

Wind on the fog: A reflection on the policy of historical memory at Televisió de Catalunya through the documentary *Perseguits i salvats*

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Abstract

Identity and collective memory are two sides of the same coin: both are constructed from a narrative of community that may either define the present (identity) or explain the past (memory). These constructs also feed into one another, since memory is built through a consciousness of identity, while identity is the product of our capacity to create and retain a narrative that explains who we are today. This article offers a reflection on the policy of historical memory adopted by the Catalan public broadcasting network Televisió de Catalunya (TVC) and a detailed study of the documentary *Perseguits i salvats. Camins de nit i boira/Persecuted and Saved. Paths through the Night and Fog* (Solé, 2014). The authors identify the elements that place the documentary within this policy framework, examining its discourse and finding in it three primary goals: to situate the memory of the Catalan people in the context of European memory; to convey the repression of the Spanish Civil War and the ensuing dictatorship to an international audience; and to bear witness to the responsibility of the Franco regime in the events of the Holocaust and the Nazi atrocities.

Keywords

audio-visual memory

collective memory

documentary

exile

holocaust

Televisió de Catalunya

A work of ‘rescue’

The narration of historical memory has been one of the core themes of documentaries and dramas produced by Televisió de Catalunya (TVC) ever since the network was created. While some of these productions have sought to tell a story in which the Catalan perspective is addressed, others have strived more overtly to ‘rescue’ historical memory through the gathering of testimonies and through field research carried out by a first-rate team of journalists and documentary-makers. Far from anchoring its output in the remote past, TVC quickly came to focus on the trauma of the Civil War, the repression of the Franco regime and, most recently, the Transition to Democracy. One of the reasons for this approach was that first-hand testimony could still be obtained from the people who had experienced the trauma portrayed.

TV3, the first and main channel broadcast by TVC, was created five years after the ratification of the Spanish Constitution (1978), which explicitly enshrines the freedom of expression. From the outset, it embarked on a dialectically ambitious project that, while it would address various periods of history, would inevitably arrive at the theme of the policy on historical memory at the time of the Spanish Transition; a policy that, as accurately described by Marta Rovira (2014), had been and continues to be an exercise in the appropriation of history, founded in dishonest practices, negotiated silences and the construction of a self-serving, quasi-mythological discursive hegemony (centred on the King, the Constitution and its ‘fathers’, etc.). As many authors have remarked (Castelló 2014; Herrmann 2008), among the documentaries that have most seriously contested this discourse there are those produced by Montse Armengou and Ricard Belis, which deal with some of the darkest and unknown episodes of repression under Franco. In this sense, TVC’s attitude towards the traumatic past has been different from the Spanish public channel TVE which, although it has also covered some of these issues – specially during the socialist terms of Rodríguez Zapatero – has traditionally taken a more soft position in regards of denouncing Francoist’s atrocities.

As it produced more documentaries and historical series, TVC gradually steered away from its initial approach. One of the keys to this change of course was the ratification of the Ley de Memoria Histórica/Law on Historical Memory under the socialist government of José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero (Jefatura del Estado 2007), bringing a new legal framework that did little more than paper over the lack of a genuine rethinking of State policy on historical memory. Productions such as *Els nens perduts del franquisme/Lost children of Francoism* (Armengou and Belis 2002), *Les fosses del silenci/The Graves of Silence* (Armengou and Belis 2003) and *El comboi dels 927/The Train of the 927* (Armengou and Belis, 2004) revived the ghosts of a collective suffering that had long gone untold, even going so far as to trace a line between the Franco regime and the Nazi concentration camps. The Law on Historical Memory marked the failure of the Spanish legal system to impose bold new policies that would tackle the past (now contested) head-on and establish a collective memory from the perspective of the victims.

The reaction was a turn towards themes that would bring a more international

dimension to the narrative output of TV3. This had already begun with the documentary *Ramon Perera, l'home que va salvar Barcelona/Ramón Perera, the man who saved Barcelona*, which was aired on the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War (Armengou and Belis 2006). The programme linked the indiscriminate bombing of civilians in Barcelona to the London Blitz, through the figure of the engineer who designed the air-raid shelters in the Catalan capital. TVC began to seek an international perspective on the conflict, presenting narratives that established links with broader European events. In line with this approach, TV3 began to co-produce documentaries with international partners, for example *Història d'una anarquista/History of an Anarchist* (Littlewood, 2007), which told the story of Ethel McDonald, a Scottish militant who had lived through the Spanish anarchist revolution and worked as a journalist in Barcelona in 1933. TVC built on this discourse with documentaries on little-known events such as *El tresor del 7é camió/The Treasure of the 7th Truck* (Solé, 2008e) about the hidden funds of the Spanish Republic; *El llegat de la maternitat d'Elna/ The legacy of Elna's maternity* (Montella and Espinosa, 2008), on the mothers and children that were born and grown there; and docu-series such as *Els diaris de Pascal/Pascal's Diaries* (Gallifa and Castejón 2009) and the more recent fictional drama *Tornarem/We shall Return* (Sol 2011). All them had an approach that offered an international dimension of the Civil War and its consequences.

