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El perro negro

Transnational Readings of Database Documentaries from Spain

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The Way In

This chapter brings two of my seemingly disconnected research areas together – writing on Spanish cinema and producing database documentaries (online and in museums) as archival cultural histories. They come together in *El perro negro: Stories from the Civil War* (*The Black Dog*, 2005), a documentary film on the Spanish Civil War by Hungarian media artist Péter Forgács, with whom my Labyrinth Research Initiative on database narrative previously collaborated.

In this chapter I read *El perro negro* in two contexts: first, as an historical documentary on an iconic Spanish topic (the civil war), made by an Hungarian outsider during a period when Spain was deeply engaged in a “national reconciliation” project called “the recuperation of historical memory”; and second, as a transnational database documentary with striking similarities to two other archival cultural histories made by Spaniards on topics outside of Spain, José Luis Guerín’s *Tren de sombras* (*Train of Shadows*, 1997) and *La niebla en las palmeras* (*The Mist in the Palm Trees*, 2005) by Carlos Molinero and Lola Salvador. I show how transnational readings of films not only reveal traces of the national specificities they combine but also accentuate rather than minimize the differences between them.

As I argued in *Blood Cinema*, the national is always a contested construct, challenged both from within, by the local or micro-regional cultures whose distinctiveness it suppresses, and from without, by the larger macro-regional formations, such as European or Spanish-language media in the case of Spain (Kinder, 1993). These micro- and macro-forces function as transnational entities, which, like rival national cultures, challenge this particular configuration of the national but, unlike those rivals, also undermine the very concept of the national itself.

As a subgenre of documentary, database documentary exposes the range of choices out of which any particular narrative is spun, including any narrative configuration of the national. By revealing the process of selecting particular narrative elements (characters, events, objects, locations, languages) from an underlying database of possibilities and combining them to create a particular narrative account that is presented as only one among many possible versions, this database structure lessens the hegemonic power of any particular configuration and thereby undermines all master narratives, including those on which national identity depends. By acknowledging both the plurality and incompleteness of all narrative texts, this mode of knowledge production always leaves room for the unknown – including foreign and future perspectives. Bakhtin theorized the ideological power of such a structure when defining the mixed form of the novel, a genre whose diverse languages prevented any single cultural perspective from being naturalized as the truth, and he was the first to explicitly associate this process of ideological awakening with the transnational:

Consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself. ... This verbal-ideological decentering will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among *other* cultures and languages. It is this knowledge that will sap the roots of a mythological feeling for language, based as it is on an absolute fusion of ideological meaning with language. (1981: 360, 369–370)

These ideas were basic to Barthes's concept of an "absolutely plural text ... based on the infinity of language, ... a network with a thousand entrances" (1974).

In this chapter, I use *El perro negro* as an entrance into the networked relations between national and transnational "systems of meanings." In performing this dual reading, I will show how the national and the transnational function effectively together, as if they were rival yet compatible generic contexts for a generic hybrid. I will argue that such a combination prevents a reductionism that merely substitutes the "transnational" or "the global" for the "national" and endows it with the same tyrannizing mythological constraints.

The Transnational Stage

My basic aim was to understand what happens to the individual ... not to judge. But to raise good questions and keep the material musical and sensitive enough to involve the viewer ... I invite the viewer to say: look what kind of treasures I found, they are dancing and living, they like to live, they like to eat, they are suffering, they are exploited. So it's a panorama, a journey from our 21st century point of view, with

the warning, it can happen if we are not aware of it, as it happened in the last decade in Yugoslavia. (Forgács, 2005)

My major attempt is to work with private history, which is a kind of alternative to public history. ... My country, Hungary, had four revolutions, four counter-revolutions, two big wars, and that means a constant identity crisis for the population. Everybody had to forget what he was to be something new. (Forgács, 2005)

What does it mean to read the Spanish Civil War through the experience of another culture and period, as occurs in *El perro negro*? Many would argue that the best cinematic treatments of the Spanish Civil War have been made by Spaniards with close access to personal memories of this traumatic national event. Only *La vieja memoria* (Old Memory, 1977), a fascinating three-hour documentary by Catalan filmmaker Jaime Camino, comes close to addressing the complexity of the political conflicts on both the Nationalist and Republican sides and to exposing the contradictions between the current memories of participants and what archives actually show.

Yet, other praiseworthy films about the civil war have been made by Europeans who normally work outside of Spain: transnational films that were admired by Spaniards and celebrated worldwide. One thinks of Frédéric Rossif's feature-length documentary *Mourir à Madrid* (To Die in Madrid, 1963), winner of the Jean Vigo Prize and an Oscar nominee which was made during Spain's Francoist era by a Yugoslavian-born émigré to France, or, in the realm of realistic fiction, Ken Loach's *Land of Freedom* (1995), which tells the story of David Carr, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain who joins the good fight in Spain and survives. As lifelong leftists, Loach and Rossif both privilege the Republican side, but their films speak to the specific political moment in which they were produced. With Franco's appointment of Manuel Fraga Iribarne as the new minister of information and tourism in 1962 a fresh cultural period of *apertura* was opening in Spain, which made 1963 a good year for Rossif to remind the world of the political legacy left by the Spanish Republic. And in the wake of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, shortly before the defeat of Felipe González's Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), or Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, by the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) – the People's Party – in Spain's March 1996 general election, Loach's film showed why the ideals of anarchy and communism were still worth defending.

There were also short films made during the civil war, such as *With the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain* (1938; 18 minutes) by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Herbert Kline, which raised money to bring members of the brigade home to the United States and pay for their medical care. And in the field of photojournalism, three great European photographers documented the civil war for leftist journals in France (such as *Ce soir* and *Regards* or for popular US magazines such as *Life*) as they participated on the Republican side: Robert Capa (Endre Ernő Friedmann, 1913–1954), who was born in Budapest like Forgács; Chim (Dawid Szymin

(David Seymour), 1911–1956) from Warsaw; and Taro (Gerta Pohorylle, 1910–1937), from Stuttgart. All of these outsiders were passionately committed to the Republican side (Young, 2010).

