

# MEMORIES OF FORGETTING IN CONFLICTIVE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTS: THE COMPETITION OF MEMORIAL CULTURES AND ITS REFLECTION IN THE ARTS, A CASE STUDY FROM THE BASQUE COUNTRY

ISMAEL MANTEROLA ISPIZUA, AMAIA ELIZALDE ESTENAGA

## Abstract

After Franco's death in 1975 there was a transitional process to a democratic system in Spain. However, the struggle between the Spanish state and, especially, left-wing Basque nationalists, based on identity and ideological grounds, persisted in the Basque Country. This conflict includes what H. Grabes (2008) calls the "competition of memorial cultures". In order to preserve its memory canon, from the 1970s on, a part of the Basque society has spontaneously constructed its subaltern memory (J. Colmeiro, 2011) through art, thus creating a subaltern cultural memory. Numerous artistic initiatives took place outside the public institutional sphere based on their own conceptions of memory sites (P. Nora, 1989), most of them directly related to the conflict. This cultural memory reflects the political problematic in many different ways, not only regarding the content of the representations themselves or to their subaltern nature, but also because of the policies developed out of them by public institutions.

A. Assmann (2008) theorizes about cultural institutions of active and passive memory and associates institutions of forgetting with totalitarian states. Nonetheless, some public policies implemented in Spain with regard to the subaltern memorial culture of a part of Basque society show that in some cases it is not only being ignored, but also negated. Beyond the exclusion that the formation of the canon and archive carry with them, many different examples of interventions carried out regarding artworks forming part of that memorial culture allow us to further develop the concept of "cultural institution" connected to active and passive forgetting, which converts memory sites into spaces of struggle (Ch. Dupláa, 2000). This need to expand the conceptual framework in order to describe the situation suggests that the Spanish transition to democracy might not have been fully completed.

**Keywords:** Cultural Memory Studies, Cultural Studies and Criticism, Cultural Institutions of Memory, Arts.

## 1. Introduction.

This work is based on the framework of Cultural Memory Studies, first developed by Aleida and Jan Assmann in the late 1980s. As A. Erll states (2008: 1-15), the relationship between culture and memory has become an international and interdisciplinary issue over the last two decades. She defines cultural memory as "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts" (2008: 2), history, religion and art being its three main areas of research. Despite its open nature, this concept has its limits in a particular use of the term 'culture', not fully compatible with its anthropological understanding. As Erll points out (2011: 30): "'Cultural Memory' does therefore

not describe all manifestations of ‘memory in culture’; rather it represents a subset of this: the societal construction of normative and formative versions of the past”. It is for this reason that many researchers have focused on the canonization processes of memory, as well as on the formation of the archive, paying attention to the role that institutions play throughout this processes. However, a deeper look into this subject is needed regarding different contexts of socio-cultural conflict connected to shifts of power or territorial and identitarian issues. In order to do so, this analysis approaches its object from a combination of Cultural Memory and Cultural Studies and Criticism, addressing concepts such as ‘hegemony’, ‘subalternity’ and ‘resistance’.

Although this research is based on examples drawn from the particular socio-cultural context of the post-Francoist Basque Country, the theoretical conclusions carried out are likely to be extrapolated to similar situations elsewhere. Therefore, the primary aims of this article are twofold: On the one hand, it brings to light the shadows of the transitional process from a concrete authoritarian system to a democratic one through their reflections in many public artworks –those placed in public places, not necessarily by public institutions, and based on the needs and wishes of citizens. On the other hand, it intends to make a contribution to the above-mentioned theoretical field, especially with regard to public institutions and public art. A deeper look into this subject is needed regarding contexts of socio-cultural conflict, such as the transitional processes from authoritarian to democratic systems that have taken place all over the world. In the belief that, as A. Assmann (1999) states, art can create and modify collective images of the past, re-establish what has been silenced and aid reconciliation, the importance of public institutions and their position towards artistic creation throughout the transitional processes, if these are actually intended to be authentic, should be emphasised.

