted by a twofold sense of fear, not just repression. That other fear is one that the series very rightly connects through several allusions with the memories of the regime’s very roots and with the fright of its repetition: the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39 (Cueto Asín 2009: 145–52, 154).

In this way, the dichotomous structure of the series emerges between the private and the political, between society and regime, but also between advancement in the social, cultural and economic realms on the one hand and the resilience of the autocratic political element on the other. It is through this dichotomy that a much-remarked sense of nostalgia, as well as a perception of a ‘happy ending’ to Francoism, become feasible (Brinkmann 2010: 359), leading to concerns about a too-soft depiction of Francoism (Corbalán 2009: 345, 349–50; Cueto Asín 2009: 139; Estrada 2004: 552). Also, it has been claimed that the series promotes a so-called ‘reflexive nostalgia’, meaning ‘a yearning for the past, which does not necessarily have to be incompatible with a critical attitude towards the very same past’ (Corbalán 2009: 341), including an increased appreciation of individual and collective memories of Francoism among viewers (Corbalán 2009: 347–48). However, *Cuéntame*’s ‘nostalgia’ can easily be circumscribed to a matter of production design with TV marketing and merchandising effects; as such, it is far from being a key interpretation of the past or anything close to a master narrative that has the potential to rewrite or update the group’s collective identity. In addition, it does not follow from *Cuéntame*’s narrative focus that the series aims to reveal and reflect on the mechanisms of cultural memory processes (Erl 2005: 184–85) – instead of weaving them into its realist and ‘docufictional’ montage for the advancement of its narratives.

Furthermore, when trying to assess the significance of *Cuéntame*, it is necessary to remind ourselves that overcoming the past in post-dictatorial contexts can be summed up as coming to terms with its interplay between founding events and traumata, myths and taboos, oblivion and remembrance (Aguilar 2002: 1–24) – all for the sake of constantly adapting collective memories to suit the current needs of the political community seeking a stable identity. To start with, *Cuéntame* re-enacts the social breaking of a taboo around the civil war (Cueto Asín 2009) and manages to articulate a narrative of closure in relation to Spain’s long period of dictatorship, a closure that, to be effective within the realm of collective memory, admittedly requires more than mere narratives (that is, laws of reparation, acts of rehabilitation and so on). However, as far as the interplay of collective memories and identities goes, *Cuéntame*’s significance rather lies in the historical master narrative it entails and in the way this narrative relates to pre-existing or contending historical

interpretations within the social memory of a post-dictatorial Spain that has enthusiastically embarked upon the adventure of reprocessing its recent past. To answer these questions, it is first necessary to take a deeper look into the fabric of the series as a memory text.

A CATHEDRAL TO MEMORY

One of most effective features of *Cuéntame* is the interweaving of major political events within the lives of its fictional characters. Besides re-enactments and the aforementioned CGI insertions, the intertwining of the private and the political – of the micro-history and national history – is accomplished through persistent sequences of television self-referentiality at key moments in the series (Corbalán 2009: 343): The Alcántaras and others gather before their old-fashioned television sets at crucial points in which ‘history’ seems to crystallize through broadcasting. In such cases, including the Burgos process, Portugal’s Carnation Revolution, Carrero Blanco’s death and Franco’s last days of agony in the hospital, the series has abundant recourse to the TVE archives, featuring some of the most prominent and already well-known images about the events depicted.

This narrative framework for documentary material heavily relies on letting the fiction’s characters re-enact the roles of viewers, with the significant difference that they are not watching previously broadcast images within the news or documentaries, but material allegedly being broadcast as the events depicted were happening or had just happened. Many a time throughout *Cuéntame*, the Alcántara family or their neighbours sit around a TV watching their own time become history while the audience in turn watches themes from 30 years ago. The emphatic ‘refashioning’ or ‘remediation’ (Erl and Rigney 2009: 3–4) of images widely associated with key events and the staging of the very act of ‘acknowledging history’ thus represent one of *Cuéntame*’s most sophisticated mnemotechnical devices – in this case a propaedeutic one that seems to tell us not how audiovisual media rework the past, but how they elevate images to the category of ‘history’.

