

(DIS)AGREEMENTS

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**FROM THE FIRST WORLD  
WAR TO THE PRESENT:  
HISTORY AND MEMORY, A  
CENTURY FOR REFLECTION**

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**THE PAST AND ITS USES:  
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**PAST AND PRESENT: HISTORY,  
MEMORY AND JUSTICE**



introduction

# THE PAST AND ITS USES: REPARATION, RESISTANCE, MANIPULATION, CONSENSUS, CONSUMPTION

RAMÓN GIRONA  
IMMA MERINO

We live in a constant state of obsession with remembering the past; examples of this can be found all around us. However, it seems that there are some pasts that can be remembered with ease, or more peacefully and less controversially than others. In June 2015, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo was celebrated with historical recreations, with soldiers re-enacting the event, and with visits to the historic sites by government representatives from the countries involved. In the United States, episodes from the War of Independence and the American Civil War are also recreated on a regular basis; however, the shooting—also in June 2015—by a white man of several black parishioners at a church in Charleston gave rise to a war of flags (the murderer had made racist proclamations on social networks while proudly posting images of the Confederate flag) until the House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina passed a bill to take down the Confederate flag that was still flying in front

of the State Capitol building. There are many more examples of this conflictive dependence on the past, including, of course, our own past: the past of a Spain still mired in its recent history, that of the Spanish Civil War, with the opposition and effective boycott by Spanish conservatives of the Historical Memory Law. This legislation could have been interpreted as an attempt, after reparations had been made to those families and institutions that had still not received them, to create a national agreement, a shared memory, a consensus that sought to leave reprisals behind and heal the shared wounds of the past once and for all. And the past can also come back in a more tangential way, as in the case of the economic and social crisis in Greece, which (in simplified terms) turned into a confrontation with Germany when, after Greece's capitulation and acquiescence to the negotiation of a third rescue package, reporters asked Chancellor Merkel whether the agreement had reminiscences of the Treaty of Versailles of

1919, whereby the Allies forced Germany to pay immensely severe reparations.

As Enzo Traverso suggests: “the past accompanies the present and settles in the collective imagination as ‘memory’, powerfully amplified by the media, often promoted by the public authorities [...] The past is transformed into collective memory after being chosen, filtered and reinterpreted according to the cultural sensitivities, ethical issues and political interests of the present” (TRAVERSO, 2006: 12)<sup>1</sup>. And the past can also be transformed into a consumer product, susceptible to museumisation, used for tourism, turned into a spectacle, recreated in films...

We could also talk of a certain commemorative obsession that exists in our contemporary societies, and warn of the abuses of memory, as posited by Tzvetan Todorov (1996).

Although human societies have always possessed a collective memory, cultivated in every era through rites and ceremonies, it was in the nineteenth century that this collective memory, and its associated commemorations, would begin to undergo a process of secularisation that gave preference to the exaltation of such values as the fatherland, justice and freedom, and this phenomenon would intensify after the First World War. The first great military conflict of the twentieth century is viewed, again by Traverso, quoting Walter Benjamin (2008), as the point of no return for certain changes that had been prefigured over the course of the nineteenth century.

In the 1930s, Benjamin speculated on the decline of transmitted experience (Erfahrung) in favour of direct experience (Erlebnis). The German philosopher reflected on the transformation—over the course of the nineteenth century—of an agrarian, rurally based social model that had required the construction of individual identity in a markedly stable social and cultural space; an identity that entailed practical knowledge and certain ways of living and thinking that

passed from one generation to the next with few alterations. Memory was intrinsic to everyday life. On this continuum, the process of industrialisation and the rise of modernity over the course of the nineteenth century acted as solvents, until the violent rupture caused by the Great War. Thus, the generation that perished in huge numbers in the trenches was the one that experienced this foundational trauma of the twentieth century in the first person. And, Traverso adds: “the great collective emotion that is evident in the commemorations of the dead of the First World War, already from the beginning of the 1920s, has undoubtedly been the first sign of the emergence of memory linked to a deep crisis in transmission” (2000)<sup>2</sup>.