## **2. The ‘Institution’ Within the Framework of Cultural Memory Studies.**

M. Halbwachs (1968 [1950]: 33) highlighted the fact that institutions based on deeply-held beliefs are fundamental for a group to survive. Cultural memory is a crucial element in the creation and permanence of those beliefs. As mentioned in the introduction, the kind of memory studied by Cultural Memory Studies is “the societal construction of normative and formative versions of the past” and, therefore, the connection between institutions and the formation of the cultural memory canon and archive is a research area of particular relevance.

A theory on the relationship between cultural memory and institutions has been developed by A. Assmann (2008), who states that “if we concede that forgetting is the normality of personal and cultural life, then remembering is the exception, which—especially in the cultural sphere— requires special and costly precautions. These precautions take the shape of cultural institutions” (98). The academic establishes a difference between active and passive memory regarding institutions. While the cultural institutions of active memory try to preserve the past as present, creating a canon, the institutions of passive memory create archives. In this context it is important to take into account the fact that these processes of canonization and archiving are inevitably ‘selective’ and ‘built on the principle of exclusion’ (106), which explains the co-existence of different memory cultures in one and the same society and, as H. Grabes states (2008: 313), “there will certainly be a competition between these memorial cultures and the canons that serve as their archives”.

It should be noted that these theories linking cultural memory, institution, canon and archive have been developed regarding fully democratic systems where, although selection and, thus, some kind of exclusion take place, active or passive forgetting by the institutions is not conceived. As A. Erll states (2011: 4) the creation and development of the theory on Cultural Memory is closely connected to the advent of democracy:

“With the transition from authoritarianism to democratization in many societies (such as South Africa, Argentina or Chile) truth and reconciliation has emerged as a major form of societies’ memory work. Moreover, as a result of decolonization and migration, the increasingly multi(-memory-)cultural nature of modern societies comes into focus. A diversity of ethnic groups and religious affiliations in a society brings

with it a diversity of traditions and views of history; recognizing minorities includes giving voice to their versions of the past.”

That would be the main reason why A. Assmann relates active and passive forgetting to authoritarian systems and does not include in her theoretical construction any links between forgetting and institutions, although some explanations are given about both active and passive forgetting (2008: 97-98). While the former makes reference to intentional acts, the latter does to non-intentional ones:

“Active forgetting is implied in intentional acts such as trashing and destroying. Acts of forgetting are a necessary and constructive part of internal social transformations; they are, however, violently destructive when directed at an alien culture or a persecuted minority. Censorship has been a forceful if not always successful instrument for destroying material and mental cultural products. The passive form of cultural forgetting is related to non-intentional acts such as hiding, losing, dispersing, neglecting, abandoning or leaving something behind. In these cases the objects are not materially destroyed; they fall out of the frames of attention, valuation and use.”

However, different facts suggest that institutions and cultural forgetting are not so strongly separated when it comes to transitional contexts from authoritarian systems to democratic ones. Through the analysis of the silent dialogues that have taken place in the Basque Country between different public artworks and institutions from the 1970s until the present, we intend to demonstrate the need to further develop both critical tools with regard to cultural memory institutions.

### **3. Active and Passive Institutional Cultural Forgetting in Basque Public art During the Spanish Transition to Democracy.**

#### **3.1. A Short Historical Context.**

As Mari Jose Olaziregi states (2012: 142-144), during the latter part of the 19th century Basque nationalism emerged and this, added to a spectacular process of industrialization, resulted in a strong militant cultural movement supporting the Basque language and culture. During the last two decades of the 19th century and the initial decades of the 20th century, very important events took place such as the institutionalization of education in Euskara (the Basque language), the First Congress of Basque Studies and the creation of institutions like Eusko Ikaskuntza (the Society of Basque Studies) and Euskaltzaindia (the Royal Academy of the Basque Language). This renaissance came to an end in 1936 as a consequence of the coup d'état against Spanish democratic republic, followed by the Spanish Civil War, which had devastating effects for Basque culture:

*“The high number of casualties and exiles was followed by the great repression implemented by the victors. During this period, Basque names were prohibited and even Basque writing on cemetery headstones was not allowed; Francoist censorship held way over street life, public administration, and culture.” (Olaziregi, 2012: 149)*

From then on, Basque nationalism and identity became characteristic of what could be considered a subaltern group, as its memory canon did not coincide with the one of the totalitarian Spanish institutions and, thus, it had to be silenced and eliminated. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that Basque culture went through a real revitalization accompanied by vindication as a consequence of social and ideological changes. The repression of the dictatorship, the “emergence of new social movements and the spread of revolutionary models in the developing world” that Olaziregi mentions (2012: 154), together with the consolidation of industry and the emergence of an important proletarian class, had a great influence on the change and radicalization of politics followed by the creation in 1959 of ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Homeland and Freedom), an armed organization created with the aim of achieving independence and socialism for the Basque Country.