Sometimes both recourses – CGI-enhanced archive material and television self-referentiality – interlace, and some characters see others inserted in old footage on TV. A third and very sparsely used means of connecting the characters to historical events materializes through the plot’s minor intrusions in history, like when some family members happen to be driving down Claudio Coello Street in Madrid when the bomb that kills Carrero Blanco goes off some hundred meters ahead of the family car (Episode 114); the images of Carrero’s car flying off the street was taken from Gillo Pontecorvo’s well-known film *Operación Ogro* (1979). Such sequences do not even require re-enacting the events or CGI, as dialogue and editing do the trick.

This effective intermingling of family opera and historical events poses two main questions. First, how are historical events and footage chosen and edited, and why? Second, in what way does the selection of historical events and their editing within fiction relate to prevalent conceptions of late Francoism and to discourses within collective memory? As to the first question, major historical events intertwined within *Cuéntame*’s family drama are strongly based on either original or CGI-manipulated material. Those historical events have all already enjoyed some considerable dissemination, but more importantly, they are also part of a cultural memory canon (Assmann 2007: 125–27) – in this case, a canon codified and stored in the form of repeated and therefore

well-known iconic images. By this, I mean that most major historical events in *Cuéntame* are part of a strictly audiovisual, televisual canon of images (which will later be referred to as 'archive'), but at the same time, they are part of a narrative canon dealing with interpretations of the past and collective identity (Assmann 2007: 125–27), reflecting also what has been called 'dominant memory' originated through extensive mass media propagation (Aguilar 2002: 10). To put it another way, cultural memory canons involve much more than a mere list of normative texts; they rather include a myriad of signifiers at multiple textual levels (from the single frame to the whole series, in our case) and a more limited set of the signified interpretations or mythoi, every individual element of which making the text into something that is susceptible of becoming or being considered canonical.

Indeed, *Cuéntame* includes abundant footage – mainly from the TVE archives and from the Francoist NODO newsreels – that has been previously featured in news retrospectives and in successful prime-time documentaries like *Los años vividos* (Alberto de Masy and Julio Peña, 1992) and *La transición* (Elías Andrés, 1995) (Sevillano Canicio 2010: 345–50), and that can be commonly recognized and easily associated with the important events depicted. Some examples are the recordings of Carrero Blanco's funeral procession, Franco's funeral chapel, the first general elections (on 15 March 1977) since the civil war and the referendum on the new constitution of 6 December 1978. The extensive use of well-known images in *Cuéntame* supports not only the importance of repetition in cultural memory (Assmann 2007: 88–90) but also the notion, based on productions dealing with the Holocaust in European film, that audiovisual cultural memory tends to establish an 'archive' of stereotypical, characteristic images that builds upon past media reception and is likely to be linked to historical pictures, narratives and discourses (Ebbrecht 2010: 35). It is through this 'archive', if by any means, that audiovisual cultural memory promotes the so-called 'musealization' of the past already noticed in *Cuéntame* (Rueda Laffond 2011: 176–77). The resort to such a concept as 'musealization' makes sense when we consider the strong representative, symbolical and pedagogical value of much of the historical footage that has been referred to. However, the museum metaphor misses the essential fact that museums display objects from the past with minor editing (periodization, display order, explanations), whereas audiovisual productions are *not* images of the past, but thoroughly edited audiovisual texts, regardless of their 'fictional' or 'documentary' label and whether or not they contain footage – manipulated or not – that was recorded live in the past. Thus, the level of editing of the past in audiovisual texts is more extensive by far, enhancing their potential as vehicles for the construction of the past through complete, compact and easily comprehensible narratives.

Still more important, though, is to acknowledge the connective interrelation of repeated canonical images on the one side and the narrative canon of historical pictures, interpretations, discourses and foundation myths on which collective identities are shaped and grounded on the other, that is, the canonical nature of both the signifiers and the signified, and the link between them. Interestingly enough, *Cuéntame* shares more than footage with the aforementioned documentary series *La transición*. The latter can be considered not only a major image archive of the years between 1973 and 1977 but also *the* refined and most popularized mass media narrative about the Spanish Transition to Democracy, reflecting the dominant and official interpretation of this process. This canonical interpretation entails an idealization of the political