After the First World War, the tumultuous twentieth century—and the first decades of the twenty-first—have given more than sufficient reason, despite the possible abuses mentioned above, for the invocation of memory, for commemorations and acts of reparation.

The First World War and the current commemoration of its centenary also offer an excellent opportunity to consider—and to ask ourselves—a number of questions about the past, about history, memory and the ways in which society and the powers that be make use of them. ■

## NOTES

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- 1 Quote translated by the editor. In the original text: “el passat acompanya el present i s’instal·la al seu imaginari col·lectiu com una “memòria” amplificada poderosament pels mitjans de comunicació, promoguda sovint pels poders públics [...] El passat es transforma en memòria col·lectiva després d’haver estat triat i garbellat i reinterpretat segons les sensibilitats culturals, els qüestionaments ètics i les conveniències polítiques del present” (TRAVERSO, 2006: 12).
- 2 Quote translated by the editor. In the original text: “la gran emoció col·lectiva que es fa present en les commemoracions dels morts de la Primera Guerra Mun-

dial, ja des de principi de la dècada de 1920, ha estat sens dubte la primera manifestació d'aquesta emergència de la memòria lligada a una crisi profunda de la transmissió" (TRAVERSO, 2000).

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## discussion

**I. It has been suggested that the past is never really past, but also that it changes: the relationship that a society establishes with the facts of the past changes over time. Is the memory of the past, then, being constructed in every present? And if so, how is it constructed today? How is the present reflected in it?**

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### Maximiliano Fuentes

The notion that the past is never past, or, more precisely, that does not want to be past, was given to us, in its original form, by the German historian Ernst Nolte, who in an essay published almost thirty years ago showed the enormous social and cultural attention that the way in which the past was remembered had in Germany. Obviously, in the context of the disputes concerning interpretations of Nazism, this assumed a primordial importance both in intellectual and political terms. Indeed, the debate over the construction of collective memories of the recent past, which in Germany focused on Nazism and on the responsibilities arising from its policies, has in recent decades become one of the focal points of academic analysis and, at the same time, a matter of great social relevance that has been reflected throughout Europe in the controversies surrounding the various issues arising from the misnamed concept of historical memory. As Walter Benjamin tried to explain in different essays, History—and memories as well—is always constructed from the perspective of the present, and, in this sense, the starting points and initial questions formulated by both the historians and the societies with whom these come into dialogue are modified constantly. This does not mean, however, that in every present everything begins all over again. History as an academic discipline develops in a combination of renewal and tradition: in a process of accumulation of knowledge and of tension—and sometimes rupture—with the dominant interpretations. These ruptures occur as the result of new questions that are often triggered by the present. In the case of memories

the situation is more complex because many other factors are involved, ranging from psychological issues to public policy. It is therefore essential to distinguish analytically between memory (or memories) and history. Although both are closely connected and feed into each other, they also follow different lines of development. In the case of memories, the weight of the present, that is, of the dominant interpretations of history, of official public policy and of the construction of collective memories that sometimes even come to construct individual memories that have never really occurred, occupies an unquestionably larger place than it does in academic history. In the last few decades, the present—which as Eric Hobsbawm noted, seems to assume a condition of permanence, i.e., unconnected to the past—has acquired huge significance in the different processes of constructing public memories and in the battles between these memories to occupy the central stage in our views of past and present. The Spanish and Catalan cases demonstrate this. Something similar could be said of the Armenian genocide and the role of the Turkish government in the centenary celebrated this year. As some historians, including Enzo Traverso, have shown, in almost every case the Holocaust paradigm, in its most presentist version, operates as an omnipresent background.

### Miguel Morey

Memory and history belong to different registers. Memory is the living recollection of the past in the present. It is basically oral, collective, strongly emotional and insensitive to the transformations it undergoes on being updated in every present.

History is an intellectual reconstruction of a dead past, a reconstruction that seeks to establish, according to scientific protocols and based on documentary evidence, the truth of the events that occurred in the past and the interpretation of the relationships between them. In its use as a vehicle for political legitimacy, history tends to be a form of memory supported by one part of the events that is considered the truly significant part and by one particular possible interpretation of their relationships. Of course, it is not a history consistent with the scientific reconstruction of the facts, although it is supported by a selection of those facts. To say that one's claims are irrefutable, then, merely means that one is not willing to have them challenged.