The situation was different for Forgács's *El perro negro* (2005), which generated heated criticism in Spain. It was barred from Spanish television and anarchists tried unsuccessfully to ban its theatrical exhibition in Spain for, unlike the other works mentioned, it did not privilege the Republican cause. Moreover, Forgács's film was produced and released during a period of intense national debate in Spain over "the recuperation of historical memory" – a movement launched by "the discovery in 2000 of the burial site in Priaranza del Bierzo" (Jerez-Farrán and Amago, 2010). This discovery not only led to the uncovering of mass graves all over Spain, it also triggered the call for a process of national reconciliation. Founded in December 2000, the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (Asociación para la recuperación de la memoria histórica (ARMH)) was devoted to exhuming and identifying these hidden corpses, and the controversial Historical Memory Law (Ley de Memoria Histórica), first proposed by the PSOE government in 2004 and finally approved in 2007, propelled an ongoing national debate.

An ever-increasing number of volunteers, led by teams of forensic experts, anthropologists, political activists, relatives of the disappeared, and sympathizers with their plight, set out to identify and exhume the numerous mass graves that are scattered throughout the country. As of July 14, 2008 ... 171 burial sites had been excavated and a total of 4,054 bodies exhumed. ... The large number of autobiographical accounts and memoirs that continue to be written by people who grew up in Republican families during Franco's dictatorship, together with an increasing output of works of fiction, history books, TV documentaries, newspaper articles, and public commemorations dealing directly with the Civil War, is unprecedented in Spain. (Jerez-Farrán and Amago, 2010: 4–5)

Part of this output was the recovery in 2007 of what has been called *The Mexican Suitcase: The Rediscovered Spanish Civil War Negatives of Capa, Chim and Taro*, which was originally sent to Paris, for preservation but, when the Germans occupied France, were sent to Mexico. These negatives were recently featured in a transnational museum exhibition curated by Cynthia Young at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York (which ran from September 24, 2010–January 9, 2011 before going on to travel in Spain and Mexico). The images are also reproduced in the extensive two-volume catalogue that accompanied the ICP exhibition, and in the 2011 documentary by Trisha Ziff that tells the complex story of the recovery.

Also titled *The Mexican Suitcase*, Ziff's 86-minute Mexican/Spanish co-production emphasizes three transnational dimensions of the story. It explores the identity and collaborative relations of the photographers, the well-known Robert Capa, Gerda Taro (Capa's wife) and Chim (David Seymour), three European Jews who voluntarily went to Spain to cover the war and invented a new genre of modern

photojournalism in the process, one that focused on action at the front and ultimately cost all three their lives. It explains why the negatives were sent to Mexico, the only nation that accepted thousands of Republican exiles with open arms: the first massive emigration for political reasons in the twentieth century. And it uses Spain's contemporary movement of historical recuperation to show why this recovery is so important now, comparing the retrieval of the negatives with the exhuming of Republican corpses from mass graves. Like the mass graves that open the film, *The Mexican Suitcase* (in all of its transmedia incarnations) is an archive, a physical site containing material objects that give global spectators a fuller understanding of what Franco's Spanish victims suffered during the civil war and its aftermath. Yet within the film the nationalist issue still arises when noted Mexican photographer Pedro Meyer questions why the negatives were taken to the United States, a culture known for appropriating the artistic legacy of others while ignoring its historical contextualization. He insists they should have remained in Mexico. In a question and answer session following a Los Angeles screening of the film, Ziff claimed the negatives were returned to the heirs of the photographers, including Capa's brother Cornell Capa (also a well-known photo journalist born in Budapest), who founded the ICP in New York. She insists the exhibition, catalogs, and documentary preserve not only all of the images from the suitcase but also their complex transnational contextualization – not just for Spaniards and Mexicans but for posterity worldwide.

When preparing to make *El perro negro*, Forgács came to the Spanish archives with different narrative goals that were also transnational. He was searching not for more evidence of what the Left had suffered at the hands of Franco's regime during the war, but what these archives could reveal about home movies made by amateur filmmakers of their everyday life, images that had not previously been seen either inside or outside Spain and which therefore might complicate our understanding of the period.

What these contrasting examples reveal is that the ideological meaning of all archival cultural histories grows out of the interplay among three sets of choices made at different historical moments: by the photographers being archived who decided what to shoot, by the archivists who decided what images to include and omit, and by the users who decide which materials to select for their own narrative goals.

Partly as a result of the "recuperation of historical memory" movement, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Spanish documentary enjoyed "unprecedented popularity, both in the global market and in the Spanish peninsula" (Estrada, 2010: 191) – a condition that seemed favorable for the reception of Forgács's film. Although Spaniards explicitly linked the retrieval of historical images from the archives with the exhumation of bodies from the mass graves, they focused exclusively on the Republican victims of Franco and thus did not savor the "treasures" that Forgács uncovered from the Nationalist side. Whereas Jo Labanyi (2008), a leading British scholar of Spanish cultural studies, acknowledges

that the Left still “has not sufficiently tackled its responsibilities for extra-judicial killings during the war,” most Spanish scholars claim the earlier exhumations (during the Francoist era and Transition) had already unearthed and reburied right-wing victims, leaving only the mass graves of left-wing victims still festering. Although *El perro negro* cites the grim statistics (besides the 500 000 who died during the war, another 75 000 were executed by the Nationalists and 55 000 by the Republicans; and after the war, in addition to the 300 000 Republicans who left Spain, another 100 000 were executed by Franco’s Nationalists and 35 000 died in concentration camps) and although it features a moving sequence where the camera pans across the faces of prisoners from the International Brigade just before they are executed, unlike the Spanish documentaries made during this period, it unearthed no new Republican corpses.