3. This is not equating canonical memory narratives to canonical religious dogma, but a media metaphor of canonical memories in which the altarpiece functions as an example of a complex pictorial medium of certain narrative traditions. Media and media metaphors are central to the analysis of cultural memory processes (Assmann 2003: 149–51; Erll 2005: 109–11, 137–57).

consensus that made Transition itself possible, to an extent that consensus justifies oblivion and is equated to the will of the Spanish people, or at least of Spain's whole social political body (Aguilar 2006: 302; Juliá 2006: 24, 63). In fact, the myth of political consensus behind the transition enjoyed a notable institutionalization and overemphasized rhetoric during the *transición* itself (Aguilar 2002: 210–11). Within historiography, the official consensus narrative on Spain's transition is most prominently represented by Javier Tusell's seminal work *La transición española*, which defined that process as 'absolutely exemplary and unrepeatable' (Tusell 1991: 191) and as a suitable model for Eastern Europe. Saving the medium and format differences, *Cuéntame's* story departs very little from that narrative. In fact, some authors have already noted the hegemony of the consensus narrative about the Transition to Democracy in the series (Rueda Laffond 2011: 178).

However, this is not the same as saying that *Cuéntame* is mere reproduction. Quite to the contrary, the series can be seen, at least in part, as the soap opera adaptation of previous documentary experiences, which, in turn, are the adaptation of a canonical historiographical narrative, or else as an adaptation of both. *Cuéntame* could be seen as a history textbook for TV audiences, packaged as a family comedy-drama with retro design, a certain nostalgic flavour and some doses of melodrama. Regardless of its very commercial, entertaining and consumable packaging, its meaning for collective memory and identities resides in the effective use of the technical resources of all types at the disposal of its medium to rework, strengthen and update historical narratives that are already part of a cultural memory canon.

Rather than the museum (or the history text book), perhaps the best metaphor to describe the mnemotechnics of *Cuéntame* might be found in religious art of the sculptural and pictorial kind. Aby Warburg has spoken of engrams referring not only to an identified aesthetic tradition in pictorial art, but to the symbolism, connotations and meanings carried by those aesthetics, amounting to a recurrent cultural tradition in the pictorial arts through the centuries from antiquity to the Renaissance (Warburg 2000). Also, Frances Yates describes in her classical study *The Art of Memory* how architecture during the Middle Ages and Renaissance was modelled on the mnemotechnical principles of ancient rhetoric, arranging the layout and ornamentation of buildings to suit a mnemotechnical organization and representation of knowledge (Yates 1992). Following those approaches, it is possible to see *Cuéntame* as an altarpiece featuring the already known and sanctioned, updated through contemporary fiction aesthetics and CGI like the rough Gothic altarpieces were reworked during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The materials and aesthetics may vary, but the medium will always deliver the usual memory places: the annunciation, nativity, baptism, transfiguration, passion, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, among other possible insertions like certain miracles, the Sermon on the Mount, the Pietá or the Pentecost³ – all of them being mere renderings of other texts and media on which they rely for their recognition and interpretation.

Comparably, *Cuéntame* reorganizes in the form of a television family series the milestones already well-established in popular culture through previous productions: 'aperture' and 'developmentalism', the Burgos process, tensions with the Catholic Church, the Matesa corruption scandal, the new central role of ETA, strikes and the repression of illegal unions and parties, the oil crisis, Carrero's assassination, the failure of Francoist orthodox reformism and of the 'Spirit of February 12', Franco's long illness and death, the renewed failure of

reformism under Arias Navarro, the general strike in Vitoria and its repression, the escalation of extremist violence (GRAPO and the Montejurra and Atocha attacks), the gathering of nearly all opposition parties in the 'Platajunta', Suárez's Law of Political Reform, the legalization of parties, the first democratic elections since 1936 and so on. Another milestone – the coup d'état of 23 February 1981 – is featured prominently in the fourteenth season of the series (Episode 235), including live archive images and the re-enactment of Tejero's occupation of Parliament's Lower House, which is a most recognizable audiovisual *lieu de mémoire*. The achievement of *Cuéntame* lies in articulating all of the aforementioned – the whole intertextual network of signifiers and its connective relation to known historical events and their canonical narratives – in a revamped, attractive and more accessible form for its target audience. More than all its aesthetic achievements, however, *Cuéntame*'s tale is one we already know, and the series updates it so we can repeat it, and by repeating it, learn it and remember it, knowing that it explains our world-view, that it provides the collective with a familiar, safe and stable cosmogony.