### **Jordi Font Agulló**

There are certainly pasts that are never completely relegated to the past. This idea, which has caused furore, is normally related to traumatic events that are hard to digest or assimilate into the liberal and democratic canons, either politically or morally. An example of this is the French collaborationism, Vichy France, which clashes with and distorts the narrative constructed by Gaullism and the leftist resistance after the Second World War.

In societies where a system of freedoms more or less predominates, memory sometimes bursts out unexpectedly and undermines the monolithic visions and narratives of that past, which are usually the product of a convenient reconstruction made from the perspective of the present, whose main purpose is to expel controversy from the public sphere. However, what often happens, as it cannot be otherwise, is that there is not one, single collective or social memory, because memory is essentially conflictive by nature. Therefore, at least in societies governed by certain democratic values based on human rights and freedom of conscience, there cannot—and must not—be a single construction of memory from the perspective of the present. Obviously, the context

of the present always determines our perception of the past, especially the most recent past, which is closely connected to the current time. What needs to exist are certain instruments, certain institutional mechanisms that would make it possible to rescue all of the memories and to put them on the table without sidestepping debate and conflict. Only in this way can there be a democratic process.

Attempts to impose a single memory have been taken to the extreme by totalitarian regimes such as fascism or Stalinism. The result has been the stifling and the erasure of the memories of whole sectors of society. In this case, in a move taken to feverish extremes, a certain selection of events of the past is manipulated through falsification, omission and an interpretative reading whose aim is to mask and legitimise a present social order governed by unjust political practices. In democracies, the reflection of the present in memory, rather than attempting to develop a convenient and non-conflictive narrative, should open up channels through which all memories can be expressed.

### **Javier Cercas**

The idea that the past is never past was posited by Faulkner in *Requiem for a Nun* (what he actually said was that the past “is never dead”, and he added: “It’s not even past”). Of course, he was absolutely right, especially in relation to the recent past, of which there is still living memory: the past is a dimension of the present, without which the present is incomprehensible. The problem is that we live, more and more each day, in a kind of dictatorship or tyranny of the present, created largely by the increasingly overwhelming predominance of the media, which not only reflects reality, but creates it (proof of this is the fact that if something does not occur in the media it is almost as if it had not occurred at all); and for the media, what happened yesterday is already in the past, and what happened last

week is prehistory. We thus live in the illusion that the present is understood only through the present and the past is something foreign to us, accumulating dust in archives and libraries. But at the same time, and perhaps as a futile attempt to compensate for this dictatorship of the present, we live in a kind of permanent state of exaltation of memory (not of the past, but of our memory of the past). This paradox, this contradiction, defines our times, and there would be much to say about it, because it has a lot to do with what Benjamin called the crisis of the transmission, and what I, more simply, call the crisis of history, something that has at least been detectable since the seventies and that reached a climax at the turn of the millennium (in fact, perhaps this crisis of history is nothing more than a new manifestation of the crisis of the transmission). Moreover, it is obvious that the present changes the past; that is, our understanding or our interpretation of the past: the same way that, for example, Kafka changes our reading of Melville or Borges changes our reading of Don Quixote, or the fall of the Berlin Wall changes our interpretation or reading of the Russian Revolution. The past is not something static, given once and for all and forever; it is constantly mutating. That is why the past, like the present and the future, is constructed by all of us, with our books, with our films, with everything we do; with everything: not only with the things that speak of the past.

### **Xavier Antich**

Martin Heidegger, drawing on Nietzsche, pointed out long ago (in one of his texts on Aristotle) that “the situation of interpretation, i.e., of the appropriation and understanding of the past, is always the living situation of the present.” There is no approach to the past, with the intention of understanding it, either in any of the historical disciplines or in the experience of memory (individual or collective) that is not a crossing of various temporalities between the time (past)

whose meaning we are attempting to understand and the time (present) in which the exercise of memory and recollection is being carried out. Indeed, Nietzsche was the first to point out the impossible naivety of an antiquarian history that sought to access the past as if it was an unchanging fossil whose meaning would not be affected by the gaze which, from a subsequent point in time, attempted to examine it. The antiquarian gaze on the past consists, to put it briefly, in considering the past as past, substantially disconnected from the present. From a perspective in opposition to this assumption, like that of Nietzsche and Benjamin, it can be considered that the gaze on the past is unequivocally and irrevocably present, given that the moment in time at which one intends to examine the past, and the mind-set that goes with it, is one of those prejudices of which Hans-Georg Gadamer spoke, of which no interpretation can be ignored because they all form a constituent part of the hermeneutical presuppositions based on which we attempt to analyse the past. There is therefore no memory of the past independent of the present, neutral or independent of the point in time, weighed down by what came after, from which that past is explored. Furthermore, the gaze on the past offers a way, perhaps the most radical, to question the present.

In contrast with the historicism that assumes a fossilised image of the past, Benjamin asserted long ago that history (and with it the memory that turns to the past to consider it and, if possible, understand it) is always a construction of meaning, that is, articulation. This means that history is not already made, nor should it be limited to collecting (or digging up) what has already been made; rather, we must make it or, perhaps more accurate, re-make it. In any case, it should not be with the intention of satiating the desire for knowledge (in the sense of mere curiosity or learning aimed at filling in gaps), nor with the purpose of accurately grasping the supposed truth of past events, since, for Benjamin, the reason for memory and history



lies not in the past, but in the present, and in the urgency with which the present always questions us. As might be expected, Benjamin's approach is directly opposed to a model of memory and history, like the one that underpins historicism and the various forms of positivism, which assumes a supposedly neutral notion of the past, inscribed in a linear, homogeneous, continuous, and yet precisely because of all this, empty time.

The memory of the past, by contrast, is constructed from the present and in the present, because the present supposes an anchoring of the hermeneutical point of view in the moment in time in which the memory is being exercised. There is no memory, nor can there be, oriented and determined only by the past to which it turns: memory, on the contrary, is determined, especially and first and foremost, by the present in which the past is examined. And this gaze upon the past is marked by the present and by all the decisions in the present that ultimately configure the act of remembering.

As suggested by Giorgio Agamben, one of the most illustrious Walter Benjamin scholars of our time, in an observation that develops Benjamin's intuition of the melancholy angel, "the interruption of tradition, which is for us now a *fait accompli*, opens an era in which no link is possible between old and new, if not the infinite accumulation of the old in a sort of monstrous archive or the alienation effected by the very means that that is supposed to help with the transmission of the old. Like the castle in Kafka's novel, which burdens the village with the obscurity of its decrees and the multiplicity of its offices, the accumulated culture has lost its living meaning and hangs over man like a threat in which he can in no way recognise himself. Suspended in the void between old and new, past and future, man is projected into time as into something alien that incessantly eludes him and that still drags him forward, but without allowing him to find his ground in it." Thus, in opposition to the phantasmagoria that

would make of the past an immense sleeping legacy, in the face of which history and memory should be limited to a ceremony of transmission that is as neutral as possible, proceeding quietly so as not to awaken it, thus feeding the mythology of the present (according to the analysis, very close to Benjamin's, offered by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), Benjamin advocates a gaze on the past that is aware that it is made up of fragments of ruins that do not make up a whole, whose meaning depends precisely on the capacity for thought to produce short circuits in the institutional apparatus of transmission and to make cracks that can reveal the essential discontinuity of this pile of ruins.

### **Carmen Castillo**

I think memory is constructed in the present and the battle for memory is proof of that. It is a real war between the ones on the bottom, the oppressed (or defeated) classes, and the ones on top, the oppressors (or winners). This is palpable in Chile (and I think in Spain too). Until we, the defeated, acknowledge the need to reflect precisely on our present in that mirror which is our past, we will not be able to put up a fair and effective fight. Sometimes we get caught up in our symbols, our words, putting them in monuments or in museums. The statues do not speak and the photographs turn yellow. Memory must go on like a flowing river, nourishing our tomorrows and sometimes overflowing.

**2. The establishment of an official memory, supposedly consensual and affirmed in commemorative events, is a way of drowning out other memories, especially those of the defeated. How is one particular historical memory imposed? What forms of resistance do other memories have?**

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**Maximiliano Fuentes**

The establishment of an official memory, constantly reaffirmed in commemorations, is both an attempt to drown out other memories and to reaffirm a set of national and supranational values. The process of imposing a particular official collective memory has occurred, particularly in several European cases, as part of a broader vision about the values that were supposed to take shape in Western democracies after the Second World War. Although this process began immediately after 1945, it was not until the eighties that it accelerated significantly through a number of mechanisms that have acted and continue to act simultaneously: the different educational levels, certain cultural manifestations (including cinema), the various devices for commemoration and construction of memories in the cities and other processes have been fundamental in this regard. This process, however, has not resulted in the disappearance of memories alternative to the official. In some cases, these alternative memories have succeeded in seeing some of their views on the past, in most cases closely related to certain unmet demands for justice, incorporated into official memory after a dispute with the State. In this respect, the case of Argentina is paradigmatic. The flipside of this process can surely be found in the Spanish case, where, after a few furtive processes initiated almost a decade ago at the official level, the status quo continues to be an evident anomaly compared to other European countries such as Germany, France or Italy.

**Miguel Morey**

It is often said that history is written by the winners, which means that the winners impose their own memory and their selection

of ritually commemorated significant events, powerfully legitimising their victory. In the case of the defeated, the Second World War offers us a sobering example. On the one hand, Nazi Germany, defeated in the war, was forced to withdraw from public memory. For example, all its pioneering work on legislation for the protection of nature and public health had to be forgotten. Who today remembers that the notion of passive smoking was coined ahead of its time by Fritz Lickint, an influential Nazi doctor in 1939? Zygmunt Bauman, in *Modernity and Holocaust*, goes as far to say: "Considered as a complex purposeful operation, the Holocaust may serve as a paradigm of modern bureaucratic rationality ... Indeed, the story of the organization of the Holocaust could be made into a textbook on scientific management. Were not the moral and political condemnation of its purpose imposed on the world by the military defeat of its perpetrators it would have been made into a textbook. There would be no shortage of distinguished scholars vying to research and generalise its experience for the benefit of an advanced organization of human affairs."

On the other hand, it is not the defeated but the main victims of Nazi barbarism, the Jews, who have ultimately seen their memory turned into the only possible memory of what occurred in the Nazi concentration camps. The only thing that really counts about what happened there, then, is that Jews suffered and died there. This obviously involves a violent form of colonisation of the memories of other groups (like the Spanish republicans, for example) who also suffered and died in the camps. Everyone knows what Shoah means, but who knows the meaning of *proraimos*, (lit. "devouring") the word that refers

to the Nazi extermination of Gypsies? But this prioritisation of the religious or ethnic element also carries a second consequence, even more serious if possible: the lack of attention given to the model of modern bureaucratic rationality implemented in Nazi camps, a model whose current use in the field of scientific management of populations should be an urgent object of all studies in this area.

### **Jordi Font Agulló**

As already suggested, official memories are of little use from the standpoint of the moral flourishing of a society. The phrase “official memory” is a contradiction and by its nature an authoritarian concept. This would be one of the reasons why it fits so well in political systems that do not admit criticism; for example, fascism or Stalinist communism. However, this danger can also be detected, again, in liberal democratic systems. Something like this happened in the Spain of the Transition and the years that followed it. In the interests of consolidating democracy, from the highest echelons of power an effort was made to favour one narrative of the mutilated immediate past—the Civil War and the Franco regime—from which many felt that many different memories were excluded, especially the memories of the losers in the war. Completely consensual memory is an illusion, because memory is conflictive by nature and, therefore, a claim of this kind only leads to processes of mystification and simplification. Myths conceal the complexities that weave the past together and also tend to have a saturation effect, as Régine Robin suggests when he refers to “saturated memory”. A good example is the sanctity of the witness and the victim, so characteristic of our time. In addition to having a bounce-back effect that leads broad swathes of society into a kind of historical half-wittedness (very in tune, incidentally, with the dominant media culture), this sanctity of the victim has meant a relegation of the resistant witness. Immediately after Second World War, the person resisting

fascism or Nazism was the paradigm par excellence. Since the nineties, more or less, the subject-victim or survivor has occupied that place, because political commitment has lost its prestige, which is now given instead to an ecumenical view of suffering. These monolithic fixations on the past evidently meet the interests of the present resulting from political circumstances and cultural hegemonies. That is what we try to counteract. It is necessary, for example, to stress that under fascism not everyone was in the resistance, nor was everybody a victim. There were, obviously, all kinds of people. Moreover, there were also many people who were indifferent and more than a few collaborators on different levels that include informers, torturers and executioners.

In reality, commemorative acts are ambivalent. In many cases they still propose an overload of heroic epic and patriotic zeal. What enriches us democratically is the complexation of our gaze on the past by means of a critical apparatus based on different comparative historical studies. And the worst that could happen would be to succumb to the historical kitsch that the entertainment industry is so fond of.

As I outlined above, rather than impose a historical memory, what we must create is a framework that allows for peaceful confrontation—without rejecting reflection and criticism—of the diversity of memories that survive and coexist. This is where the honesty and rigour of scholars of the past (i.e., those working in the fields of history, humanities and social sciences) comes into play. These researchers—and we should also add the work of creators like artists, writers, etc. —provide the materials and data that we should use to dismiss the myths and stereotypes so characteristic of totalitarianism and exclusionary nationalisms, but which may also be present in democracies. Memory should not be imposed. Imposition is a synonym of failure.

The Spanish case of the second Bourbon restoration is undoubtedly paradigmatic for the resistance of silenced memories. In the early

eighties it entered a long period of resignation that gradually receded, thanks, in part, to the work of a nascent historiography which offered plentiful empirical reasons to that third generation of grandchildren of the war who wanted to uncover what had happened to their grandparents. This third generation felt far removed from the memorial limitations imposed—perhaps there had been no other way out—during the transitional process in the interests of reconciliation. At the same time in the late twentieth century, two situations occurred that favoured this awakening of other memories. On the one hand, a right-wing “without complexes”, as José María Aznar described it, had seized power and began to disseminate a revisionist reading of the recent past based on a coarse neo-Francoism declaimed by pseudo-historians. This obviously caused a reaction from serious historiographers and, in turn, stimulated the creation of protest movements calling for moral—and in some cases economic—reparations for the damages that Francoism had done to their family members. On the other hand, internationally, in subsequent transitional processes like those of the Southern Cone or South Africa, the global paradigm of human rights was imposed. This new narrative of human rights has entailed the promotion, as a first step towards social peace, of the recognition of the victims in countries that suffered under dictatorships and the initiation of legal proceedings at which the perpetrators of crimes and human rights violations are required to appear. The Spanish context, in which tens of thousands of bodies, poorly buried on roadsides, are still unidentified, could not remain immune to the new possibilities opened up by the humanitarian way. Another thing has been the reaction of the Spanish government. Summing up, if we take the Spanish case as an example, with its regional and national peculiarities, we could say that the resistance of other memories is woven together through the confluence of

various factors: scientific, generational, political and international.

### **Javier Cercas**

I do not like the expression “historical memory”, because it is an oxymoron: memory is individual, partial and subjective; history, on the other hand, is collective and aims to be total and objective. But, furthermore, in Spain and other countries it is also an euphemism: the so-called Movement for the Recovery of Historical Memory should have been called the Movement for the Recovery of Memory of Victims of Francoism, or of the Republican Memory. Having said this, it will be clear that I do not like neither the expression “official memory”: it is another oxymoron, like “collective memory”. In my view, all this conceptual confusion—the success of these expressions that serve more to confound than to clarify—is due in great part to the explosion of memory in recent years, and to the fact that much of it has invaded history. It goes without saying that memory is essential to everything, because without memory, we are nothing; but it is not the same thing as history. Previously, more or less up until the seventies, memory barely played a role in the construction of history, in the reconstruction of the past; now it plays an excessive role, to the point that it has colonised the territory of history. Both these extremes are bad: we need memory, but we also need history. There may be an official history—a minimum agreement in a country about its past—but there cannot be an official memory, because memory is by definition subjective, sentimental, individual, rebellious, resistant, and does not listen to reason, all of which leads, just as Benjamin said, to the opening up of cases that history had deemed closed. In short, there neither can nor should be an official memory; nor can nor should a memory ever be imposed on others. Separating the territory of history from the territory of memory, so that they can become allies rather than adversaries, and so that the

good relationship between them can facilitate an accurate reconstruction of the past and fruitful dialogue between it and the present, seems to me one of the essential tasks we face today.

### **Xavier Antich**

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin wrote that “the chronicler who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and the small thereby accounts for the truth that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history.” From this perspective, on which the notion of micro-history is based, it should be possible to rescue those memories expelled from the official or hegemonic version and sentenced to nurture a periphery of excluded memories.

Benjamin, in a premonitory way, intuited that the mutations in thought, in art and in the scientific practice of his time, as well as in society itself, necessitated a reformulation of the very meaning of the act of looking back on the past through memory. In a sense, all his works, more or less implicitly, attempt to “to brush history against the grain”, in order to wake up sleeping events of history, not to consider those events as they really were, or as closed documents of a static past, but to discover in them a memory that “flashes in a moment of danger.” The intention, in short, is to avoid the risk, present as a threat in every one of the images of the past, that they may vanish from any present that is not capable of recognising itself in them.

As Susan Buck-Morss has said of Benjamin, “his aim was to destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history’s ‘continuum.’ [...] Benjamin makes us aware that the transmission of culture (high and low), which is central to this rescue operation, is a political act of the highest import.”

It is not surprising that Benjamin should have conceived of historical thought itself in a similar

manner similar to the process of editing and photomontage, nor should we be surprised by his fascination for the remains abandoned, as if they were a bothersome surplus, by the large systematic narratives of present and past, or the attention he always gave to those elements that we might call minimal, which can contain a revealing significance that goes beyond their miniscule appearance and the insignificance to which they were condemned by a history attentive only to the grand outlines and monumental blocks.

### **Carmen Castillo**

As I said before, this is a real war. The winners know that history, despite the crisis of transmission that Benjamin spoke about, is the dispenser of legitimacy. In Chile today it is not honourable to have participated in the dictatorship (especially having been a torturer), but because the product of twenty years of impunity and amnesia was a narrative of suffering of the “victims”, people cannot connect in their minds that what Pinochet imposed in Chile was neoliberalism (or ultra-liberalism) par excellence, and that therefore what they are suffering today, every day, with this model where inequality and injustice reigns, is the product of the ones who put Pinochet in power, enriched themselves and still rule today behind the mask of a democracy directed by socialists, communists and Christian Democrats. The pathetic, sentimental narrative work against the true memory of the defeated, the narrative of the struggle, of tomorrow. This is why we need to construct stories, fictions, in keeping with those who are struggling today, and that requires us to build bridges, gateways, to unsettle people and make them think. I am not saying that we have to join this or that party, only that when we Create we should be conscious of the need to Resist (as when we truly Resist the irresistible, we must be aware of the need to Create, to invent). There is no point in being a caricature of what we once were or constantly repeating worn-out or empty words: we have to invent in order to shake things up and break new ground.

**3. And in line with the previous question, do you believe that it is legitimate to oppose the recovery of the past in the name of a supposed general will, a supposed common good? And if so, in what cases?**

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**Maximiliano Fuentes**

As numerous studies have claimed, it is not only legitimate but can also prove to be therapeutic to some extent in social terms. However, it is important, first of all, to delimit the scope of this supposed general will. It is also important to keep in mind the political use that has been made of the recovery of the past with certain specific political interests to various degrees by both democratic and dictatorial regimes. Finally, it is essential to take into account the need for respect for a justice linked to respect for human rights when seeking to challenge a supposed general will with respect to memory, if it can be put in such terms.

**Miguel Morey**

The common good also depends on the common memory: if one part of those entitled to the common good are not entitled to have their memory recognised, we have a serious problem, a problem that affects what we mean by common and to what good we are entitled to share. It is worth recalling here the ritual atonement conducted periodically in Germany, the biggest promoter of commemorative memory since the Second World War on. And that Auschwitz is, by decree, a “duty of memory” and that to deny the existence and use of gas chambers in the Nazi camps (that is, to deny the Shoah) is a criminal offence.