The two television documentaries that dealt most directly with the discovery of mass graves were *Els fosses del silenci* (*The Graves of Silence*) by Montse Armengou and Ricard Belis, broadcast on Catalan Televisión, TV3, in 2003; and *Las fosas del olvido* (*The Graves of the Forgotten*) by Alfonso Domingo and Itziar Bernaola, made for the national station Televisión Española, TVE2, which aired it in early 2004. Both belong to a larger national movement of independent documentary: “a series composed of 13 documentaries entitled *Imágenes contra el olvido*, which are unified by their participation in the so-called ‘recuperation of memory’” (Estrada, 2010: 191). Like *El perro negro* these Spanish documentaries draw on archival footage, yet they emphasize new graveside testimonies by the friends and families of the victims, creating a more journalistic approach rooted in Spain’s contemporary moment.

In “Mass graves on Spanish TV: a tale of two documentaries” Gina Herrmann (2010) contrasts these two films, praising Armengou and Belis for letting spectators make their own judgments and accusing Domingo and Bernaola of manipulating “archival images ... and editing techniques” to imply an even distribution of blame between “rojos y fachas” (“reds and fascists”), a description that also could be applied to *El perro negro*. Herrmann assumes the aestheticizing of this material carries traces of fascism, an assumption that echoes Walter Benjamin’s famous 1955 distinction between fascism and communism: whereas fascism aestheticizes politics, communism politicizes art ([1955] 1985).

As should be clear in my description of *The Mexican Suitcase*, I am not suggesting that this Spanish discourse on the “recuperation of historical memory” was devoid of transnational dimensions. In fact, most Spanish studies scholars acknowledge transnational links to other parts of the world, including Yugoslavia. “Although the present volume focuses on contemporary Spain, the implications of the issues explored here transcend national boundaries. ... We only need to think of the Holocaust, *los desaparecidos* in Latin America, the Yugoslav Civil War, and the Rwandan genocide, to realize that the psychohistorical dynamics of ignored atrocities and systematic assaults on truth and memory are of universal concern” (Jerez-Farrán and Amago, 2010). Many even credit transnational precedents in

Chile and Argentina with “reactivating” Spain’s demands for transitional justice that were “sidelined” during its own earlier transition to democracy (Labanyi, 2008). Yet, they focus on what was unique about the Spanish nationalist context: “Spain, in one sense, is a pioneer again, showing the way for pacted democracies to pursue justice after, and apart from, the transition moment” (Golob, 2008).

Given Spain’s focus on “the recuperation of historical memory,” it is hardly surprising that Spaniards found Forgács’s choice of amateur filmmakers politically problematic. The victim whose footage is most prominently featured is Falangist Joan Salvans, a Catalan industrialist from Terrassa who, we are told, was murdered along with his father by an anarchist named Pedro Cruel. The other amateur filmmaker featured is Ernesto Noriega from Madrid, an anarchist opportunist who becomes a Falangist convert to survive. Although Noriega comes from Castilla rather than Cataluña and from a lower class than Salvans, Forgács chose him because he shot footage from inside his prison cell. In contrast to the Salvans family, who, as powerful industrialists, were solidly committed to the Nationalist cause, we learn from the voiceover that Noriega’s “whole family was divided. One brother a liberal, another an extreme conservative, another a Communist, another a Falangist.” This diversity helps explain the ease of his ideological conversions. In his story, there is always the sense he could be killed at any moment; he was just trying to survive. As a Falangist he claims, “I was lucky ... I never had to shoot anyone.”

Surprisingly, Forgács’s identification with Noriega seems stronger than with Salvans; in fact, his own directorial credit is superimposed over an image of Noriega’s face. By using his own voice for the offscreen narration, Forgács reminds us that his transnational reading of the Spanish Civil War relies not only on these two Spaniards’s documentation of their private lives but also on his own East European perspective. Claiming his film provides “a panorama, a journey from our 21st century point of view,” he admits it has been shaped not by the unearthing of mass graves in Spain but by the civil wars we have witnessed in the former Yugoslavia. More specifically, he acknowledges that, as a Hungarian, he has been forced by frequent political reversals to become a changeling like Noriega – “to forget what he was to be something new.”

Like the Catalan and Spanish documentaries on the mass graves, *El perro negro* was distributed on television as well as on film, yet its funding was primarily transnational. Like most Forgács films, *El perro negro* was produced and distributed by Cesar Messemaker of Lumen Film, whose base in Amsterdam and Dutch nationality grant him access to several transnational funding sources located in the Netherlands: VPRO Television (a “culturally radical” venue on Dutch television); the Dutch Film Fund (a national agency responsible for supporting film production, distribution, and marketing); the CoBo Fund (a Dutch organization that collects fees from Belgian and German cable users to rebroadcast programming from Dutch public television and foster collaboration between national public television channels and independent film producers such as Messemaker). Lumen

also gives Forgács's films access to other European sources that do not require a Dutch base: Arte France (a Franco-German television network, called "the European Cultural Channel," which is available in several other European nations including the Netherlands but not Hungary or Spain); YLE/TVI Co-productions (a Finnish broadcast company, funded primarily through a television user fee, which provides access to live television programming from all over the world, including Spain and the Netherlands); and Sveriges Television (a national television broadcaster based in Sweden, also funded by the BBC model of compulsory user fees).

El perro negro won three awards at international festivals: the Documentary Grand Prize at the 2006 Hungarian Film Week in Budapest; the Maysles Brothers Documentary Grand Prize at the 2005 Denver International Film Festival; and the Feature Length Documentary Film Award at the 2005 Tribeca International Film Festival in New York. In 2007 it also helped Forgács win the prestigious Erasmus Prize, "awarded to a person or institution which has made an exceptionally important contribution to culture in Europe." It received no prizes in Spain.

According to Forgács (2005), one anarchist accused him of telling the story of a crime (the murder of Joan Salvans), but *not* the story of the civil war where the poor were fighting for a better future. Granting the truth of this observation, Forgács claims we have already seen that story in other documentaries. Drawing on the language of Homi Bhabha (1990), he claims he was more interested in showing "a performative history" by individuals, footage that no one has previously seen, for it can destabilize our existing pedagogic vision of the war. As historian Robert Rosenstone puts it so eloquently:

The film creates a kind of counter history. ... Of all the documentaries I have seen on the conflict, this is the one that, after years of study, I find the most startling and provocative, a commentary on the others and all that I know about the war. If one of the tasks of history is to make familiar events of the past strange, that is, to make one see them anew, then *El Perro Negro* is definitely history. (2006)

Yet Rosenstone's reading could be dismissed by Spaniards as that of an outsider who, like Forgács, failed to acknowledge the national "recuperation of historical memory."

Like those in the movement, Forgács emphasizes the interplay between personal and public history, yet has a different understanding of this binary. He believes that private history, rooted in the personal memories and lived experience of individuals (and best preserved in home movies), is always a preferable "alternative to public history," a discourse inevitably shaped and distorted by those in power. Consistent with Bakhtin's dialogic strategies, Forgács assumes it is a matter of leveraging the former to denaturalize the latter, no matter what ideological position the former holds. Yet, many in the "recuperation of historical memory" movement believe in a "collective memory" that can reconcile the opposition between private memory and public history. "Without the 'social

frameworks' ... provided by collective memory (the sum of understandings of the past that circulate in any given society), individual memories could not be recounted, since narration requires the insertion of data into a narrative structure (or mix of narrative structures) drawn from an available repertoire" (Labanyi, 2008: 121).

My argument is that far from erasing the significance of national specificity, the transnational dimensions in the production and reception of *El perro negro* make the national distinctions between Spain and Hungary and their respective narrative structures all the more glaring. Perhaps this is particularly the case for documentaries that rely on access to the archives. Thus, a Spanish-language fictional film such as Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Biutiful* (2010) – a Mexican/ Spanish co-production based on real-life characters – can be enriched by a narrative frame that exhumes the corpse of a man who had been forced into exile by Franco and who is here reunited in an imaginary sequence with the son he had never met. Partly because it is a work of fiction, this film can be celebrated in Spain for its *imagined* historical frame acknowledges the national drive for recuperating historical memory without destabilizing its ideological meaning. But the stakes have always been higher for such reinscriptions in Spanish documentary.

The Spanish Context for Reading Documentaries

Even before "the recuperation of historical memory" movement, there were at least three reasons why the truth value of documentary has been such a politically charged issue within Spain (Kinder, 1997). First, Spaniards were fortunate to have the extraordinary model of Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* (*Land Without Bread*, 1932), the deeply subversive documentary that launched Buñuel on his own distinctive path. The ironic interplay between reality and fiction had always been a rich topic in Spanish literature, but nowhere is that issue more compelling than in documentary film, where the medium presents indexical photographic images whose meanings can easily be transformed by the words with which they are paired. This interaction between concrete images and ironic commentary was introduced in *Las Hurdes*, whose narration Buñuel first performed live in the early silent screenings of the film. Not only did it lay the groundwork for pseudo-documentary, but it anticipated the ideological critiques of ethnography and anthropology that occurred decades later.

Las Hurdes also made a subversive use of the interplay between insiders and outsiders, the local and the global. Given the struggle of Spanish regions for autonomy, early documentaries in Spain frequently focused on establishing local identity (through portrayals of picturesque customs). Yet, Buñuel used such portrayals to create a devastating portrait of Spain's most impoverished region, which exposed the corruption of the Spanish nation and of global forces such as capitalism,

Catholicism, and colonialism. It is not the locals who are under attack but the outsiders who ignore them or who come to document and exploit their misery (including Buñuel and his crew). As Michael Renov (2004) observes, “the ethnographic project has long been haunted by the legacy of its colonialist past” – a connection Buñuel acknowledged. This film enabled him not only to bring the French surrealist aesthetic home to his native Spain but also to invent a new genre – the “surrealist documentary” – whose conceptual power and satiric force were intensified by Spain’s homegrown aesthetic of *esperpento* (a Spanish form of absurdity). It also launched what Scott Macdonald (2010) calls the long tradition of “avant-doc,” which enhanced the subversive potential of both genres.

Second, although the Spanish documentary had been a viable political form during the 1930s and a potent ideological vehicle for the various political factions that participated in the civil war, in 1942 Franco’s government imposed a ban on shooting, editing, and processing any documentary footage other than that produced for the state-controlled *Noticiarios y Documentales* (known familiarly as “NO-DO” newsreels). Most Spaniards realized the archives were being held captive and therefore had political value; but these government newsreels showed them how easily the meanings of specific archival images could be manipulated for propagandistic ends. Paradoxically, it made Spanish spectators distrust all documentaries yet yearn for free access to the archives. It also made them aware of the ideological potential of disjunctive sound–image relations. Given these dynamics and the inaccessibility of the archives during the Francoist era, it is easy to understand why Spaniards welcomed documentaries on the civil war that challenged this “official” perspective, even if they came from outsiders such as Rossif.

Third, during the period of political transition (between the death of Franco in 1975 and the election of the Socialist government in 1982), when filmmakers from the Left finally gained access to the archives, they produced a series of revisionist compilation films that used some of the same archival images but with a different soundtrack and a different ideological perspective. Again, this made Spaniards aware of the power of popular memory and the ideological potential of remix and disjunctive sound/image relations. They realized that how you *reread* this archival material is far more important than the “authenticity” of the images. In a sense, they performed an earlier “recuperation of historical memory” that applied only to the archives, not to the mass graves that were still hidden. No film made a more powerful use of these dynamics than Camino’s 1977 documentary on the Spanish Civil War, *La vieja memoria*, particularly in those sequences where the personal memories of the person being interviewed are contradicted by the historical footage we see on screen.

Even in the late 1970s and 1980s, outsider perspectives on the Spanish Civil War were still welcome. Basilio Martín Patiño, who made two of the most provocative compilation films – *Canciones para después de una guerra* (*Songs for after a War*, 1971) and *Caudillo* (1975) – dramatized the process in his Godardian fictional feature, *Madrid* (1986). This multilingual film (in Spanish, German, and English) focuses on

a German filmmaker (played by Rüdiger Vogler, best known from films by Wim Wenders), who is hired by German television to make a documentary on the Spanish Civil War. Not only does he bring his German cultural baggage to the task (as Forgács would later bring his Hungarian identity to *El perro negro*) but he becomes so engaged in contemporary Spanish politics (street demonstrations against NATO and the United States) that he ends up abandoning the project. Spaniards such as Patiño were tired of having the Spanish Civil War treated as a dress rehearsal for World War Two and its ideological struggles. They were ready for new contemporary narratives about Spain.

Similarly, I am not really interested in comparing various films about the Spanish Civil War – a task that has been admirably performed by others, including Rosenstone (2006), Herrmann (2008; 2010), Hardcastle (2010), and Estrada (2010). Rather, I am more interested in exploring the combination of archival materials and home movies, public and private history, a narrative strategy found in most films by Forgács, which also has a rich history in Spain.

Re-Imagining Archival Histories

Amateur films urge us all – scholars, filmmakers, archivists, curators – to re-imagine the archive and film historiography. They suggest the impossibility of separating the visual from the historical and the amateur from the professional. Our collective film archive of the future demands a new historiography that embraces multiple cinematic forms. ... We need to imagine the archive as an engine of difference and plurality, always expanding, always open. (Zimmerman, 2008)

The concept of archive I invoke surpasses its institutional, physical, and material definition, focusing instead on its possibilities as a basis for knowledge production, identity formation, and the projection of community imaginaries not only in the past and present but also, notably, in the future. “In rethinking spatial categories, this strategy will allow a reading of history ... not from a single, fixed, geographical and conceptual cartography – be it linguistic, ethnic, or otherwise – but according to multiple maps, simultaneously unfolded” (Vizcaya, 2008). What do we gain by doing this second reading of *El perro negro* in the transnational context of database documentary? We are prevented from wrongly concluding that Spaniards are solely committed to a national context, or that they are resistant to transnational readings or to Forgács’s approach to documentary.

In fact, *El perro negro* shares many themes and textual strategies with José Luis Guerín’s *Tren de sombras* (*Train of Shadows*, 1997) and Carlos Molinero and Lola Salvador’s *La niebla en las palmeras* (*The Mist in the Palm Trees*, 2005), two database documentaries by Spaniards that focus on topics outside Spain. All three combine images (both stills and footage) from personal and public archives. All three claim

to use “found footage” (shot by others) and a database structure, which suggests their images and sounds have been selected and remixed to illuminate an historical subject. In the process, all three create an open narrative field that contains several interwoven stories whose combination deliberately blurs the lines between history, home movies, and fiction. All three have titles that pair commonplace material objects (dog, train, palm trees) with a symbolic quality evoking obscurity or death (blackness, shadows, mist). They all raise epistemological questions (“How do we know what we know?”) and raise doubts about the truth value of archival materials, showing how easily their meanings can be manipulated through editing. Yet they all present archival data as a tangible form of personal memory, a process that validates the unique experience and creative invention of individuals.

More specifically, all three feature a male figure (a photographer or filmmaker), whose death is a mystery but who leaves haunting images behind as his legacy. Though his story is interwoven with those of others, in each case it is his personal experience that most dramatically enriches, complicates, or challenges the “official” collective history we thought we already knew. In the presentation of his story, there is a disjunctive gap between word and image. While *Tren de sombras* has no narrative voiceover and practically no dialogue, an anonymous printed text sets the mystery in motion. Although *La niebla en las palmeras* uses a first-person narration, the voice is female and the character male. Although *El perro negro* has a voice-of-God narration voiced by Forgács himself it is gradually decentered by an increasing plurality of voices.

Tren de sombras (1997)

Tren de sombras tells the story of Gérard Fleury, a Parisian lawyer and amateur filmmaker who lived in Upper Normandy, a region associated with French literary masters – such as Flaubert (who was born in Rouen) and Proust (who depicted this area as Balbec in *Remembrance of Things Past*). In a brief onscreen text (practically the only one in this almost wordless film), we are told that on November 8, 1930 Fleury went out at dawn to capture the right light for filming the local landscape. He was never seen or heard from again. The film closely examines Fleury’s decaying black-and-white, silent home movies, which are contrasted with Guerín’s contemporary color footage that documents the same locale. While the home movies are mobilized to solve the mystery of one man’s disappearance, Guerín’s contemporary footage leads us to confront the mysterious disappearance of an entire way of life.

Midway through the film – after we have already seen Fleury’s home movies (both silent and with different musical tracks) and before we begin to focus on Guerín’s contemporary footage (with ambient sound) – we watch Fleury’s decaying black-and-white images streaming through a Moviola. We discover how

new meanings can be excavated from these home movies, which are reanimated with narrative drive. Introduced by the whirring sound of its motor, the Moviola functions as search engine, generating a train of images that position Fleury's brother Étienne next to their young niece Hortense, suggesting a romantic relationship between them. At one point, it keeps replaying footage, of Hortense riding her bicycle; the moviola goes forward and backward, as it searches for a third figure hidden in the background (evoking the famous sequence from Antonioni's *Blow-up*). It finally discloses the maid with whom Étienne is probably having an affair. The more sexual tensions that are uncovered, the more we begin to read all of the images in this erotic light – even footage of two young boys playing with their ties and giving lascivious looks. We begin to suspect that Fleury may also have been erotically interested in Hortense and realize that his rivalry with Étienne was not only over this young woman but also over opposing models of early cinema: the Méliès-type magic evoked by Étienne's performance as amateur magician versus the Lumière actualités, which, like Fleury's home movies, documented moving trains and domestic life.

Unlike the similar sequence from *Blow-up*, here the mysteries remain unsolved. We still do not know what happened to Fleury, what exactly was going on within the family's domestic melodrama, or whether these archival images are authentic or fake. Guerín seems more interested in the process of questioning than in providing answers. Through remix, he shows how this found footage can be re-read within several regimes of knowledge to generate different meanings about the mysterious disappearance of the auteur, the cultural and historical specificity of this particular region, the materiality and fragility of the film medium, the respective values of film preservation and historical reconstruction, the history of European silent cinema, and the permeability of boundaries between all bordered domains – including genres (documentary and fiction, comedy and melodrama), regions (Normandy and Catalonia), and nations (France and Spain).

Given that meanings are so easily manipulated by editing, Guerín purposely casts doubts on the authenticity of Fleury's home movies. He shows that their value is dependent on other qualities – on what they reveal about the cinematic medium and about cultural change. The home movies contain narrative fragments that generate melodrama: a complex network of erotic relations within an affluent, extended bourgeois family of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the kind of network that was theorized by Freud and Foucault and dramatized by Proust and Flaubert. In contrast, Guerín's documentary footage uses static long-takes to capture anonymous strangers, sheep, cars, barges, music, light, and shadows drifting in and out of the frame. While the former raises provocative narrative questions about the characters and their erotic relations, the latter moves us with the sheer beauty of its crisp images of nature and industry. They are both compelling, but in very different ways, for they must be read against different cultural regimes of knowledge and pleasure (Kinder, 2003).

La niebla en las palmeras (2005)

In contrast to *Tren de sombras*, *La niebla en las palmeras* immediately reveals that its central character is fictional; Santiago Bergson is a transnational construct whose composite story embodies the mysteries of the twentieth century. His name ineluctably brings to mind the Polish/French philosopher Henri Bergson, which leads us to read the film's subjective stream-of-consciousness as both a unity and a multiplicity (five variations of one man's story). His given name, Santiago, also brings to mind Pinochet's 1973 overthrow of Allende in Chile, which launched the search for twentieth-century political victims buried worldwide. We are told Bergson was a Spanish photographer from Asturias who documented the miners' leftist revolt, an anti-fascist adventurer who fought with the French Resistance during World War Two, a physicist who worked on the Manhattan Project in the United States to create the atomic bomb, an artist who collaborated with Orson Welles on his radio hoax about an invasion from Mars, and a husband and father who may have been murdered. His fictional status is underscored by having a woman voice his first-person narration and by representing his daughter with three transnational versions, living in Asturias, Havana, and Normandy respectively. Yet each daughter tells the same story with minor variations and different photographic images. Though the filmmakers name these multiple versions of Bergson's story after what they perceive as five qualities of the quark (strangeness, charm, beauty, truth, and color) and call the abstract finale "Higgs" (evoking the Higgs boson or "God particle" in quantum physics that is assumed to exist although it cannot be directly observed), the film's experimental structure and archival data say more about history, memory, and representation than about physics.

The film uses archival images from diverse sources – family photographs and home movies from "real" people who are not related to Bergson, commercial postcards of nude women once sold with packages of tobacco, historic footage from newsreels and public archives, and contemporary color footage of the daughters shot by Molinaro and Salvador. The meanings of these appropriated images are constantly redefined by the voiceovers that accompany them, enabling them to accrue new associations each time they reappear in a new narrative context. This interplay between words and images, between the audio and visual tracks, contradicts Barthes's arguments about the anchoring function of verbal captions that allegedly limit the plurality of meanings in the photographic image (1977). Consistent with Bakhtin (1981), the poetic voiceovers actually increase the plurality of meanings for the images, especially in "Charm" where the text is presented in Spanish, English, French, and German. Although the film may sound abstract and difficult to follow, it is actually quite accessible (in fact, it won the People's Choice Award at the Tribeca Film Festival) for both its train of fascinating images and highly literate voiceovers move at an exhilarating pace, challenging spectators to keep up with their kaleidoscopic juxtapositions.

Although both *La niebla en las palmeras* and *Tren de sombras* could be considered pseudo-documentaries, they do not make us question the historical value of the image. Rather, they use this “fictional” dimension to explore the interweaving of history, memory, and photography in the twentieth century and to reimagine the archive as an ever-expanding mode of knowledge production that must always remain open. With their emphasis on plurality and subjectivity, these films can also be read as “poetic” documentaries, the category Rosenstone borrows from Bill Nichols (2010) and Michael Renov (2004) to describe *El perro negro*. Although it may lack a logical argument, the poetic documentary “presents us with bits of lives, mini-narratives, fragments of voices, horrendous images, even moments of humour and good cheer, and say all of these different worlds existed at once” (Rosenstone, 2006).

El perro negro (2005)

An archivist (with his own personal collection), as well as a filmmaker and media artist, Péter Forgács is known for the use of amateur home movies that he collects from ordinary people throughout Europe and remixes with more traditional archival footage from public institutions. Most of his films create a rivalry between personal and public footage, which becomes a way to question any “official” version of history. He puts faith in the knowledge generated by “authentic” home movies and their resistance to manipulation by any collective discourse. He sees his own manipulation as merely enhancement, as bringing out what needs to be revealed. Although he always favors home movies, he chooses only those that have aesthetic power – reaffirming his faith in the epistemological potential of art and its ability to move us emotionally. For his own aesthetic power depends not only on his own masterful re-editing of this material (as in the case of Guérin, Molinaro, and Salvador), but also on his choosing amateur artists whose unique aesthetic makes them worthy of being saved from oblivion. This is his way of recovering dead artists from the grave.

Before introducing its amateur filmmakers, Joan Salvans and Ernesto Noriega, *El perro negro* opens with a highly ambiguous sequence that documents what looks like a festive local ceremony. But soon it turns into a ritualistic execution committed by a group of young men who push a blindfolded victim off the hillside. We never find out who they are, when or where this ritual occurred, whether anyone actually died, or where this footage came from. Accompanied by Tibor Szemző’s percussive music with rhythmic clapping (which matches the clapping of the men on screen), the ritual becomes totally immersive. The later recurrence of both images and music from this strange sequence underscores its importance to the film, yet Forgács deliberately retains its poetic ambiguity. When I asked him about this footage, he told me it came from the collection of Joan Salvans: “This 16 mm

film was shot in the late 20s or early 30s in Catalonia, with friends on a spring excursion, playing a folk game. One falls out at each round. But here the 'execution' scene – I presume – is 'in the air of the times'" (Forgács, pers. comm. with the author). With hindsight, we realize that the ritual prefigures executions to come: real executions that are committed by both sides during the war but whose meanings are still difficult to decipher. We never find out more about the ritual. The only way spectators can identify the source of the footage is by retroactively recognizing Salvans's cinematic style, through aesthetics rather than politics.