Although the altarpiece metaphor may seem like an anachronism today, it might be the best available to explain cultural memory based on (audio) visual media, at least those built around canonical imagery and narratives. Unchallenging and unquestioning articulations of the past in audiovisual fictions like *Cuéntame* share with altarpieces a very similar recurrent intertextuality based on known representative, symbolic and iconic imagery on the one hand and its ineludible, pre-established synaptic relations to official canonical narratives on the other. The central semiotic processes in audiovisual memory texts such as *Cuéntame* thus consist of re-establishing the associations or pre-configured links between known images and historical narratives prevalent or hegemonic in a given context and encoded by the producers. This conceptualization of audiovisual cultural memory also shares a mechanism similar to Aleida Assmann's proposed interplay between storage memory, or *Speichergedächtnis*, and functional memory, or *Funktionsgedächtnis* – the first consisting of the whole memory 'archive' of a community's shared past, the latter meaning the active selection, retrieval and use of individual memories for present-oriented purposes (Assmann 2003: 133–44). By re-establishing pre-configured links between canonical images and narratives, coder and decoder retrieve pieces of information – images and historical knowledge – contained in the cultural storage memory of the community to make current, goal-oriented and functional use of them, each particular association being a validation, innovation or contestation of historical cosmogonies and identities. Following this model, already established links are uploaded back onto the storage memory for future reutilization or update, which would explain a more and more automated process of dominant cultural memories.

As to the links to historical interpretations and identity narratives, *Cuéntame* specifically articulates a most striking twofold paradox. On the one hand, the series makes a notable effort to enact or simulate memory in a way that transcends its narrator and connects with the Spanish imagined community, implicitly claiming to represent it and its memories. However, the tale of the series departs so little from the canonical narrative suggested that hardly any room is left for questioning, criticizing or contesting the past, as other audiovisual productions attempt to do (Rosenstone 1995: 57–59, 2006: 18–20). The cultural memory it enables is thus much too prefabricated, stable and closed to further critical enquiry, exploration and interpretation of the past. On the other hand, and perhaps even more paradoxically, one of the main

4. Regarding political or social violence, including state-exercised violence in dictatorial contexts, I would like to note some paramount examples in contemporary German-speaking films alone that efficiently and unambiguously manage to articulate oppression and repression with no or very little recourse to depictions of explicit physical violence. While *The Life of Others* (von Donnersmarck, 2006) and *Barbara* (Petzold, 2012) succeed in portraying dictatorial state violence and oppression with no recourse to detentions, incarcerations, torture or executions, *The White Tape* (Haneke, 2009) excels in signifying the importance of structural social violence without even showing its young perpetrators and their victims together in the same frames. The very outspoken position of Michael Haneke regarding structural social violence and its subtle, inexplicit depiction can be summed up as an audiovisual representation strategy that seeks to provoke questions and allow distance for reflection and dialogue, insisting that such effects constitute a true catharsis opposed to the bourgeois, consumerist usage of mainstream American depictions of violence (Haneke 1992: 89).

constructs of *Cuéntame* – that of ‘the people’ as a historical collective subject and its empowerment as a historical agency – should be considered as oversized and overemphasized, as we shall see later.

It has not gone unnoticed that the series scarcely features the many millions of Spaniards that were content and silent during the last decades of the Franco regime (Cueto Asín 2009: 142–43; Guerra Gómez and Rueda Laffond 2009: 404). In *Cuéntame*, the collective hero possesses quasi-epic characteristics and a rebellious undertone. In truth, however, that hero is no more than a state television narrative construct for avoiding a sadder tone in the series and its depiction of the period, allowing consumable entertainment, a presentist identification of the audience and the self-indulgent impression that, no matter how bittersweet it was, Francoism was eventually endured and outlived by the good people of Spain. *Cuéntame* has managed to turn ‘We, the people’ into a system construct, albeit for the sake of a narrative happy ending. ‘The long march’ (Chirbes 2008), as writer Rafael Chirbes called the long years from dictatorship to freedom, was brought to a good end. Spaniards had wandered through the metaphorical wilderness stoically and with no lack of humour, and *Cuéntame* is the prime-time soap opera chronicle of the last hard years of wandering that ended in the promised land of democracy.

