

Digital Memory: The Visual Recording of Mass Grave Exhumations in Contemporary Spain

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Abstract: Exhumations of the victims of Franco's repressive policies are cultural practices of tremendous heuristic value and allow for the analysis of the public emergence, circulation and consumption of traumatic memory in local contexts. The use of visual media to capture social action in the surroundings of the exhumations serves as both a recording and as a triggering device for this emerging social memory. In the first part of this article we shall reflect on the different forms of visual and audiovisual interventions by different social actors that shape around mass grave exhumations. In the second part we will focus on the visual methods used by social scientists, particularly the recording of video-testimony of survivors and witnesses.

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1. Introduction: The "Recovery of Historical Memory" in Spain

Over the last eight years, Spain has seen the emergence of a surprisingly strong social movement, loosely found on the idea of "recovering historical memory." Local organizations with such an aim in view (ARMHs, Asociaciones para la Recuperación de la Memoria) have been mushrooming in different regions of the country. The "recovery movement," which has never failed to spark controversy, mostly focuses on: 1) locating graves and exhuming corpses of the victims of Franco's repressive policies, both during the Civil War (1936-1939) and after Franco's victory, and 2) recording oral testimony from victims and relatives, mostly in digital video format. Archaeologists, forensic doctors, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and other scientists have been cooperating with their specific expertise in the whole process. [1]

Recent historical research estimates the number of people executed by Franco's troops during and after the war in the range of 70,000 to 100,000 (JULIÁ, 1999). Modes of execution included: a) full-scale massacres, such as the one that took

place in the bullring of Badajoz in 1936, where 1,000 to 1,500 prisoners were allegedly shot, and b) the so-called "sacas" or "paseos" ("strolls"), a generalized terror and death technique where prisoners, drawn from jails and concentration camps, or citizens, deemed collaborators of the defeated Republican government, and therefore included in execution lists drawn up by local Franco agents, were driven in trucks at dawn and shot in isolated places, abandoned on the spot or dumped into ditches. [2]

Vengeful forms of extreme violence took place on both sides in the Civil War, and debates as to who was first, who was reacting and who was more systematic and cruel in their use of violence are common in Spanish historiography. Yet while many of the numerous war victims belonging to the winning side, including those illegally executed either by irregular troops or popular tribunals on the Republican side, were named, located, exhumed and commemorated in due course during the first years of Franco's dictatorial rule, the corpses of many of the defeated still remain in unmarked graves by roadsides, cemeteries or battlefields. Until 2000, aside from a number of exhumations that had a mostly regional, local or merely familial impact, as well as the late-50s official, albeit semiclandestine, rush to find bodies and bury them in the Valle de los Caídos (Valley of the Fallen), a thick shroud of silence used to hang over the subject of Spanish Civil War mass graves (FERRÁNDIZ, 2006, 2007, 2008). [3]

The recent swift upsurge of the ghosts of the Spanish Civil War, who had lain still for six decades, has thrown the country into an unexpected public debate exposing conflicting political cultures, both from an ideological and a generational viewpoint. The generations born since the sixties, who were children when Franco died, who neither fully experienced the dictatorship nor participated in the political bargaining surrounding the 1977 Amnesty Law, were to learn that the country's much touted democratization and modernization were founded on neglected, yet unquiet graves. They began to question the political pacts established by their elders after Franco's death. [4]

Exhumations of Civil War graves in the last seven years were closely connected at first with civil-society initiatives and the media's sudden interest. The conditions making it possible for the latter wave of exhumations to occur were nonetheless deeply embedded in the fabric of Spain's civil society, where they had been kept well alive, despite Franco's dictatorship and its mandatory historiographical construction of "Victory," as well as the political agreements paving the way for Spain's democracy in the 1970s. Then, in January 2000, Emilio Silva, a young Madrid-based journalist, set out to exhume the body of his grandfather, who is thought to have been shot in October 1936 and thrown, along with twelve others, into an unmarked grave in the village of Priaranza del Bierzo (León). In October 2000 the grave was opened under the supervision of archaeologists and forensic anthropologists. Along with Santiago Macías, they founded the now well-known *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, ARMH). [5]

Subsequently, new associations began to spring up in different parts of Spain, some of them as regional or provincial sections of the ARMH, or loosely linked to it. Other associations clustered around a second NGO, *Foro por la Memoria* (now split in the *Foro por la Memoria* and the *Federación de Foros por la Memoria*) which is linked to the Communist Party. Several others were autonomous. Since then, hundreds of exhumations have been carried out, ranging from individual graves to mass graves as in Malaga, where roughly 4,000 bodies are thought to have been dumped in the San Rafael cemetery in 1937. [6]

Significant media fuss has accompanied the emergence of the bones from their forgotten graves and the associated re-evaluation of the testimonies of the defeated, they have also given rise to a full scale "meaning industry" (SZTOMPKA, 2000) revolving around memories of the Civil War, not unlike the avalanche of cultural products Germany has seen in the wake of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II and other similar processes. Even as many exhumations take place in small villages—such as Villamayor in the province of Burgos or Uclés in the province of Cuenca—where a large part of rearguard repression occurred during and after the war, the actions connected with them are to be regarded as symptomatic of a large-scale phenomenon that links traumatic memory to different forms of digital recording and visualization. We are dealing with increasingly polyedric global processes of production, circulation and experience of images of past acts of violence, within the framework of public discourse about the past. These have become more and more complex, multidimensional and dependent on media technologies and, consequently, on emerging modes of "trauma imaging and consumption" in a globalized market of images of the uncomfortable past. This paper, which must be regarded as work in progress, is thus part of a broader long term research project focusing on the ways in which the different modes of recording, archiving and distributing digital images associated with exhumations are becoming crucial elements in the process of recovery of "historical memories" in contemporary Spain. [7]