This strategic ambiguity makes us welcome the voice-of-God narration once it is launched yet question its adequacy to explain everything we see and hear. In fact, as if purposely maintaining the ambiguity for as long as possible, the percussive music from the ritual continues over the titles and over a montage of fragmented poetic images that will be remixed to introduce Salvans's story: the wind in the trees; the sea; the Salvans' palatial home, La Barata; the shadow of the filmmaker with his camera; the industrialist Francesc Salvans; his son Joan; their factory; an overhead shot of the workers; a faceless man retrieving a gun hidden in his bed; a pair of elegant women dancing; a desolate country road. Both the music and montage are interrupted by the sound of two gunshots, which trigger the voiceover that unifies these fragments within an emerging historical narrative. Sounding very much like the opening printed text in *Tren de sombras*, Forgács's opening comment roots us in history and underlines the centrality of Salvans: "On 24 July 1936, six days after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, a cyclist found the bodies of Joan Salvans and his father Francesc not far from their house, La Barata. They were killed by an anarchist called Pedro Cruel." This statement's matter-of-fact tone may lead some of us to falsely assume that we have actually seen Pedro getting his gun (the only shot in the film that looks like a contemporary insert). It leads all of us to listen for more: "We traveled through Spain's violent decade with the images and stories of amateur filmmakers, such as Joan Salvans from Terrassa in Catalonia, and Ernest Noriega from Madrid in Castilla."

Forgács uses his own voice for this offscreen "outsider" narration, as Buñuel had done in *Las Hurdes*, at least in the early silent screenings where he performed the voiceover live. Forgács's commentary, like that of Buñuel, acknowledges his own status as an outsider who has come to document this disturbing chapter in Spain's history and who will rely on the "images and stories" of local informants. At one point he picks out Pedro Cruel from an overhead long-shot of workers and pauses the footage so that we can get a better look at this person who has a box drawn around his head and shoulders. Yet, as Rosenstone points out, we never really know whether this blurry figure is actually Pedro Cruel. Repeatedly, like Buñuel's narrator, Forgács either over- or under-narrates what we are seeing, making us aware of the limitations of his commentary. Yet his narration never reaches the same level of disjunctive irony that we find in *Las Hurdes* because it also serves the practical function of explaining the Spanish Civil War, which was much more complicated than the contextualizing historical narratives of World War Two and the

Holocaust that were evoked in most of his earlier films. Well known to most of his viewers, those framing historical narratives could remain offscreen yet influence what we were seeing because we brought that knowledge (what Labanyi (2008) calls "collective memory" or "social frameworks") to the film.

As Forgács has acknowledged, the case was different with the Spanish Civil War. Though everyone has heard of it, few understand its complex politics, so he could not rely on a prior knowledge in his audience. Thus he used his own voiceover commentary to summarize the "official" version of the war: but which official version? Given that the commentary is not contradicted by the images we see on screen, the film seems to be endorsing this view. In his earlier films, the "official" history was usually under attack, but here the only "official version" being rejected (or omitted) is the leftist version, which has prevailed in most previous films on the civil war. What is strikingly new is his appreciation for Salvans and for what was lost with his premature death.

Forgács's earlier films frequently created a unique spectator position – largely based on the music provided by his collaborator, minimalist composer Tibor Szemző. His melancholy music sharply contrasts with the vibrant, playful behavior shown in the home movies, creating an historical distance between the viewer and the characters on screen. Yet the melancholy music is appropriate to the historical hindsight we bring to the film, for we know what happens to these characters even though they do not. This dynamic is particularly strong in *The Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle* (1997), a film based on home movies that document the daily life of a Jewish family (the Peerebooms) in the Netherlands, including the day on which they pack for their trip to a "work camp" in Auschwitz. This ironic combination of the minimalist music and vibrant behavior makes our perception of their physical and emotional vitality all the more poignant, for now we have a better understanding of what has been lost in the Holocaust. This dynamic has a mesmerizing effect because it combines emotional engagement with historical distance, a combination that is rare in cinema but that Forgács also tries to achieve in *El perro negro*.

Yet these dynamics did not work in the same way for the Spanish Civil War because Forgács could not assume his Spanish spectators would sympathize with these individuals of different ideological persuasions. Although Salvans may have created "treasures" that show how much he and his friends "like to live" (like the wonderful scene in which he and his fiancé Mercé dance on the terrace at La Barata to a paso doble playing on the phonograph, while the wind animates the trees in the background), he was still documenting the bourgeois life that was under attack by union workers, anarchists, and landless peasants who saw his family as the enemy. To fully enjoy Salvans's footage of everyday life, perhaps we need to treat it as "the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie" or "fictionalize the material" by recontextualizing it as melodrama. In fact, the double wedding of the Salvans brothers brings to mind the elegant bourgeois wedding that is contrasted with the working-class barrio in Juan Antonio Bardem's *Muerte de un ciclista* (*Death of a Cyclist*, 1955), the award-winning melodrama that helped launch the modern

Spanish cinema. Other scenes of the Salvans' household remind us of Fleury's affluent bourgeois family in *Tren de sombras*, which came from roughly the same period. But in contrast to Guerín's database documentary, Forgács's melodramatic reading serves to justify the amateur filmmaker and his home movies rather than merely showing how easily the meaning of their images can be re-inscribed. It tries to convince us that with his premature death, something valuable was lost.

The limits of Forgács's voice-of-God narration are exposed not only by ambiguous scenes (such as the opening ritual) but also by the inevitable march toward war. The closer it comes, the more other voices are added. There are excerpts from speeches by historical figures such as dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera and his son José Antonio Primo de Rivera explaining the uniqueness of the Falangist Party he is founding; passages by Noriega describing his harrowing experience and explaining his footage; comments by landless peasants expressing their hatred of the Salvans ("When we looked at the landowner, we thought we were looking at the devil himself"), or by an international writer such as George Orwell, acknowledging his ambivalence toward seeing Barcelona under anarchist rule: "Though I don't understand it and don't even like it, I recognize it as a state of affairs worth fighting for." Forgács emphasizes the ironic ambiguity of this line by accompanying it with Szemző's percussive music from the opening ritual sequence.