A TALE AROUND THE FIRE – A DANCE AROUND THE TOTEM

As seen, *Cuéntame*’s historical subject is an oversized, overemphasized and over-empowered heroic construct veiled under the trials and tribulations of everyday family life and some humouristic situations. The intermingling of this collective protagonist with major historical events does not aim at uncovering new facets or clarifications of the past, or at any critical exploration of the interpretations of historical events. Instead, repetition of what is already well known, remediation of consolidated *lieux de mémoire* and re-inscription of official and dominant historical interpretations through a new alluring commercial format are the main achievements of the series within the realm of collective cultural memory. Does this necessarily mean that the depiction of Francoism is mitigated or soft? In my opinion, the answer must be negative.

Despite the use of melodramatic and comedic elements in the series, the Francoist regime is explicitly portrayed in a clearly negative light. A certain ‘benevolence’ or ‘softness’ of *Cuéntame*’s depiction of Francoism can be explained by production factors, the narrative and the collective memory context itself. Many limitations in *Cuéntame*’s depiction are imposed by the fact that the show is intended for an audience of all ages and broadcast in such a time slot. Therefore, the explicit sex and violence of some of the late 1980s’ miniseries, such as *Lorca*, *Muerte de un poeta* (Juan Antonio Bardem, 1987) and *Jinetes del Alba* (Vicente Aranda, 1990), have no place in *Cuéntame*, though explicit on-screen violence does not necessarily imply an effective portrayal of structural social violence or oppression.⁴ In fact, different takes on the depiction of violence are compatible with *Cuéntame*’s many episodes and story arcs. Some authors see violence in the series as ‘almost picturesque’, more disperse and less perverse than current everyday violence in the news, just a cloud over the main narrative of modernization (López 2007: 143–44). Other authors, though, remind us that the Alcántaras’ path to democracy is steadily shrouded by the darkest side of late Francoism, characterized by instability and violence (Cueto Asín 2009: 138), and that *Cuéntame* could well dispense with violence without risking its coherence and success; instead,

however, the series chooses to articulate a 'representational mechanic of violence by means of the steady invocation, the allusion of individual or collective memory' (Cueto Asín 2009: 141–42), including the violence of civil war times intra-diegetically remembered in the fiction. This mostly off-screen or intra-diegetically narrated articulation of repression or political violence is counterpoised by didacticism and comedic elements, which, while not necessarily interfering with the negative picture of Francoism, sometimes constitute a 'distancing effect', or *Verfremdungseffekt* (Cueto Asín 2009: 141), of what would otherwise just be a tale of oppression. Comedy does not necessarily exclude criticism, as such examples as Berlanga's *La Vaquilla* (1985) and Kusturica's *Underground* (1995) show.

At the same time, *Cuéntame* is a dichotomous tale of development and dictatorship. As a tale of oppression, *Cuéntame* goes so far as to make repression and fear a part of the family's everyday lives without making them anti-Francoist activists. As a tale of social transformation, 'developmentalism' does not necessarily collide with the repressive, dictatorial nature of Francoism, nor does it imply a validation of Franco's regime of any kind. Growth from the early 1960s until 1973 was the general economic cycle in the West, and was boosted in Spain by the remittances of a million emigrants (López 2007: 147), though the series is smart enough to couple the portrayal of economic development with corruption at the level of the regime's elites (embodied by the character of Don Pablo). Benevolence or softness result from the fact that *Cuéntame's* narrative entails a movement or evolution away from oppression and into the present, which makes the overall tone of the series a positive one in contrast to the specific depictions of the Franco regime's political nature.

Nonetheless, a more important question posed by *Cuéntame* for Spain's post-dictatorial collective memory does not revolve around its depiction of Francoism. Quite to the contrary, the problem may lie in the fact that *Cuéntame* does not challenge our present. The master narrative of the whole series – that of a people prospering and progressing through the hardship of an autocratic regime up to democracy – can and should be read as a foundational myth of contemporary Spain, much in the way Jan Assmann speaks of foundational memories – characterized by presentism – that make the present appear as a meaningful, necessary and irremediable outcome of the endorsed past (Assmann 2007: 78–80).

In fact, *Cuéntame's* much-remarked presentism (Gómez Guerra and Rueda Laffond 2009: 406) derives from the fact that its main narrative is an evolutionary one, depicting Francoism merely as a departure point and hurdle for social and political transformation, while focusing on the progressive movement towards the present. This series narrative even implies an underlying continuity of social evolution during Francoism, the transition and present-day democracy (Rueda Laffond 2011: 183). It is therefore the cosmogonic relation of the present with the past that poses the main collective identity question, with the risk of forcing a re-evaluation of both past and present: To what extent is current Spanish society the result of Francoist social evolution? How much of the dictatorial past is to be found in the current self? To what extent is the dictatorial past we are learning to abhor in fact embedded in the foundations of the present?

On the one hand, if transformation processes of the Francoist society and elites led to current Spanish democracy – without a clear-cut break with the regime and without any considerable agency of the community or political body – it is difficult to avoid acknowledging the fact that the Francoist regime

apparatus designed, favoured and led that evolution, letting it eventually culminate in a new political system – the one currently in place. Beyond newly awoken criticism of the *transición* and the so-called ‘pacted reform’ (*reforma pactada*) on the left (a result of the memory boom itself), for the collective as a whole to accept this would amount to taking on board a cosmogony diametrically opposed to the one currently used in its efforts to come to terms with Francoism. On the other hand, if the good Spanish people could actually be seen to have enjoyed any significant agency in eroding the social base of Francoism, then the proposed alternative cosmogony of a current democracy indebted to Francoism could be relativized and minimized, stabilizing in a most positive light Spain’s present-day collective identity.

Cuéntame’s narrative aims at the latter, strengthening the role and features of the community represented by its collective protagonist: the people. It does this by inserting this collective protagonist as a new political subject into the pre-existing consensus narrative about the *transición* and giving it a stronger agency. A much-too-idealist myth of the collective is thereby unfortunately forged, resulting in presentism, self-indulgence and an idealization not far from that of the consensus myth itself. The Spanish *transición* was a top-to-bottom political process in which the common people had a most passive role, and in which some very limited bottom-to-top acquiescence or slight re-routing of the process was only possible – beyond the new legalized parties – through organizations like the trade union Comisiones Obreras (Alonso and Muro 2011: 3–5). However, since the current Spanish democracy cannot be understood as a continuation of the Second Republic’s democracy – the latter needing its own rehabilitation and reworking – the only options available to *Cuéntame*’s mythomotrics would be either to acknowledge current democracy as a late result of Francoist politics – which would be unacceptable for the majority – or else to break a taboo and endorse overall criticism of the *transición*.

As to the Transition to Democracy, *Cuéntame* has shed most of its anti-Francoist criticism since its tenth season (at the latest) and has not replaced it with a perspective that allows for relativizing the *transición* process; it can thus be seen as embracing the dominant consensus narrative. Paradigmatically, family patriarch Antonio Alcántara joins the political party steering the transition from government: the UCD, a centre-right organization (later to be cannibalized by the right) established by the most liberal and reformist of the former Francoist elites and led by the last Francoist prime minister, Adolfo Suárez (who would become the first democratically elected one too). By contrast, the leftist leanings of Antonio’s son Toni, who is portrayed as rather militant, possibly even having revolutionary or communist sympathies in the early seasons of the series, become more appeased, realist and pragmatic as the *transición* progresses. Mercedes, the family’s matriarch, shows no precise, explicit political predilections – something that waters down the mildly feminist subtext of her character in the early seasons of the series. Furthermore, the construction of the new Spanish democracy appears to be challenged merely by the perils of its own fragility, and never on the grounds of its political design or its policy of *tabula rasa* towards the prior regime. Fear and terror – both from the left and the right, though especially presentist in the case of ETA’s actions (Cueto Asín 2009: 153) – take the place of the narrative’s antagonist. The escalation of right-wing involution and leftist radicalism, and the fear of them leading to the rupture of the political consensus and to another fratricidal conflict, was not only one of the master narratives of the