After the dictator’s death in 1975 Spain went through a period of change for different reasons and embarked on a process of transition to a democratic system. However, academics do not agree on either the start or the end of this transitional process. The first democratic elections were held in 1977, the Law of Amnesty was promulgated that same year and the Constitution was approved in 1978. However, due to the nature of the Law of Amnesty, no one was judged for the crimes committed during the Civil War and the dictatorship, neither were the corpses of those assassinated during those years exhumed. While a pact of silence and forgetting was established in most of Spain, the struggle continued in the Basque Country for the issue of the call for Independence was not resolved and, therefore, this group kept being subaltern, as was its memory canon. ETA continued with the armed struggle and those of the transitional process happened to be very violent decades. Although ETA ceased its armed struggle in 2011, the Spanish state refuses to start a dialogue in order to address the subject of independence, both in the case of the Basque Country and Catalonia.

As the following examples attempt to show, the policies followed by public institutions with regard to public artworks connected to the left-wing nationalist cultural memory, reflect that besides the fact that a period of passive institutional forgetting took place in many different ways, the transitional process to a democracy in Spain has also been a period of active institutional forgetting. Some subaltern groups remained subaltern once the dictatorship came to its end and so were their memory cultures. This is why, as J. Colmeiro points out (2011: 20), a lot of contemporary research like this, carried out in the field of poststructuralism and postcolonialism, is trying to give voice and visibility to memories that became subaltern within the socio-cultural context with which we are concerned.

### **3.2. Institutional passive forgetting**

During the 1970s, right after Franco’s death and before the Spanish Constitution was approved, Basque society experienced years characterised by a high level of violence. The vindication for independence and socialism, coinciding with similar processes of national liberation taking place in different countries in South America, together with the demand for a general amnesty, gave way to several protests from citizens and the response from the Spanish institutions gave continuity to those policies of the dictatorship, often resulting in the death of protesters. After these tragic events, since no Spanish public institution would do it, civil society created artworks to keep alive the memory of their dead comrades, a subaltern memory embodied in artistic artworks that were often removed and put up again by the ordinary citizens. There is no way to know who removed these memorial public artworks, but the fact is that institutions did not replace them and neither did they implement a plan to sensitize society towards interculturality and respect for other’s memory. This attitude from the part of the institution could be addressed as passive forgetting.

Two examples that illustrate this situation are the monuments and memorials of Vitoria-Gasteiz and Iruña-Pamplona. The former was initially a commemorative plaque created to remember five workers that were assassinated by the police on 3rd March 1976 during a demonstration for worker’s rights in Vitoria-Gasteiz. Besides

this plaque, different artists contributed to the memory of the tragic event which was not recognized by the institutions with paintings, songs, literary works, etc. Civil society started a dynamic of remembrance which was totally separate from public institutions and assumed its own role. As the plaque was repeatedly removed, it was replaced by a more solid sculpture that some colleagues of the dead workers created.



*Figure 1: Monument 3M.*

Later on, the Basque Government started to contribute to the artistic network activated for the memory of the 3rd March 1976 with different initiatives such as a memorial placed in the same square and a mural painted in a building nearby in 2013.



*Figure 2: Memorial 3M.*



Figure 3: Mural 3M.

The tragic events that took place in Vitoria-Gasteiz have become what P. Nora (1984) called *lieu de mémoire* or memory site and the same could be said about the place itself, called “Plaza del 3 de Marzo”. It should be noted that the artistic network that has been activated until today has had a remarkable relevance for the preservation of memory as a tool of resistance for a subaltern culture and its memory.

However, the Spanish government has not contributed to this process, and neither has it responded to the requests for truth and justice stemming from Basque society and its government. In addition to that, the public artworks dedicated to the workers have suffered attacks that turn the memory site into what Ch. Dupl a (2000: 30) calls a ‘site of struggle’. In 2016, on the 40th anniversary of the events, the monuments were found painted in red and yellow (the colours of the Spanish flag).