The first of these additional voices is introduced by the reading of Lorca's "Eyes," a poem about the subjective experience of death which uses both voice and vision to diversify the perspectives on the war. Later in the film, during some of the most gruesome footage, when Lorca's poem (like the opening ritual) is repeated, it takes on greater emotional resonance.

Forgács's reliance on aesthetics (over ideology) is reinforced by his many allusions to Lorca and Buñuel, two of Spain's most famous artists; they shared Salvans's class background but were both committed to the Republican side. Though the film reminds us that Lorca, "the son of a rich landowner from Granada," was murdered by Franco's Nationalists, *El perro negro* associates him with Salvans, lamenting the loss of two talented individual artists, one famous, the other an amateur, both from the bourgeoisie. No one knows whether, had Salvans lived, he would have become a professional filmmaker but his artistic potential is elevated by being linked to Lorca.

The allusions to Buñuel imply a comparison with Forgács himself. Like his friend Lorca, Buñuel came from the landed bourgeoisie but always supported the Left and was always committed to individualism. In one of his interviews Forgács refers to *Las Hurdes* (which was attacked both by the Right and the Left), praising Buñuel's courage and implying that he himself was taking a similar risk with *El perro negro*, which he knew would arouse serious objections in Spain. Within the film, his choice of images sometimes evokes specific references to *Las Hurdes*; for example, to illustrate Spain's "extreme poverty" he chooses shots of a sick child in the street and a pig (rather than a bull) entering a poor hovel, choices that evoke Buñuel's memorable images.

The choice of the film's title also strengthens its connections with Lorca, Buñuel, and Salvador Dalí. Some claim the title of the first film made by Buñuel and Dalí, *Un chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*) was a reference to their close friend Lorca, whom Buñuel (1984) had described as "an elegant Andalusian." Although it was Dalí who chose the name of their film, he took it from the title of "a forgotten book" of poems by Buñuel, which had been influenced by Lorca's poetry.

Not only is the black dog the first and last image we see in the film, it reappears at the end of the recitation of Lorca's "Eyes," where it begins its association with death. This is an important nodal point in the film which marks the end of a long introduction for the recitation ends the exclusivity of Forgács's narration and introduces a calendar that begins the long chronological drive toward the war.

The dog's identification with death is also strengthened by the image of Dalí and his wife Gaia, which leads to an explicit reference to *A Short Report of a Crime* by Buñuel and Dalí, a brief text we both see and hear: in the suburbs of Madrid a dog discovers a girl's body and eats part of her skull. The black dog is also associated with the anarchist killer Pedro Cruel (when he gains power) and more generally with violence committed by both sides. At the end of the film, the dog splits in half, evoking Cerberus, the multi-headed hound from classical mythology who guarded the gates of Hades, preventing the dead from escaping. In the context of the Spanish Civil War, the split dog also evokes "the two Spains," both equally immersed in death. Yet the dogs in *El perro negro* also belong to an array of domesticated animals – pigs, sheep, rabbits, donkeys, horses, bulls – that move through the film, reinforcing one of the lines quoted in the voiceover: "Landless peasants hate the bourgeoisie because they treat them like animals."

This version of the deadly hound also brings to mind the mangy dog at the end of Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950), the Mexican film that brought him back to world prominence. In the sequence where Jaibo, a young killer as vicious as Pedro Cruel, lies dying alone in the street like a dog, he finally gains our sympathy. He futilely calls for his mother, but the last image he sees is this canine creature, both mythic and banal, who becomes the embodiment of death. The image of the dog is superimposed onto Jaibo's body, which gradually freezes into a still image of his corpse.

By strengthening his references to these world-renowned Spanish artists, Lorca, Buñuel, and Dalí, as a means of addressing the political critiques from Spain, Forgács was demonstrating his own reliance on the epistemological power of aesthetics over ideology.

Given that the sources of only some of the footage are identified, we are left with the sense that the "total" story is still unknowable; even if we scour the archives (both public and private), there will still be holes. Yet it is the home movies that help to fill those gaps. Their primary value depends on this dual status as supplementing the story while still remaining rare and unique.

Forgács's acknowledgment of the gaps is also built into the film's modular structure – one that alternates between the two sides without judging either. Instead of talking about the nation he moves from one region or city to

another, tracking events that led to the war, its resolution, and its aftermath: recurrent ceremonies and strikes, elections, and executions, banquets and battles, parties and parades. He moves from Terrasa and Barcelona in Catalonia to Madrid in Castilla and to other local sites including Andalucia, Valencia, and Alicante. He covers the miner's revolt in Asturias, which was brutally crushed by Franco – an event that is central in *La niebla en las palmeras*. He keeps the structure open, though, as if many more episodes could be added from other cities and villages and other moments of history so long as authentic footage could be found. And he acknowledges the international forces, not only the International Brigade, but also Germans fighting on both sides. Thus, the representation of the war stresses the local, the regional, and the global rather than the national.

Despite Nichols's (2010) claim that documentary is a discourse of "sobriety" that is capable of implementing ideas and actions, it is the formal power of these three poetic database documentaries that is more forceful than their politics. Although Santiago Bergson is fictional and both Fleury and Salvans remain mysterious, all three films filter their respective archival materials and memories, with all of their contradictory and pluralistic meanings, through an individual's subjectivity rather than through some official discourse or "collective memory." That is what makes all three films so emotionally compelling.

However, there are still significant cultural differences. Whereas Forgács sees the "authentic" private history as an alternative to the inevitable distortions of public history, Guérin, Molinaro, and Salvador see them working together productively. These Spaniards do not want to forget who they were – they want to remember. So they freely remix images from public and private archives, as well as from history and fiction, creating dramatic combinations that enable them to reimagine the past and document the future. But Forgács preserves the open-endedness and performative possibilities of his cultural histories by cultivating an intriguing ambiguity both in the images and in the music and in the editing rhythms that orchestrate and combine them. By making this historical material "musical" he enables this ambiguity to resist the totalizing impulse of archives and to challenge the hegemonic claims of master narratives and nations.

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Further Reading

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