transición (Aguilar 2002: 163–64) but also the main argument for the so-called ‘amnesia policies’ towards the crumbling Franco regime (Humblebaek 2011). And *Cuéntame*, when it reaches the *transición*, adheres to this narrative mythology again without leaving any real room for critical questioning, exploration and interpretation of the ‘history’ we are being told. This full adherence is legitimate as far as historical depiction goes (consensus and amnesia did prevail during the Transition), but it betrays any claim the series might have to representative memory and the very memory boom of the last decade, during which many key features of the dictatorial past – notably repression, its victims and surviving material symbolism – have been revisited, as has the oblivion paid for a quarter of a century as the price for a peaceful arrival at democracy. Instead of criticizing or reflecting on established narratives of the past, the main focus of the series lies on inserting an updated discourse on collective identity within the existing official narrative framework, providing the resulting identity picture with the stability that might otherwise be threatened by remembrance.

Indeed, *Cuéntame* accomplishes this task in a very effective way, which borders on the best possible. First of all, the series constitutes a collective political agency – the Alcántaras, the Spanish family, the neighbourhood, the community: ‘we, the people’. Then the fiction shows that good Spanish people remain stoic, hopeful and brave in their daily lives, despite the oppressive regime under which they live. Any glimpse of the apathetic, silent, consenting millions of passive supporters of Francoism is hardly seen. Quite to the contrary, *Cuéntame*’s characters prove a little too unwavering in their hope for change and for a future of political freedom, even stubborn in their suffering of the adversities of dictatorship and resolute in living their lives in conformity to the new social and political standards they long for – not those of the dying official Spain – to the limits allowed by repression. That ‘real’ Spain, as opposed to the outdated official one of Franco’s stubbornly entrenched regime, can be seen as the social seed of the present. So the question is answered in a presentist, heroic way. Indeed, the origins of today’s Spain are to be found in Francoism, not (only) in the Francoist regime, but in the people who lived against it. To paraphrase Vázquez Montalbán’s famous sentence that summarizes some of the *desencanto*, or disenchantment, after Franco’s dictatorship, while ironizing about political nostalgia, ‘against Francoism we lived better’ (Vázquez Sallés 2009).

On the other hand, *Cuéntame*’s well-designed political subject does not imply a criticism or devaluation of the *transición*; quite to the contrary, the series strengthens the *transición* narrative by adding more weight to the people, who really had very little, if any, influence at all. In doing so, it leaves aside any articulated enquiry or doubts about the political design of this process and the well-calculated oblivion on Francoism it enforced. It seems, therefore, that not only do mass media memories fulfil a prosthetic function (Landsberg 2003: 144–61), but so do the subjects narrated therein. Indeed, if we consider *Cuéntame*’s oversized historical subject, the prosthetic memory function of hegemonic narratives and the aforementioned identification potential of some forms of televisual fiction, it is possible to see *Cuéntame* as a threefold narrative, a mnemotechnical and televisual ‘suture’ that binds a mythological hero, an imagined memory community and its intra-diagetically idealized viewership – those watching ‘history’ within the series – in one identity construct: ‘the Spanish people’. For this reason, the *trompe l’oeil* comprised by *Cuéntame* – with its many faux subjects of both the past and

remembrance of the same pictures – may well constitute an example of how entangled the intermingling layers of history and story, identity and narrative, social constructs and agencies become. At least in the case of *Cuéntame*, though, it seems that we, the people – whoever we have been and are – will inherit the past in one way or another.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, *Cuéntame* is not about exploring the past, but about repeating what we have been taught about it and learning to insert its official, canonical interpretations into a collective identity narrative framework consistent with the present. Within post-Francoist collective memory, *Cuéntame* resembles not only a tribal cosmogony tale around the fire but also a celebration dance around the totem erected by breaking a former taboo – the oblivion imposed by consensus and fear – and, most significantly, by repeating and retelling the canonical narrative of the past in a more positive light – one in which the current political system can at least partly be seen as a conquest on the part of its people and as their well-deserved prize for having outlived four decades of dictatorship. It is a most beautiful tale and, indeed, it would be one to celebrate, if we really were its hero.

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