In the first part of this article we shall reflect on the different forms of audiovisual interventions in the context of mass grave exhumations, since this endeavor attracts extraordinary attention from a variety of actors: archaeologists, relatives of the victims, the mass media, documentary film makers and, of course ourselves, the social scientists. In the second part we shall address the way in which visual media is being used by social scientists as an analytical tool designed to help understand the emergence of traumatic memory around mass grave exhumations, and particularly the methodological implications of taking video-testimony in this privileged, ephemeral, unique but rather problematic environment. We will discuss materials gathered through ethnographic fieldwork in Villamayor de los Montes (in the province of Burgos, Francisco FERRÁNDIZ) and Uclés and Huélamas (in the province of Cuenca, Alejandro BAER). [8]

2. The Visuality of Traumatic Memory



Photo 1, Photo 2, Photo 3: Sequence of pictures of the exhumation at Villamayor, Burgos, on July of 2004. First, skeletons of *fusilados* as they are being dug up by forensics and archaeologists. Second, a member of the archaeological team speaks to a member of the local association across the emptied mass grave. Third, the same grave covered with flower bouquets after a commemorative ceremony. [9]

If we examine the forms which memory of genocide and of other modes of extreme violence have taken over the last few decades we find three main ways of recording and displaying a certain form of disappearance: (1) pictures of the open grave with its skeletons or loose bones, (2) the *desaparecidos*' (missing victims) portraits, and (3) video-testimony of the witness or survivor. All three are nowadays conventional modes of visualizing traumatic memory. In today's memorial media culture (HUYSEN, 1993), their iconic power as memory prompts cannot be sufficiently stressed. [10]

Pictures of excavated mass graves with human bones have become an unmistakable sign of human rights violations. We come across these images very often: Cambodia, Argentina, Guatemala, Bosnia, Iraq. Their meaning far exceeds their factual nature, what they actually show. They have become metaphors, ethical points of reference, "secular icons" (BRINK, 1998) whose intensely symbolic varnish overlays its referential information almost entirely. The fact that these sites are also entering the sphere of photo artistic expression shows this progression from document to icon, to memory-art that pleads for remembrance. In our case, for instance, renowned photographer Frances TORRES documented the excavation of a mass grave in Villamayor de los Montes in Burgos containing 47 bodies. His pictures, which have been published in the book "Dark is the room where we sleep" (possibly an allusion to Paul CELAN's well known Holocaust poem *Deathfuge*¹) were first exhibited at the International Center of Photography

1 Its 4th verse says: "we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped" (CELAN, 2001).

in New York and, as we write this paper (June 2008), in MACBA (Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art). TORRES considers these black-and-white pictures, which were taken almost seventy years after the tragic events, to be war photography. And this, in turn, to be critical, cutting-edge action, which is both artistically and politically committed. In his own words,

"I thought then, and still do now, that it is very important for these pictures taken by myself and by others', to become part of the visual conscience of Spanish citizens and those of any other country which has experienced or may yet experience circumstances similar to ours (...) Any open grave is a book with pages of soil where words are written whose letters are bodies, bones, fractures, bullet holes, Mauser bullet shells, handgun shells, buttons, buckles, clothes, shoes, pencils, glasses, watches, and rings" (TORRES, 2007, pp.21-22). [11]

Pictures of the victims prior to their victimization, the images of the so called "desaparecidos"—*missing*—, have become "a widespread, almost epidemic, image of tragedy and defiance that is just as much a part of our planetary imagination as the all-pervasive brands and logos, which obviously convey a very different sort of message," writes Chilean playwright Ariel DORFMAN (2006). Furthermore, he stresses the fact that, given their iconographic power and visual transgression potential, they are the most appropriate response to the disappearances, since they reverse the politics of invisibilization of the victims by meeting the needs of contemporary media with "extreme efficiency and extraordinary poetry." In our case, pictures of those who disappeared in Franco's mass graves, which are carried and often shown by their children and grandchildren, as well as "retaken" in digital form and distributed through the new media, play as well into this universal symbolic language of traumatic memory in its most demanding form². They are documents that establish a factual link to the heap of bones unearthed as they enter into a global pool of images of repression, loss, terror and violence. Their impact goes far beyond their evidentiary or explicit value. As Claudia FELD (quoted in LANGLAND 2005, p.89) points out with regard to the trials of the military Juntas which ruled Argentina during the 1970ies, photography also serves as "implicit" documentary proof, which implies that the "truth" established in law courts may not be enough. "The 'truth' needs to be corroborated by the frozen image" and photography, being the "undeniable trace of 'what has been', seems the most adequate medium to achieve this." In our case, similarly, it is not only historical fact, but also its emotional impact, that is, its capacity to arouse a sense of personal connection to what is being shown, which gives photography—and particularly these pictures—its singular role in these contexts. In addition, the act of looking at—witnessing—photographs that symbolize past injustice and present social trauma enlarges the "'us' community" (LANGLAND 2005, p.90) a fundamental dimension of the memory recovery movement.

2 Grassroots organizations, such as the local section of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la memoria histórica (ARMH) in Cuenca or in Burgos are making every effort to locally document and communicate (through exhibitions and homages) the Regime's repression in the area during and after the Civil War. Portraits of the victims, images from the exhumations and video-testimonies are fundamental visual tools in these projects.

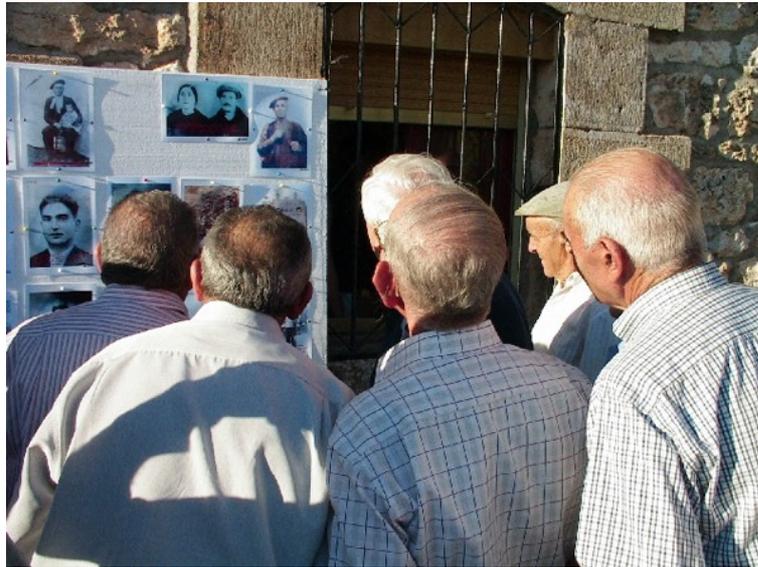


Photo 4: Villamayor neighbors confronting pictures of the exhumed "disappeared" in an exhibition panel outside the village's Civil Center during the "corpse devolution" public act (2006) [12]

As regard to the third type of visualization of disappearance, namely video-testimonies, the mission attributed to them, as Annette WIEVIORKA (1994) has emphasized, "is no longer to bear witness to inadequately known events, but rather to keep them before our eyes." In other words, what is valued here, again, lies beyond the explicit content of the testimony. It is the actual act of bearing witness to the traumatic events. The term "moral witness" (MARGALIT, 2002), as opposed to the judiciary—or epistemological—witness is quite meaningful in these contexts. Video-testimony in particular, of survivors or witnesses, serves this purpose with extraordinary force. In the mass grave exhumation projects, recording video-testimony is almost as important as the exhumation. As the corpses are made visible, the disappeared recover their identity through the spoken words and bodily expression of those who remember them. The video-testimony archive of "memory donors" is not only a source of information, though we certainly encounter insufficiently known events on occasion, or at least events which were never spoken about publicly or for historical record. However, the different video-testimony undertakings and their digital collections are restitution projects and moral containers, symbols of past tragedy and present homage. In short, we might say, paraphrasing FOUCAULT (1969/2002) that the document becomes the monument. [13]

In what follows we will reflect on the different forms of visual recording at the exhumation site by different social actors, and in so doing will take into consideration the differing cultural practices and discourses in which they are embedded. We will show that the three conventional forms of visualization of the disappeared mentioned above—namely bones, portraits and testimonies—serve as a background pattern which is present in the various forms of digital production, circulation and consumption of traumatic memory in these contexts. [14]

3. Archaeologists and Forensic Anthropologists: Visualizing and Deciphering the Past



Photo 5: Archaeologist taking photographs of the exhumed remains in Villamayor (Burgos, 2004) [15]

Archaeologists and forensic doctors working on exhumations, like the oral historian or the social memory ethnographer, work on what is left of the past. The archaeologist focuses on the material aspects, while the former does on both material and discursive features. Whether being aware of it or not, they all work not so much on the past as on a socially, culturally, symbolically and politically mediated relationships between past and present. Archaeologists at these killing sites dig up the ground, systematically record the findings, and collect objects as evidence, in our case mainly the remains of the murdered Republicans, their personal objects, as well as the many traces left behind by the act of violent killing (bullets, marks of *perimortem* torture or mistreatment, details regarding the disposition of the bodies in the mass grave, and so on). Archaeologists and forensics usually say that "the corpses speak." And they do, in fact, through the different visual discursive practices involved in their *métier* within a certain regime of knowledge. By working with what remains of the past they translate the materiality of the object into surrogate mediating forms such as images, which are very useful for the identification of the corpses and the reconstruction of the crime scene down to every minute detail, as shown by their technical reports.³ The digging teams use mostly photographic cameras to record evidence before the bodies are removed, and also during the identification process in the laboratory. They do it methodically and at times also compulsively, as a direct result of the "cheap shooting" brought about by the new technologies of digital imaging,—as we will also see in regard to the relatives.⁴ Archaeologists and forensic doctors similarly use their unlimited access to the evidence uncovered

3 See for example the one on Olmedillo de Roa at <http://www.sc.ehu.es/scrwwsr/Medicina-Legal/olmedillo/olmedillo.pdf>. Forensic and archaeological reports are a crucial "memory translation point" in the whole process, and will be analyzed more thoroughly in the future.

not just for technical reasons within their own structure and styles of truth production, but also with crucial pedagogical goals. As technical experts taking part in the exhumations are often required to participate in events at civic centers in villages and University contexts alike, long-winded PowerPoints have become the norm in the process of "knowledge devolution" to society at large. [16]