The trend to internationalize the viewpoint about the past was also clear in some TVC productions that were oriented towards investigating the relationships between Francoism and the German nazi regime during World War II. This is the case with *Boira negra/Black fog* (2008), a documentary series in four programmes directed by Felip Solé. The series explores the close collaboration between Franco and Hitler in the persecution of mutual enemies. The plot shows the influence of anti-Semitic policies in Spanish territory and one of the episodes, *Fugint dels Nazis/Fleeing the Nazis* (Solé 2008c), describes how the escape networks through the Pyrenees were organized. Shocking eye-witness accounts from the Catalan guides through the mountains (*passadors*) connect the tragedy of the Jewish people with the courage and drama of the Catalan oppressed rural population.

This body of work continues to grow with productions like *Avi, et trauré d'aquí/Grandfather, I'll remove you from here* (Armengou and Belis 2013) on the Fallen Valley (Valle de los Caídos) or the most recent contribution being the documentary *Els internats de la por/Boarding schools of fear* (Armengou and Belis, 2015), which moves beyond denunciations of the dictatorship to place a new focus on the tragic events that also took place during the Transition. All in all, and considering not only the above-mentioned productions but the vast amount of those focused on the collective memory of the dictatorship, TVC has been the most prolific TV producer of documentaries and series focusing on the victims of the Franco regime.

Persecuted and saved

In the summer of 2014, the Provincial Council of Lleida announced the creation of the project 'Perseguits i salvats'/'Persecuted and Saved', which aimed to recover the memory of thousands of people, most of them Jewish, who had crossed the Pyrenees from France during World War II to flee repression and genocide in Nazi Germany. The project was part of a wider initiative supported by the European Union and a range of institutions including the universities of Lleida, Perpignan and Barcelona. In

addition to the launch of a website containing text resources and video reports about the project,¹ signposts were erected along several of the routes that the fugitives had taken across the mountains, connecting various towns and villages on either side of the border.

Six months later, TVC showed the documentary *Perseguits i salvats. Camins de nit i boira* (Solé, 2014), which continued Solé's previous work on escape networks and support for Jewish refugees in Catalonia (*Fugint dels Nazis* 2008c) by combining interviews filmed for the original project with dramatizations and re-enactments of experiences recounted by Jewish exiles from occupied France. This section offers a reflection on the narrative, structural and discourse mechanisms that the documentary uses to situate the Catalan experience in European and international collective memory of the period, linking local experiences of repression under Franco to a global past of Nazi persecution.

How is the recognition of a Catalan identity achieved within a shared international identity? The film looks at the story of those who crossed the Pyrenees to escape World War II through the eyes of its protagonists. Using the model of 'history from below', the narrative takes up the viewpoint of the fugitives who crossed the mountains from France to escape persecution and death, who saw Spain as a source of hope. With the exception of brief contributions by historians and archivists, the documentary focuses on the first-hand accounts of Jewish survivors, who formed part of the armed resistance against the Nazis and organized the flight of thousands of people from European shores, or who embarked on one of the many expeditions to escape to Catalonia on foot.

Through this series of accounts, we learn how the resistance movement to save Jewish fugitives operated and what the escape through the mountains was like. As the narrative progresses, however, alongside the testimonies of the survivors we also hear the accounts of local residents in the towns and villages around Lleida that the refugees arrived in. The documentary shows how events that have been ingrained on the memories of the surviving Jews match the recollections of locals in the Vall d'Aran and Pallars Sobirà about the early part of the 1940s. The excerpts from interviews are put together sequentially, alternating between the testimonies of Jewish survivors and those of local residents, who describe the same places, name the same people, and tell the same stories; this structure reinforces the veracity of the stories and establishes the narrative that binds the Jewish and the Catalan people together. The memory of the past is constructed as a mosaic around a single discourse formed by the two voices: local residents and Jews from many European countries, whose personal experiences tell a shared story.

The intertwining of these two voices, which reveals the intersection between the identities of the Catalan people and of Europe's persecuted Jews, is mirrored in the visual presentation of the documentary: the dynamic editing displays images of places in Catalonia recalled by the fugitives (mountainous areas, villages, checkpoints, border crossings...) at the points at which they are reached in the interviews. Contemporary scenes are combined with old images (archive footage and photographs) that raise the dramatic tension of the narrative when the story requires it. Sometimes personal photographs of the protagonists – as valuable historical artefacts of the period in their own right – are displayed in parallel with the survivors' accounts.