*Figures 4 and 5: Monument and memorial painted.*

The paint was quickly removed and the monuments remained the same, as if nothing had happened. However, the problem hidden behind this attack has not been fixed, as no long-term programme has been implemented in order to educate the citizenry on the importance of respecting each other's memory cultures.

There is a monument that commemorates the assassination of German Rodriguez in Iruña-Pamplona on the 8th July of 1978. Many citizens were inside the city bullring claiming amnesty with a large banner when the armed police came in. The riots spread to other parts of the city and a fatal shot killed Germán Rodríguez (Iruña, 1951-1978). As in the case of the 3rd March, the Spanish government has not taken any steps in order to achieve justice and this memory, as well as the group that keeps it, remains subaltern.



*Figure 6: Monument to Germán Rodríguez.*

The nature and history of the commemorating sculpture shares many characteristics with the above-mentioned one. First of all, it has been civil society that has kept alive the memory through artworks, among others. Public institutions did not contribute to the persistence of or the respect for this memory. The monument has been destroyed several times, becoming a memory site of struggle. Initially, it was made of stone but as it was destroyed

twice the next one was made of brass. In 2005 it was removed because of the works that were to be done for an underground car park and in 2006 the government of Navarre decided not to replace it. However, when the governing party lost its absolute majority, the sculpture was replaced by the institutions in 2007.

In summary, the history of these two examples of public art shows that a memorial culture that was subaltern during the Francoist dictatorship continues to be so in some way. The events that these artworks commemorate have not been politically resolved and, besides, institutions have not made an effort to prevent the attempts to destroy the artworks or the transformation of those memory sites into sites of struggle. As the institutions have neither given voice to the subaltern minorities that were repressed during the dictatorship nor taken action in favour of a respectful co-existence of different memorial cultures and, thus, have continued with the dynamics of the totalitarian state, it could be argued that they have acted as institutions of passive forgetting.

### 3.3. Institutional Active Forgetting.

The following examples illustrate cases where institutions took an active part in the destruction of public artworks. One of the artworks is a mural that the Basque artist Alejandro Tapia (Usurbil, 1930-2016) painted in Usurbil (Gipuzkoa, Basque Country) in 1985, imitating the typical murals created in Ireland in a simple figurative language. The work was entitled *Alaitsu eta borrokan kementsu*, the Basque translation of the slogan that the FSLN (Sandinist Front for National Liberation) used, and it represented of members of the coalition created by the different Basque nationalist political parties that campaigned for independence.



Figure 7: Alejandro Tapia's original mural (picture).

Due to the activity of ETA the Spanish government outlawed the political party Herri Batasuna, but the outlawing went further. In 2009, when the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party came to power in the Basque Country, many cultural expressions related to left-wing Basque nationalism were also forbidden such as, for example, Tapia's

mural. Surprisingly, the mural was not totally erased and only the slogans that appeared in it were covered with grey paint under the protection of the Ertzaintza (Basque police).



Figure 8: Alejandro Tapia's mural now.

Despite the fact that some years later Tapia was asked to repaint the mural in order to bring it to its original look, he preferred to leave it as it was and display a plaque with a picture showing the original work. Tapia's decision, therefore, demonstrates not only the subaltern nature of a memorial culture, but also the active participation of institutions attempting to eliminate it so it would be forgotten.

The other example is a similar event that took place in Hernani (Gipuzkoa, Basque Country). It was in 2008 when Spanish judges started to issue orders to remove from the public spaces of the Basque Country any public expression related to ETA's violence. That same year the judge Grande Marlaska issued an order to remove the name of a square in Hernani, as it was named after a member of ETA, Jose Manuel Ariztimuño, alias *Pana*, who died in 1981 during a confrontation with the police. Consequently, the Ertzaintza removed all the plaques with the name of the commemorated dead but, besides that, they also removed a sculpture that was placed in the square but had no connection with its name. The sculpture was created by Txema Kalero in 1987 and it was part of the square because the municipality of Hernani decided to decorate the village. This misunderstanding shows the strong revolutionary power of many sculptures in the Basque Country that have a similar shape to Kalero's one, as Basque sculpture embraced the avant-garde aesthetic as an instrument of cultural resistance and against the Francoist dictatorship. For this reason, the sculpture was interpreted to be connected to left-wing Basque nationalism's political struggle.