In an appealing text archaeologist Michael SHANKS (2006) underlines that both photography and archaeology "establish relationships—'modes of engagement' with the remains of the past." Past events are "brought to us by a turn, a conjunction, an act of connecting traces of the past with present interests." Attention is shifted from "discovery" to the active and productive nature of the archaeological and forensic relationship with the past, this "working on the past" that is closely connected in our case with the cultural politics of recovery of social memory by grassroots organizations. Pictures enable us to work through the traces and to probe into a past which is not quite over. [17]

4. The Victim's Relatives: Between Memory and History

As mentioned earlier, the initiative in the so-called "Recovery of historical memory" movement lies chiefly with "third generation" relatives, known also as the "grandchildren generation." Members of this generation, who are now in their thirties and forties, are active in the whole process of researching, documenting, and honoring the memory of their relatives who, as we discussed before, were neglected and rendered invisible by the political compromises reached in the course of Spain's transition to democracy. A swift progression from silence and oblivion in local contexts to an outburst of memory in clearly visual and digital formats, which at times finds its way into global networks, has much to do with the fact that this is an "audiovisual generation," and hence very familiar with the handling of visual media and aware of the importance of "being there" in the global pool of traumatic memory representations. Although, as explained before, some relatives and associations are still reluctant to open graves, with the attendant public exposure of the bones, and resent certain forms of representation of loss and pain, which they view as lacking in the "appropriate dignity," many others are truly committed to the task of "visibilization"—both in a metaphorical and a literal sense—and remain very active in the different stages of the exhumation. They are involved as volunteers, as local historians gathering documents in church or provincial archives, as oral historians collecting testimonies, as image-makers digitally recording everything which may capture their attention, and so on. The visual and audiovisual aspects of their involvement are most apparent when these relatives take pictures and record digital videos of exhumations, homages and burials, and create blogs and WebPages containing the visual material they themselves record in these memory places and ceremonies. Furthermore, the process of digital imaging of memory is being transformed as technology becomes cheaper and more widely available. At times, quicker or even instant visual consumption of emerging memory may occur

4 For example, after the exhumation at Villamayor, one of the archaeologists who participated in the digging prepared and distributed a CD-ROM with almost 600 images, all of them taken with his sole camera.

as, for example, pictures or video clips taken with mobile phones in exhumations or commemorative events are swiftly distributed within certain "memory recovery" networks. In turn, the quality of images taken by relatives differs widely, ranging from amateurish to more expert recordings. Out of frame and focus yet emotionally charged pictures abound. However, on occasion, relatives who happen to be professional cameramen or filmmakers have gone as far as producing full scale documentaries. Such is the case of *Olvidados*, produced by Jesús Zamora—great-nephew of Vicente Díez Villaverde, shot on September 13, 1936 at the age of 27—on the Villamayor exhumation (Photo 6)⁵. Gathering family stories goes hand in hand with the work of establishing the facts for the broader socio-political history of contemporary Spain. Memory (both personal and collective) and history intermingle around the exhumation's audio/visual interventions and its archive.



Photo 6: Jesús Zamora, in the act of videorecording the exhumation at Villamayor, 2004, with a professional camera



Photo 7: Republican homage at the Uclés exhumation 2006, being digitally recorded by relatives [18]

Private mourning and political allegiance blend into rituals that involve direct relatives and the "memory community" at large (see Photo 7). Image production, circulation and reception play a prevalent role. Youtube and Websites display several of these video recorded homages (see for example *Homenaje a los fusilados Republicanos en El Escorial*, an event organized by relatives of the victims.) They are the final outcome of this nearly compulsive image-making activity at the sites of memory, which is an increasingly important feature of the whole socio-political ceremony. [19]

5 The story of this documentary is highly illustrative of the local impact of images and testimonies of Fascist repression even seven decades later. Many of the testimonies Jesús Zamora and his brother Raúl gathered throughout the village and at the very exhumation site during the exhumation were given on condition that the documentary was not shown in Villamayor. It was thus premiered in the region in the course of a Summer School in the University of Burgos in July 2005. Not surprisingly, the auditorium was packed with people from many of the villages affected by the September 1936 shooting, including many neighbors from Villamayor.

There are also private (familiar) acts of remembrance, which usually take place after the exhumation. Relatives gather for the inhumation of the remains, which sometimes occurs at the local cemetery (Photo 9) or in the hometown of the victim (Photo 8): the dead are thus said to be "coming home," as an article in *Die Zeit*⁶ aptly expressed it. The notion of "proper" or "decent" burial takes on a special significance here, in that it is held (by the prevalent historical memory discourse) to be the fitting restitution for victims and relatives who were deprived of memory⁷. Again, this act of restitution, which marks the actual ending of the exhumation process, needs to be visually documented. Moreover, its digital register, archive, widespread distribution and projection have become an integral part of the restitution process.



Photo 8: Burial of the exhumed remains of Antonio Millán in Puebla de Alcocer (Badajoz) in 2007. The body was exhumed in Huélamos (Cuenca).



Photo 9: Relatives taking digital memory-pictures by the collective tombstone after the reinterment of 47 bodies in the cemetery of Villamayor in 2006 [20]

Relatives also bring visual material to the exhumation site such as photographs, drawings, objects, etc. Stature, shape of the skull, etc. can sometimes be inferred from a photograph and may allow comparison with the exhumed remains. But this material is not only used for such technical purposes of identification. An activity worth noting is the actual re-picturing (and thus digitalizing) of photographs from the family album on the spot. We have a whole range of re-picturing pursuits and objectives. Some pictures are taken for the associations' digital archives, for the webpages and blogs, but most interesting are those involving both the victims' picture and that of the relative, as seen below (see Photo 10). In acts such as these, generational gaps and kinship links coalesce in fresh digital imaging. [21]

6 *Die Zeit*, 22.05.2003, Nr.22.

7 "We want to pay homage to our grandparents, our parents. All those people who paved the way for the freedom and peaceful coexistence we enjoy today. We can think of no better homage to them than recovering their remains, which are scattered in illegal and irregular graves and reintegrate them into society. Reintegrate them into cemeteries, which is the place where people are buried in normal healthy societies. I don't understand why the victims of Franco's terror must be treated worse than animals," Máximo Molina, Chairman of Cuenca Chapter of the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (ARMH), during a public event in Fuenlabrada, Madrid.

As the unknown corpse is identified through archeological and forensic procedures, this act of public re-picturing allows for something even more essential: to provide the "invisible" *desaparecido* with his/her image. "I will be a clump of nettles beneath your feet; ah, then know that I had a face like you." The final verses of the poem *Exodus* by Benjamin Fondane⁸, displayed in several Holocaust museums in connection with the victims' pictures, resonate strongly in this context. Here it is the relative who brings the picture from the family album and who is photographed with it, hence expressing a personal connection with the victim, as well as making a statement about his/her dramatic and unjust fate. The image of him/her holding the picture can be regarded as a testimony, a form of commitment, as the veritable act of memory that is to symbolically reestablish continuity as well as to acknowledge the traumatic loss.⁹



Photo 10: Image display in Huélamos (Cuenca) [22]

8 Benjamin Fondane was murdered at Auschwitz in 1944.

9 The picture from Huélamos shows another dimension of the exhumation process. The relative holds a wine bottle in his left arm and an opener in his hand, since they are about to have a picnic just a very short distance away from the grave that is being undug. This is indicative of small scale exhumations (usually one or two corpses) where family members, who usually come from outside the village (in this case they are from the province of Badajoz, more than 300 km away) meet the archaeologists or forensic anthropologist team and spend the day(s) of the exhumation with them, sometimes volunteering in different tasks. The commitment of the grass roots organization (as the Cuenca chapter of the ARMH) is greatly appreciated by the relatives, who usually develop a tight emotional bond to the experts and volunteers over the course of the exhumation.

5. The Media: At the Limits of Representation

We will briefly consider the role of the media in this polymorphic process of image-producing. Since the first exhumation in Priaranza del Bierzo in 2000 mass media (mainly television crews) have been notably present and grave diggings swiftly became desirable shooting sites. The impact and demand for these images was not merely a consequence of morbid TV sensationalism although, as we shall see below, the anticipated media impact was a subject of controversy amongst some NGOs, especially at the outset. Media products are also of very different kinds, ranging from more sensationalist reports to quality and widely influential investigative journalism. The exhumation of corpses provided explicit material evidence of the repressive policies put in place by Franco's regime and nurtured ongoing and vivid public controversy over the interpretation of Spain's recent history. Television has included widely different kinds of audiovisual material of and on the exhumations in news programs and documentaries.¹⁰ News and pictures of the exhumations appeared regularly in local and national newspapers from 2001 to 2007. This media publicity had different consequences: on the one hand, it has given the "memory recovery" movement an important social boost, by triggering off a chain reaction: families all around Spain began to search for their relatives, new organizations emerged and the ARMH expanded its local sections; witnesses got in contact with the organizations in order to provide testimony¹¹ or information about the location of mass graves in their area, etc. On the other hand, at the very sites, in Internet debates, in association meetings, the acknowledgment of the potential presence of TV cameras and reporters sparked at times harsh debates on the ethical limits of representation (i.e. issues such as the judiciousness of filming the corpses, or the grief of family members at the very moment when the bones emerge), and raised controversy over their sometimes disturbing presence, the fact that they interfere in the process by seeking sensational shots or addressing people on the spot in search of dramatic sound bite-type testimonies (we shall reflect on this matter in the section devoted to video-testimony methodology). The uncomfortable images of heaped corpses bearing marks of violence have provoked widespread debates in Spanish society, particularly within and between the various groups striving to recover the memory of the victims of Franco's repression. Early on in the process, exhumations were considered by several other Associations¹² as an "erasure of genocide" or even a "second killing" of the victims. It was felt that they were carried out for media consumption and personal profit, and thus flouted the powerful denunciation of injustice inscribed in the buried bones as silent and invisible witnesses of the atrocities. According to this rationale, such associations

10 Several programs and documentaries on this subject were aired on TV in the last few years: *Las fosas del silencio* (2003), *Rejas de la memoria* (2005), *Muerte en el valle* (2005), *La guerrilla de la memoria* (2001). Ten of the best known documentaries are currently sold in a pack called *Imágenes contra el olvido: Lo que nunca se contó del franquismo* (*Images Against Oblivion: What was Never Told about Francoism*), distributed by Impulso Records. See <http://www.imagenescontraelolvido.com/>.

11 The so called "donantes de memoria" (memory donors) campaigns are closely linked to the publicity of the exhumation's phenomenon. As in other countries, media exposure enhanced the video-testimony projects (see BAER, 2001).

12 Such as the Asociación de Familiares y Amigos de la Fosa Común de Oviedo, or the Archivo Guerra y Exilio (AGE).

instead promote, the "dignification" of the graves through their localization, demarcation and incorporation into commemorative cycles. Exhumations would only trigger conflict and promote a culture of "TV-luridness" by transmuting the decorum and dignity owed to survivors and victims' relatives into a commercial manipulation of pain. Over the last few years, visibility of exhumations has become increasingly normalized and mainstream as a result of their entry into mass media formats. The kind of images they generate collect in the viewer's memory, while the different technical, social, political and symbolic actions linked to the undigging of mass graves are increasingly reabsorbed into a global pool of images of horror and violence (FERRÁNDIZ, 2006, 2007, 2008).



Photo 11: TV Crews around a mass grave exhumation [23]

6. The Visual Methods of Social Scientists

The clearly visual and material nature of the process of mass grave exhumation and the richness of interactions that take place in this revealing and difficult context make visual methods extremely useful to the sociologist or anthropologist. From an ethnographic perspective, our research aimed to explore the different forms of public emergence, circulation and consumption of traumatic memory in local, regional, national as well as international contexts, by using the exhumations as a methodological starting point. On this score, we must emphasize that many of the events taking place in and around the exhumation are expressly designed to be digitally recorded. Commemorative events taking place in and around the grave (or having the victims as a central theme) can be regarded as a specific form of "performance," in which language and visual aspects need to be carefully studied. The performative nature of this set of cultural practices suggests the usefulness of applying visual methods, in particular qualitative video analysis (KNOBLAUCH, SCHNETTLER, RAAB & SOEFFNER, 2006). Our analytical attention is focused on the details of the ritual development of the events, the elements shaping them, specificities and variations among different memory recovery associations and on the convergences and divergences with the symbolic forms of an increasingly globalized memorial culture (ALEXANDER, 2002; BAER, 2004, 2006). [24]

Consequently, we used visual media in exhumation environments in three main ways:

1. As a tool in order to record and study the unfolding of traumatic memory in the vicinity of such complex *lieux de mémoire*. We used the camera to record the emergence of improvised ritual choreographies, the establishment of consecrated spaces and symbolic boundaries, as well as the organization of informal homages and new commemorative ceremonies;
2. to record and analyze the multiple actions of photographing and video recording of memory emergence on the part of different social actors; these range from journalists to experts and victims' relatives. As we have pointed out before, the pictures and videos being disclosed do not represent reality—or not only—but are a fundamental part of the reality they purportedly represent. For this reason we tried to approach reflexively the process of exhumation, by ascribing a crucial role to image-making itself (including ours);
3. to record video-testimony, which is a particularly challenging task, that calls for a methodological reflection. This is the purpose of the following section. [25]

As pointed out above, the main goals of the pro-exhumation associations were the identification of the disappeared and the recounting of the experiences of Spanish Civil War victims. The process of identification and exhumation notably involves the gathering by experts and untrained volunteers alike of testimonials of witnesses and relatives of those killed during the early postwar years. These testimonials, expressed in local idioms of distress, suddenly acquired special relevance as necessary companions of the exhumed bones. Stories that were voiced rarely if at all, and then only in whispers, in family settings and civil society alike during decades, suddenly found in the exhumations and the disturbing caches of bones the *resonance box* they had lacked for more than six decades. Some people speak out about the violence for the first time during the exhumations, while others look around in awe or refuse to give complete names. And some are offended by the presence of "inappropriate" people at the exhumations, such as relatives of the war victors, but also by the intrusive presence of cameras, as mentioned before. As survivors age, the suppressed memories of the generation who suffered most during the war and its aftermath have been on the wane. But following recent exhumations, survivors were suddenly powerfully anchored in the most explicit evidence of the violence, namely the very corpses. In this process, the impenetrable silence imposed by Franco's regime on the victims of his terror policy in the postwar years has irrevocably crumbled, and the consequences of this are still unforeseeable. [26]

First we may begin by addressing the question of whether exhumations are an adequate testimony taking site, as opposed to other more neutral settings. The literature on video-testimony methodology and projects usually focuses either on studio sessions (as in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies) or domestic scenarios as appropriate for testimony taking (BAER, 2005; BAER & SANCHEZ PEREZ, 2004). Some projects, notably the Survivor of the Shoah Visual History Foundation (now USC Shoah Foundation Institute) included,

besides the interviews recorded at the interviewee's home, another type of video-testimony known as "walking interview." This is suitable for those cases in which the interviewee, himself a survivor, lived close to—or revisited—the places that have crucial significance for the interview. The walking interview is actually an addition to the at-home-interview and is regarded in the project's methodological brochure as an opportunity for survivors to elaborate on their testimony by documenting places connected with their experience.¹³ For this mode of testimony, an extra sensitivity was demanded from interviewer and videographer, as well as an in depth preparation beforehand. The interviewer was called upon to find out how many locations the survivor wished to revisit and how much of their story occurred at each location. During the interview the interviewer was meant to encourage the survivor to pinpoint (show, touch, or operate) any objects relevant to their story while on camera. [27]

While the sites of these walking interviews are usually Nazi concentration camps, which were, to some extent, already institutionalized sites of memory (NORA, 1989), the exhumations are places of a different nature. As we have seen in the previous section these locations *become* memory sites while the process of exhumation takes place, and sometimes after it. In this respect, the approach is thus similar to that taken by Claude LANZMANN in his acclaimed documentary project *Shoah* which combines still and walking interviews, and where the camera serves as a catalytic tool to encourage the interviewee's expression on the spot (FELMAN, 2000). Mass graves are usually located in rural areas, in a roadside, or the outskirts of a village. Firstly, a survivor or a witness will locate the grave. As in *Shoah*, which begins with the survivor Simon Srebnik returning to his native Poland and identifying the location of the mass killings in the midst of placid prairies and forests, someone will stand in front of our camera and say "this is the place." The camera's images, together with the witness' words, somehow "undress the landscape" (TORNER, 2002, p.34).



Photo 12: A relative identifies the location of a grave containing seven peasants shot by Franco's troops in 1941 in Fontanosas (Ciudad Real, 2005). [28]

13 Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. The Walking Interview (revised 1/7/97).

Once the undigging of the grave has started, interviewing becomes a particularly difficult task, since exhumations, as we have seen, are very complex places from a social and symbolic viewpoint, particularly when they contain large numbers of bodies, which makes the task of interviewee selection very intricate and unpredictable. For example, potential interviewees at times self-select for reasons unknown to the researcher at the moment of the interview. Procedures need to be established in order to overcome the unavoidable confusion of this kind of social environments. Who is to be interviewed?, we may then ask ourselves. Only "victims," and relatives of victims? How about "visitors," "revolutionary tourists," "politicians," "activists," "other scientists"? Who defines whom is who? How to tell between them? Are some of them more "legitimate" or "interesting" than others? What happens if their roles change over time? Should interviews be public, semi-private or private? Who is to decide on that? (FERRÁNDIZ, 2008) [29]

Exhumations are emotionally charged performances which may, according to certain methodological assumptions, hinder or at least partially invalidate testimonies gathered under these circumstances. The opposite view, though, may plausibly be argued: precisely because of the drama and the uniqueness of the situation, exhumations may be considered to be a proper place to explore the intricacies of oral history in a raw form. This does not mean that exhumations are the only place to record historical memories of the Civil War. In fact, it must be considered as only one within a wide range of scenarios. As a counterpart to this, there is also one crucial fact social scientists on the ground cannot afford to ignore: exhumations are sites where testimonies are spontaneously delivered and many other kinds of information exchanges occur in connection with the tragic events that are literally being brought into public view (more or less formal conversations amongst relatives and neighbors, gossip, political critique, spontaneous poetry, and so on). These testimonies will be offered regardless of the interest shown by social scientists and whether we are present or not. Are we, then, under an obligation to record them in systematic ways, and attempt to reduce the "noises" present in the context of the exhumation as much as possible? It is also true that the presence of a recording team both catalyzes and diversifies the social space in order for potential testimonies to emerge around a mass grave.



Photo 13: A direct witness speaks out for the younger generations in Olmedillo de Roa, Burgos (2003). [30]

In order to establish an *ad hoc* video-based methodology for testimony taking in and around mass graves we need to begin by asking ourselves what our final goals are (this question is not always raised by oral history practitioners). In our case these were: 1. to Contribute to gathering of facts concerning the circumstances of the killings and their aftermath, as well as the physical features of those killed, so as to cross-reference them with data gathered by archaeologists and forensics and contribute to possible identifications. Interviews are the appropriate context for collecting family pictures, letters and objects; 2. gather material for academic analysis regarding social memory in comparative perspective; 3. contribute with the material collected to a future audiovisual archive of testimonies of those "defeated" in the Civil War, who were largely silenced for decades. [31]

With all the problems, limitations and potential advantages in mind, we have kept to a general protocol we created ourselves drew up for volunteers working with ARMH in exhumations, in an attempt to create uniform conditions and sets of technical rules for the interviews on the ground. This protocol can also be used in interviews conducted in scenarios other than the exhumations, and it is largely intended to be used by untrained interviewers; these are often the only ones available on the ground. Given the unpredictability of events connected with the exhumations, it does not propose a rigid interview approach but, rather, a series of strategies which need adapting to different circumstances, although always within the framework of a general method. We shall presently outline the main features of the scheme we have been following:

1. Recognition of the exhumation as a privileged and unavoidable site for testimony taking. Whenever possible, interviews are conducted some distance away from the exhumation site, which is at times reserved for interviewers and interviewees (Villamayor, Uclés). We thereby hope to avoid: (a) direct exposure of the interviewees to the dramatic graves being uncovered during the interview, and (b) to create a safer space for the use of more systematic testimony gathering techniques.
2. Previous research: gathering of all historical and genealogical information available so as to better discriminate between the diverse actors on the ground and conduct relevant case-by-case interviews. Informed assessment of the whole range of possible interviews in order to select best-case studies.
3. Design of a general interview questioning plan, including the main events connected with the mass grave, with a view to administering to all informants. Camera recording of a complete affiliation of the interview (including notably his/her relationship with the mass grave), while keeping a parallel systematic logging of the whole recording process, with individual and standardized files.
4. Whenever possible, preliminary time should be specifically devoted to developing "empathy" with the interviewees, in order to create the necessary confidence for painful memories to emerge in a sympathetic environment of "deep listening" and respect. Possibility of using supporting material (pictures, objects) to elicit certain areas of memory. Special attention should also be paid to the "interview closing."
5. As a general rule: optimize the available techniques and protocols related to the shifting circumstances on the ground. In all cases, a respectful, systematic and organized approach is requisite.



Photo 14: A space prepared for video-testimony taking close to the mass grave in Uclés



Photo 15: Video-testimony recording set close to the mass grave in Villamayor

1. Whenever possible, diversification of the interview scenarios, including family homes, parks, institutional buildings and other relevant sites of memory. In a number of cases, exhumations may serve as opportunities for contact with potential interviewees who do not want or are reluctant to speak under the circumstances but are open to other interview options.
2. Possible interview stages and modalities, according to their features, length and complexity: (a) ideally, interviews with a minimum duration of one and a half hour, to be negotiated case by case according to circumstances and reactions, based on the general questioning plan; (b) in the case of especially articulate informants, combination of more closed and open ended interview strategies, lengthening the duration of the interview; (c) in the case of key informants, use of life story taking techniques in sequential interviews, preferably before, during and after the mass grave diggings. And (d), the possibility of conducting limited collective interviews, specially if they involve relatives; (e) informed recording of spontaneous conversations initially unrelated to the video recording process; and (f) more informal, "on the fly" interviews (unplanned and spontaneous). In terms of progression, establishment of a "target" technique: from general to specific, from trivial to more personal and private.
3. On camera and written consent. Acceptance of whatever conditions may be demanded by potential interviewees, in regard both to the recording process and the future uses of the material, including the interruption of the interview or the erasure of material already recorded. Interviewees can drop out of the process at any time.
4. Crucial attention has increasingly been paid to the technical aspects of the recording. Preference for the use of digital technology. Previous exercises and development of expertise in the handling of equipment. Coordination between team members if necessary. Organize setting to avoid technical problems during the recording (echoes, counter-lighting, "noises") and to minimize camera impact, whenever possible. Use of tripod whenever possible. Special attention must be paid to the quality of sound recording. Diversification of video shots before/during/after the interview to allow for the resulting recording material to be used in documentaries, educational CD-ROMs, etc. Need for some pre-/post-interview panoramic shots to establish the context in which the interview is taking place.
5. Unresolved (with the attendant ethical questions, also in regard to informed consent): custody and uses of the materials gathered. Nowadays, aside from a few cases (Aranzadi in the Basque Country; Project "As vítimas, os nomes, as vozes e lugares" of the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, among others; and soon, the University of California at San Diego Archive and the Memorial Democratic de Catalunya), the scenario is one of fragmentation and heterogeneity. The effect and role of the new Center for Historical Memory recently established in Salamanca has still to be seen. [32]

7. Conclusions: Digital Sites of Memory

The research on this complex and multidimensional topic presented in this paper is still in progress. Therefore the title of this last section—conclusions—may be misleading. However, we would like to finish this paper with some analytical inferences. We have addressed two of the features of our object of study, a theoretical one—traumatic memory and visual (digital) formats—and a methodological one—recording video testimony in exhumation contexts; the latter being intimately coupled with the former, since it is one of the many audiovisual interventions in the memory scene of contemporary Spain. We have tried to link the two realms by examining reflexively this process of triggering, audio-visualizing, storing and spreading memory of loss and trauma, a process we were taking part in, and to which we are also personally committed. [33]

With adaptations of globalized language and forms of traumatic memory Spain lives through this interesting boom of the "recovery of historical memories," which finds in Franco's mass graves its symbolic epicenter. They give rise to a set of new cultural practices and rituals of a civic-political, as well as a personal, nature, which evoke a distressing past but, as any object of memory, tell just as much about our present. A present beset by a culture whose motto is "never forget." The injunction not to forget is inscribed in each of the images taken in an almost obsessive manner by those (of us) who form this heterogeneous memory community. Within this passionate mission of preserving the vanishing traces of a terrible past, videorecording and photographs, serve multiple purposes, as we have seen: to document, to preserve, to honor, to link oneself, to perform identity, etc. But, on a deeper level they also create the shock of "the unimaginable made visible" (LISS, 1998, p.1). [34]

Exhumation projects are trapped in a certain paradoxical dilemma: history or memory of the events. Can this distinction be made, considering that the one is necessarily linked to the other? What is more important, the proof or the symbol of the located—though unburied—grave? Should the facts be established—who is actually buried there and the details of their murder—or is it enough, to "dignify" the graves with monuments and commemorations?¹⁴ These debates bring us back to the importance of production, distribution and consumption of images in this context. Memory is *in progress* during the course of the exhumation (from the moment when the grave is located until flowers are laid in an emptied tomb, as we saw in the pictures above). A few days later, when the archeologist crew has left the site and the homages are over there might be nothing visible left, but a plaque or a sign. The spot that had become the center of attention during the excavation is emptied of the bodies, which had bestowed symbolic power upon it. It is this ontological quality of the unburied victim which is revealed by those opposing the exhumation. Here the image acquires its specific importance. "After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on

14 Within the everyday work of the memory recovery associations these questions were sometimes of a rather practical nature, since requesting excavation was often the only way to avoid the total disappearance of these sites as a consequence of road expansions or building on the terrain.

the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed" writes SONTAG (1982, p.11). The cultural practice of unearthing mass graves which we have outlined in this paper is impossible to imagine without the recording or photographing, archiving and consumption of images. Given the transitory and ephemeral nature of the exhumation, images restore their lost eternity, that of the grave and that of the monument. If the purpose of memory sites is to "stop the time, to block the work of forgetting (...) to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial (...) in order to capture a maximum of meaning" (NORA, 1989, p.19), we can plausibly assume that the audiovisual archive (photographs and video of the exhumation, testimonies, etc.) has become the genuine *lieux de memorie* in a digital memorial culture. [35]

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