The documentary is also notable for its use of fictional scenes created for the screen,

with historical dramatizations to illustrate the most moving points in the story. The scenes themselves are simple and sparsely produced, generally without dialogue, and reproduce the hardships faced by the fugitives in their journey across the Pyrenees, often with no provisions or suitable preparation and in terribly harsh conditions. Broad panoramas in sombre tones bring out the imposing mountains beneath a grey, windswept sky (see Figures 1 and 2), and close shots of the feet and legs of the actors as they walk one in front of the other highlight the difficulties of marching for hours, day and night, through the snowy terrain (see Figures 3 and 4). The scenes of the escape experience embodied in the actors are a vivid illustration of the reality of the events and strengthen the bond between viewers and protagonists in two ways, namely by building a sense of empathy and fostering a greater knowledge of history

The complex structure of the testimonies presented in the documentary has another layer; a thread running throughout the film is the presence of those who are no longer with us, who we learn about through survivors or from the accounts of their relatives and descendants. This is the case of two Portuguese Jews, the brothers Joel and Samuel Sequerra, who worked for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Barcelona coordinating support for the Jews in Catalonia; another is Miguel, the customs chief in the municipality of Les who defied his orders and allowed fugitives free passage to prevent their capture by the Nazis (in the mould of Oscar Schindler). Interviews with the descendants of hotel and spa owners who took in refugees complete the description of a support network that aided Jewish escapes in Catalonia throughout World War II.

The final part of the film is particularly striking, bringing us interviews with people who had featured only in the accounts of the other participants: the guides who led the Jews on either side of the border. The documentary ends with the first-hand accounts of two Catalan border guides who led Jewish refugees through the mountains, explaining what had led them to work with the resistance movement: if Hitler lost the war, perhaps they could ‘get rid of Franco’ (expression used by one of the guides in the documentary).

Contributing to a European memory

Perseguits i salvats is a novel and interesting contribution to the body of television documentaries that address the recent past of Catalonia, shedding light on an aspect of the early years of the dictatorship and World War II about which very little is known. It highlights a largely unexplored side of the relationship between the Franco regime and Nazi Germany and, through a remarkable study that combines the testimonies of Jewish survivors with a variety of local accounts, connects the collective memory of international history to local stories from the Catalan regions.

Studies such as the one by Rosa Sala Rose (2011) on fugitives from the Nazis in Spain show that the people who fled across the Pyrenees were a diverse group and did not consist solely of Jews. Sala Rose describes how the ‘free zone’, as Spain was considered, in fact became ‘an unexpected trap’, run by a collaborationist government (2011: 24), where thousands of refugees were held for months or even years in jails or in Franco’s concentration camps, if they were not escorted directly back to the border. *Perseguits i salvats*, by contrast, focuses exclusively on the experiences of Jewish fugitives. Broadly speaking, it deals with the many difficulties they faced when

reaching the frontier zone and their frequent arrest by the Spanish police and subsequent deportation to France, but the narrative looks at events from a novel angle: how hundreds of people fleeing the Holocaust were saved thanks to the activism and solidarity of Catalans.

The emotive power of the documentary and its particular emphasis on eliciting the empathy of viewers are designed to transmit a specific message: through the human tragedies in the personal accounts of the fugitives, the film highlights Catalan support for the anti-Nazi resistance movement during World War II, both in the clandestine organization of escape networks and through the spontaneous assistance of local villagers. *Perseguits i salvats* is a tribute to the men who risked their lives as border guides, and to the many unnamed citizens who helped the fugitives in their flight to Catalonia. This support helped to save the lives of hundreds of Jews in the context of the fear, repression and fierce vigilance of the French Spanish border in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, and establishes a link between the history of fascist repression in Catalonia and the international memory of the Holocaust.

In addition to its importance in sustaining historical awareness and understanding of the Holocaust and the post-war situation in Spain, the film is also a valuable historical record because of its interviews with elderly Catalans who had been border guides in their youth and the local accounts gathered from the towns and villages of Lleida that witnessed the arrival of the fugitives. There is also significant historical value in the archive footage and photographs of the post-war frontier towns, customs posts, mountain refuges and other documents shown in the documentary, such as the sketches drawn by a prisoner in Seminari Vell, Lleida, in 1943.

The documentary fits perfectly within the general policy on historical memory that has typified TVC output in recent years. It reveals little-known facts about a traumatic past, gives voice to the victims of fascism, and denounces the complicity of the Franco regime in Nazi atrocities in its account of prisoners who were handed over to the Gestapo by the Spanish border police. Similarly to other documentary sources, *Perseguits i salvats* also explains how the memory of local experience is connected to the history and memory of Europe as a whole, making it possible to construct a collective memory of Catalonia that is tied to a collective memory with an international perspective. In this short note we are not able to display a deeper reflection on how TVC has contributed to link this memory works to the national identity in Catalonia. Despite this, we can affirm that productions like *Perseguits i Salvats* are a clear example of how a product mostly focused for a national audience can also include elements of attraction for an international viewer.

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Note

¹ Source: <http://www.perseguits.cat/en/>, accessed 30 May 2015.