Figure 9: Remains of Txema Kalero's sculpture.

Based on what happened in Hernani, in 2010 the Basque artist Asier Mendizabal (Ordizia, 1973) created a series of sculptures called *Hernani* through which he intended to encourage reflection on the suggestive power of some forms. In the process of reflection he used the traces that the Ertzaintza left after cutting the sculpture using a chainsaw in order to analyse the Basque context of the last 40 years regarding its history, memory, impossible co-existence, relationship between citizens and power, relationship between art and society, as well as censorship.



Figure 10: Asier Mendizabal's series (1).



Figure 11: Asier Mendizabal's series (2).

#### 4. As a Conclusion

The descriptive analysis provided throughout this article aims to demonstrate different facts related to cultural memory. Firstly, there is evidence that Spanish institutions have both actively and passively acted as institutions of forgetting with regard to those memorial cultures that do not coincide with the memory canon of power. These subaltern memorial cultures created in the Basque context have used artistic expressions as an instrument of resistance against the hegemonic canon. It should be noted that, even if the existence of different memorial cultures and the competition between them are natural events, a democratic system should work towards a respectful relationship of co-existence and cohabitation of those cultures, especially avoiding the creation of subaltern memorial cultures and giving voice to minorities or those silenced during the previous authoritarian system.

Secondly, and consequently, it should be noted that the mentioned histories of the public artworks reflect, on the one hand, the persistence of cultural conflicts existing during the dictatorship and, on the other hand, that the changes regarding cultural memory that A. Erll suggests for countries that have gone through a transition from an authoritarian system to a democratic one have not been completed in the Spanish context yet. Therefore, this research suggests the need to enlarge the theoretical framework of Cultural Memory Studies by considering the existence of links between institutions and forgetting, at least in the case of socio-cultural contexts that are similar to the one described. A constant comparative approach to different socio-cultural contexts would be very helpful in order to progressively reinforce the framework of cultural memory related to memorial cultures and their relationship with the public. Furthermore, those theoretical achievements would probably be of help for the development more solid transitional processes.

#### References

- Adam, D.J., 1984. Stakeholderanalysis. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UniversityPress.
- Assmann, Aleida, 2008. "Canon and Archive". In Erll, Astrid and Nünning, Ansgar ed. Media and Cultural Memory, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 97-107.
- Colmeiro, José, 2011. "Nation of Ghosts?: Haunting, Historical Memory and Forgetting in Post Franco Spain". In ElectronicJournal of Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature. 4. 17-34.  
<<http://www.452f.com/index.php/josecolmeiro.html>>, [2017/06/22].

- Dupláa, Christina, 2000. "Memoria Colectiva y Lieux de Mémoire en la España de la Transición". In Resina, Joan Ramon ed. *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 29-42.
- Erll, Astrid, 2011. *Memory in Culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave Mac Millan UK.
- Erll, Astrid, 2008. "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction". In Erll, Astrid and Nünning, Ansgar ed. *Media and Cultural Memory*. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter. 1-15.
- Grabes, Herbert, 2008. "Cultural Memory and Literary Canon". In Erll, Astrid and Nünning, Ansgar ed.: *Media and Cultural Memory*. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter. 311-318.
- Halbwachs, Maurice, 1994 [1925]. *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Halbwachs, Maurice, 1968 [1950]. *La Mémoire Collective*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Mattelart, A. y Neveu, É., 2003. *Introduction aux Cultural Studies*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte.
- Nora, Pierre, 1997 [1984]. "Entre Mémoire et Histoire. La problématique des lieux". In Pierre Nora ed. *Les lieux de mémoire*. I. Paris: Gallimard. 23-43.
- Olaziregi, Mari Jose, 2012. "Worlds of Fiction: An Introduction to Basque Narrative". In Mari Jose Olaziregi ed. *Basque Literary History*. Reno: University of Nevada. 137-200.
- Payne, Michael and Rae Barbera, Jessica, 2010 [1996]. *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory: Second Edition*. New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing.