

Elena García-Martín
Presentation Text
Limits of the Past

Remembering History on Stage: Appropriations, Ritualizations, and Visions of Baroque Tradition in Republican and Francoist Spain.

The premise of my paper stems from the assumption that popular spectacles, and in particular theatre, provide the primary images through which collective consciousness articulates itself. To the extent that collective memory requires a unifying language, and a consistent narrative through which to decode it, I believe the images generated through popular entertainment may often function as unifying agents. This capacity of theatre, which may be aligned to serve both progressive or regressive governments, needs to be investigated and understood in all its aesthetic and ethical implications. The re-evaluation of the dissemination, functions and possible manipulation of historical nostalgia through public acts of remembrance, such as theatre and the narratives that re-configure it, is an essential part in the responsible shaping of political consciousness.

Reworkings of the Spanish Golden Age "history plays," often sought to reconstitute, homogenize and fix images of the nation in moments of political instability. Since memory does not constitute a timeless vehicle for the recovery of past events, but is itself affected by its own conception and construction of the past, it must be historically situated. I will focus on the years leading to and following the Spanish Civil War so as to assess the way in which rhetorical and staged representations of historical drama contributed to define the icons, sentiments and appearance of a Spanish "national" consciousness in a period of divisiveness and internal struggle.

The processes through which this nostalgic invocation take place constitute a two-fold exercise in historical memory. In the first place, the plays selected were often re-enactments of key episodes in the history of Spain--such was the case of Lope de Vega's Fuenteovejuna. Secondly, the adaptations themselves were historically situated around a civil war, which both generates and effaces memory, creates irreversible sides and symbolizes discontinuities. Furthermore, these plays were staged and rhetorically constructed within organisms--Republican or Francoist--which held particular conceptions of history, and had specific reasons for recovering the past. Yet, most studies on historical drama focus on the distortions and discrepancies between historical record and the dramatic text rather than on the workings of memories and uses of the past.

While for the Republicans Fuenteovejuna was the expression of social revolution, for the Francoists it represented political conformism. Therefore, we must assume that the dynamics of collective memory necessarily involve processes of construction and

distortion¹ which were activated as part of the cultural politics of both the Republican and the Francoist regimes.

Memory is fluid, discursive and socially constituted. At a basic level, there are mechanisms **inherent** to remembering, such as what Michael Schudson terms "instrumentalization," defined as "the selection and promotion of a particular version of the past to serve present interests," (352) and "conventionalization" or "the social re-working of the past as heritage or tradition which may be disseminated through high-prestige, socially consensual institutions" (359). Both of these mechanisms were, naturally, common to Republican and Francoist visions of history.

To the extent that any memory involves selection, and consequently, the silencing of other historical narratives, theatre may be said to participate in the dynamics of remembering /forgetting that constitute national memories. Both the right and the left made use of this selective, "instrumentalizing" form of memory.

The open debate as to which were the authors and works worth rescuing to become "cantores de la raza" had been taking place for most of the 30's but was intensified on the occasion of Lope de Vega's anniversary in 1935. The "phoenix of creativity," as Lope was commonly named was simultaneously acclaimed as the bard both of the right and the left. Jose M. Pemán, Francoist author and critic, described Lope as the poet of unity, nationalism and conformity. Rafael Alberti, the Republican poet, celebrates Lope "the merry, the popular,...the satirical trickster of fairs, the licentious, the mocking, the sardonic" (369)². While the left aimed at recuperating a popular Lope, emblem of social struggle and subversive spirit of the carnival, the right imagined an educated, visionary and loyal bard at the service of a unified Catholic Spain. Clearly opposing images, of compliance and subversion, which imply a selective process which also affects the reading of his plays.

If we concentrate on Fuenteovejuna, one of his most polemic plays, similar diverging reactions occur. The center of the discussions at the time was the legitimacy, incompatibility and authenticity of visions. While the Falangist Calle Iturrino

¹ In my considerations about the mechanisms of memory practice I will be using a variety of sources. The notions "instrumentalization," "conventionalization" and "distanciation" are defined by the psychologist Michael Schudson in "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory" in Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past Ed. Daniel L. Schacter. Cambridge: Harvard U.P, 1995. The philosopher Theodore Plantinga refers to "polarization," "integration," "anachronism," and "anthropomorphism" as constitutive principles in How Memory Shapes Narratives: a Philosophical Essay on Redeeming the Past. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992.

² All translations from Spanish are the author's unless otherwise noted.

accused Republicans of "profaning Lope's memory" and of "falsifying the spirit of Fuenteovejuna" (7), and Pemán condemned the Marxists for "impudently sequestering and mutilating the play" (Schwartz 186), the Republican bard García Lorca defended himself by calling his cut version "an **anthology** of Fuenteovejuna," in order to distinguish it from the original, and confessed to wanting to "vulgarize" it and privilege a social plot over the Renaissance, political one whose circumstances had been superceded. Clearly, we find contrasting relations to the national past which illustrate the right's notion of an unchanging historical essence, and the left's perspective on the actualization and contingency of historical forces. Here lies the difference between the notions of memory as an unchangeable legacy, or as a social practice.

To guarantee the effective communication and dissemination of certain visions of the past, these may be legitimized through prestigious organisms such as religious heritage or cultural tradition. This is a process which Schudson calls "**conventionalization**." The desire to facilitate diffusion and legitimation led both sides in the Civil War to resort to Golden Age theatre as a familiar and respected body of literature, an "authority" upon which to project their respective political fantasies. In fact, La Barraca, the university travelling company led by Lorca, limited its repertory exclusively to Golden Age plays, a highly unlikely repertoire for a group of artists of aesthetic modernist background.

After acknowledging both sides' analogous desire to communicate and disseminate their particular visions of the past, it is pertinent to explore the differences in the nature of these aesthetic and rhetorical visions. Many have been the studies on the aesthetics of Fascism and its ritualistic and celebratory aspects. The ideological dimension of their aesthetics involves an appeal to transcendence, continuity and myth which many have associated with pseudo-religion. The theatrical implications of these ritualistic performances involve a perceived audience, and a coded reception much like church attendance. The fascist paradigm aims to create consensus by appealing to the **collective spirit**, an entity which not only transcends reason but which may indeed conflict with positivistic inquiry, as many of its Spanish proponents claimed. Giménez Caballero, in Arte y Estado (1935), a treatise which is considered as the earliest exponent of radical Falangist aesthetics, elevates intuition, intimation and faith as methods of inquiry while defining reflection and "abuses of reason" as the "maximum form of ignorance" (14). Hence, even fascist aesthetic treatises were clothed in the rhetorical garb of anti-intellectual, unsystematic "confessions" and cautioned the reader that abusing reason could only generate individuals contrary to the "Spanish character," i.e., "irresolute, coward, agnostic and disoriented" (14).

On the other hand, the Republican paradigm aimed to create consensus by appealing to the rise of a **collective consciousness**, a capacity which would only be hindered by disproportionately

enthusiastic sentiment, and which, at least conceptually, required a critical vision. Indalecio Prieto, Republican Minister of Culture cautioned his audiences in his speeches about "excesses of enthusiasm" and "unreflective impulses" which clouded the intellect and could be used in the interest of the opposition (43-47). Naturally, these cognitive dispositions had aesthetic repercussions as well.

The Falangist aesthetic was defined in its early stages as "Christian Classicism" a trend which was countered by the Republican's allegiance to "social realism." Giménez Caballero, defines the essence of theatre as mystery, and its function as "the representation of human life as a religious phenomenon" (164). Jose Pemán, another one of the Francoist bards, conceived theatre as an occasion to "promote the communion of ideas" and envisioned the Spanish audience as a "compact unit, firm in the unanimities of a heroic age fully lived or imaginatively prolonged" (1959 17). Despite the cryptic and convoluted style of his remark, certain aspects of the Nationalist view of the audience are clear and later illustrated: it must be univocal and responsive to the structure of the Greek dramatic models, where the noble "hero" and the "chorus" represented with "religious and national resonances" the dynamics between the exceptional individual and the homogenized collective (17). This conjunction of religious and classical terms guaranteed a ritualistic and celebratory conception of art at the service of a hierarchichal and authoritarian social model.

Consequently, Pemán, who perceived Fuenteovejuna as an expression of what he considered national values--i.e., imperialism, nationalism, Catholicism--understands the end of the play where the kings restore order, as a ceremony of investment, a "deus ex machina" ritual of empowerment for the monarchs which is recognized by the people. On the occasion of a Christmas day performance, a date which already ritualizes and magnifies its importance, Pemán observes:

This is the drama of the absorption by the State of all sub-states or anti-states dispersed throughout the country. The infuriated people of Fuenteovejuna help the unitary, statuary and modern cause of the Catholic Kings. The people do not condemn the red cross on the Comendador, but want it on the King's chest instead.
(Schwartz 186)

In Pemán's opinion, the play not only works to support the monarchy, but the military orders upon which its power rests. His position towards history is commemorative: this is the remembrance of an idealized past in which the people "spoke as one", but also the recognition of an inherent historical essence from which the present unnaturally deviates. In his vision we behold a ceremony in which the people as a unit do not rebel against the system, but against individuals, and where the emblems of power--like the red cross of the military order of Santiago--are not destroyed but merely transferred.

If the main theme for Pemán was the conformist celebration of centralized power and the evocation of historical essence, for

Lorca these aspects of the play were only contingent. In fact, he eliminates the role of the monarchs, whom he sees as part of a historico-political subplot which distracts from the true protagonist: the permanence of social injustice. With this, he effects a change, previously seen on the communist Russian stage (Kirschner 259), and which he explains as follows "I have not revised, but cut out," and thus, "removed the inessential from the play." (Byrd 14).

Lorca also employed other strategies to stress the humanity, particularity and protagonism of the people, aspects that were de-emphasized in the abstract types of the "Christian Classicism." In order to facilitate the identification between the audience and the events on stage, the wardrobe of the actors was actualized to match the style of the peasants of the time of the performance. In fact, although the attires were carefully designed by Alberto, the garments often came from gifts from the audience, which gave the actors an eclectic, detailed and realistic appearance. While this may be deemed a strategy to promote ideological consensus it also constituted a metafictional act which forced anachronism on stage as a means to reflect upon the connections between past and present. In an introductory remark to the performance Lorca admits: "the play is constructed with the anachronism necessary to match our current sensibilities" (Lorca 425). Some critics considered that with this approach the audience could then see itself on stage as the protagonists of actualized history, that is, as the agents in charge of making and transforming present history, a phenomenon of awakening. Yet, this identification was never allowed to reach emotionally cathartic proportions as the modesty of the stage, mounted off the back of a truck, and the surrealist backdrop painted by Alberto (Sáenz de la Calzada 64), forced the audience to confront the constructedness of fiction, and of history³.

Of similar effect was the inclusion of folkloric and regional songs and dances, which were performed, atypically, with Renaissance instrumentation. Again, Lorca's anachronistic technique would provide a temporal bridge among audiences while

³ An anecdote that may serve to highlight the reaction of the audience to Republican performances is documented in the biography of Lorca's favorite actress, Margarita Xirgú. On the occasion of Lope de Vega's anniversary in 1935 a performance of Fuenteovejuna was set in the Plaza la "Libertad" of the historical village. At the end, when the attendants rushed to the stage, Lorca, believing the actors could be identified with the tyrants they portrayed on stage, feared for their safety. Contrary to his expectations the actors were not only congratulated for the performance, but esteemed for their actions outside the stage--namely, the liberation of a reputedly anarchist villager imprisoned by the authorities so that he could not use the event to create turmoil. Indeed, rather than generating passive catharsis the performance triggered an act of collective recognition that went beyond the parameters of fiction.

constituting an act of re-appropriation of tradition from high culture to popular classes.

In contrast, the ritualizing and monumentalizing aesthetics of Francoist performances prided themselves on the historical accuracy of their wardrobes and had their actors clad in somewhat glamorized historical garb which was meant to fit the spectacularity of the setting. Fuenteovejuna, was set repeatedly in the plaza of the historical village itself as a symbol of historical continuity with the Spain of the past. In addition, this setting allowed the casting of hundreds of extras which could resonantly, unanimously and with the impressive force of numbers, chant their collective guilt in front of the authority "Fuenteovejuna did it!" This constituted the embodiment of Giménez Caballero's dream: a unified, noble and obedient chorus. In an exceptional wartime performance of the play staged in Seville by soldiers on leave on the Christmas day of 1938 the solemnity and historicity of the occasion made up, in the eyes of Falangist critics, for the scarcity of means:

This was a poor, difficult and brave attempt: with difficulties, with mended costumes, without [rich] fabrics or insignias, with actors on ten day leave. A Christmacy Fuenteovejuna, where the national theatre was born among humble hay. But radiating throughout with enormous decisiveness and valor. (Pemán 1939)

The ceremonial nature of this performance, as it becomes likened to the birth and prospective sacrifice of Christ/soldiers, reveals the sacramental perspective of Falangist drama. Even when circumstances don't allow for the accuracy of historical detail that might be desired, we must reinterpret aesthetic elements from a perspective proper to Spanish-Catholic spirit.

Yet, despite the contrasts sentiment/reason, ritual/folklore, classicism/anachronism, the opposition right/left may not be easily resolved. The intense lyricism of Lorca, the idealism of the task envisioned by his company "La Barraca," and the intellectual training of their members complicated the political claims of the Republican project. In fact, modernist artists perceived in Lorca a certain aura which set him apart from folklore and the people he sought to "educate." Neruda, precursor of the avant-garde, is quoted describing the bard's effect on the audience as follows: "everything Lorca touched, however aesthetic or mysterious, would be filled of profound essences, of sounds that reached the depth of multitudes" (Schwartz 232). Lorca often referred to the "people" as the "fertile and virgin ground" which he sought to sow, thus encouraging the imagery of telluric ritualization (Lorca, 616). Once again we can see that the initial opposition is dismantled and transformed in a matter of degree since both sides of the spectrum use ritualizing imagery and envision theatre as a ceremony⁴ which

⁴ This conception of the theatre as a ritual process is reminiscent of Turner's primitive religious rituals, spectacles which promoted "liminal solidarity" and often regressed to fixity and closure. The alternative theatrical process, which meant to invert, innovate and invite to spontaneity and immediacy through

is reminiscent of primitive religious rituals rather than as an intellectual forum for the exchange of ideas.

The Falangist narrative had enforced the polarization of sentiment/reason as part of the religious dogma, and would extend it to cultural issues. We have already seen Giménez Caballero's claims of anti-intellectualism. Pemán in 1929, in order to combat what he saw as endemic to academic intellectualism, already defined culture as "the absolute end of relativism" (5).

But, paradoxically, as the Civil War progressed Republicans would be forced into a similar position. Republican publications of the time exhibit a similar terminology about good/evil and the common fight against the "egotism and personal interests" fostered by intellectualism. (Gamonal 240). The Republican author and critic Rosa Chacel cautions young intellectuals who, "while favoring the 'pueblo' may fall victim to a pseudo-culture of historical interpretation when what is needed is a living reality" (Schwartz 228). Maria Zambrano, another Republican author, accuses liberal intellectuals of "tak[ing] refuge in a heroic individual fate without currency" (Schwartz 228). This backlash against artistic and personalized visions left Republican members of the avant-garde, such as Lorca, in the uncomfortable position of having to suppress lyrical, surreal, or existentialist tendencies in their renderings of history. Furthermore, Lorca's rigorous regulations as a director (Byrd 124) and his belief in the "metteur's" total control of the performance⁵ (Vilches de Frutos 6) reflected an individualistic vision perhaps in dissonance with his intended "democratization and vulgarization" of the theme of the play. In fact, his choice of topics and classical repertoire sought to bring the marginality of avant-garde experimentalism closer to the public. For him, the advances in stage direction, with his emphasis in a "total spectacle" which brought together music, painting, and dance, permitted a conciliatory synthesis between tradition and vanguardism. A position that, due to political circumstances, a civil war, would for ever transform our vision of Spanish modernism.

In conclusion, while the Republican and early Francoist

the emergence of a "liminoid community" would have promoted ludic rather than sacred hermeneutic methods (Turner, 1982 23). Thus, Lorca's imagery attempted to naturalize instead of question the process of dramatic communication and to objectivize the public as passive "ground."

⁵ Vilches de Frutos studies the aspects of Lorca's direction which were carefully orchestrated by him, everything from voices, to music, to choreographic rhythm and the suggestion of colors in the costume design. While working in "La Barraca" he wrote "I choose, adapt, and direct the scenography and interpretation; I compose the music and dance"(6). These observations leave little doubt as to the character of *Fuenteovejuna* as a personal vision of the director rather than a collaborative effort on the part of the crew and conflict with the "democratic, vulgarized" subject of the play.

rhetoric fostered opposing paradigms through which to remember and envision history, the mechanisms of reason and sentiment were put to the service of both types of political fantasy. In effect, the mechanisms that mobilize memories--conventionalization, instrumentalization, ritualization, polarization, anachronism--were used to represent both progressive and regressive visions of the past. Yet, the distinction lay in the historicity of the moments of public remembrance and their relative positions with respect to the past. While the Falangists encouraged a nostalgic vision of an idealized past reflection of a true "Spanish essence" that needed to be stimulated, the Republicans envisioned the past as a present history which was open to and indeed in dire need of transformation.

Works Cited

- Alberti, Rafael. Prosas Encontradas. Nueva Edición Muy Aumentada. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2000.
- Byrd, Suzanne W. La Fuente Ovejuna de Federico García Lorca. Madrid: Editorial Pliegos, 1984.
- Gamonal Torres Miguel A. Arte y Política en la Guerra Civil Española: el Caso Republicano. Granada: Diputación Provincial, Biblioteca de Ensayo, 1987.
- García Lorca, Federico. Obras, Vol. 1 Prosa 1. Ed. Miguel García Posada. Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 1994.
- Giménez Caballero, E. Arte y Estado. Madrid: Unknown, 1935.
- Iturrino, Calle. Lope de Vega y Clave de "Fuenteovejuna". Bilbao: Casa Dochao, 1938.
- Kirschner, Teresa J. "Sobrevivencia de una Comedia: Historia de la Difusión de Fuenteovejuna" Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos. Vol. I, No 3 (Primavera 1977).
- Pemán, José M. Los Complejos del Teatro Español. (Discurso Leído el 24 Octubre de 1959). Madrid: Imp. Editorial Magisterio Español, 1959.
- . "Fuenteovejuna en la Provincia." ABC Sevilla. 1 Jan. 1939.
- . Prólogo de El Pensamiento de Primo de Rivera. Madrid: Imprenta Artística Sáez Hermanos, 1929.
- . Lo Tradicional y lo Moderno en Lope de Vega: Edad Moderna y Renacimiento (Discurso Leído el 27 de Enero de 1962) Madrid: Imp. Editorial Magisterio Español, 1962.
- Plantinga, Theodore. How Memories Shape Narratives: A Philosophical Essay on Redeeming the Past. Queenston: The Edward Mellon Press, 1992.
- Prieto, Indalecio. Palabras de Ayer y de Hoy. Santiago de Chile: Ercilla, 1938.
- Sáenz de la Calzada, Luis. "La Barraca" Teatro Universitario. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1976.
- Schudson, Michael. "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory." Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past. Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1995.
- Schwartz, Kessel. The Meaning of Existence in Contemporary Hispanic Literature. Coral Gables, Fl.: U. of Miami Press,

1969.

Turner, Victor W. From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness
Of Play. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publication,
1982.

Vilches de Frutos, María Francisca. "Directors of the Twentieth
Century Spanish Stage." Contemporary Theatre Review. 1998,
Vol. 7, Part 3, pp. 1-23.