**Jordi Font Agulló**

The recovery of the past or of a particular interpretation of the immediate past always appears on political agendas, because its purpose is to legitimise the status quo of the present. The question is what is this past and how is it recovered. The choice to forget is, of course, one way of dealing with the past. It is also a form of memory.

When addressing this issue, that is, the promotion of forgetting in the name of building a better future that will leave the strife of the past behind (in the case of civil wars), or tiptoeing around acts as appalling as crimes against humanity (for example, the case of Nazism), it is common to refer to the paradigmatic example of Classical Greece, so well analysed by Nicole Loraux in her book *The Divided City*. In that case, the ancient Greeks, in 403 B.C., after a long period of war and violence, decided to “eradicate the yoke of memory from their lives” and prescribed the civic virtues of forgetting as a future form of coexistence. In other words, they banned stirring up the past in order to prevent the instigation of new disputes that would be dangerous to the continued peace and prosperity of the community.

This possible path of reconciliation tends to neglect the heaviest burdens of the past, which often contain facts and behaviours that do not square with the discourses on which a forgetful present is founded. The journey into the future is more easily made with light baggage. However, the risk is that these kinds of operations leave a deep ethical vacuum in such societies. The act of “casting into oblivion” might work at first as a buffer that makes it possible to rebuild a society which, as in the case of the Germany of the Second World War, had hit an absolute low, or in the face of the risk of a new civil confrontation, as might have been the case of the Spain of the Transition, but it has dire consequences in the medium term, and it takes a lot of effort to recover. The biggest casualty is the quality of democracy. In our case, the appeal to forgetting could be understood in the complex years of the transitional process, although it is important to clarify that the inculcation of fear in society—and hence the invitation to forget—was related to the maintenance of a significant portion

of the privileges enjoyed by the sectors closest to the dictatorship. Unfortunately, this commitment to forgetting endured over time and became public policy for memory promoted by the social-democratic governments of the eighties and early nineties. It was the next generation—in this case the grandchildren of the Civil War—who broke down the blockade of oblivion. Actually, there is no single answer to your question. Perhaps the “non-recovery of the past” or forgetting at a given time is a necessity, although its dimensions and its significance depends on the correlation of forces in the transitional process towards democracy. What is not permissible, as the years pass, is its survival. The reluctance to embrace public policies of memory that make it possible to talk once and for all about all of our recent past has no logic. In a society that is supposed to be a mature democracy, it should be possible to deal with every complexity of the past, whether or not it fits in with our desires and preferences in the present. Although, of course, it should be taken into account that in the current parameters, characterised by the internationalisation of convictions of human rights violations and crimes against humanity, a process like the abolition of Francoism might not necessarily have been carried out with appeals to values like forgetting or the pseudo-reconciliation that amounted to saying “we are all to blame.” And it is obvious that the levels of blame were not all the same. That is what people are entitled to know. In other words, it is important to encourage the promotion of memory, not as a duty, but as a right that offers keys for clarifying the past. A construction of the future on a foundation of forgetting at one point or another ends up showing its cracks.

### **Javier Cercas**

Being opposed to the recovery of the past is like being opposed to understanding the present. The problem is what past is recovered, how and what for. Recovering the past is not necessarily

good in itself; this is another of the intellectual superstitions of our time. Francoism, it could be said, lived permanently in the past, permanently remembering the war, which explains why the forty years of Francoism were not forty years of peace, as the regime claimed, or that the war lasted three years, as it is commonly believed: it lasted forty, because Francoism was merely the continuation of the war by other means. Key sectors of the current Israeli powers make an equally spurious and harmful use of the past by exploiting the memory of the extermination of Jews in Europe as an excuse or instrument or ideological justification for their brutal policies against the Palestinians. And so on. Furthermore, what needs to be recovered is not exactly the past, but the truth about the past, with all its nuances, frenzies and contradictions, in order to face the present with all its contradictions, nuances and frenzies. That is very hard to do, but at the same time it is necessary. It is what we Spaniards have not done, with the so-called Movement for the Recovery of Historical Memory as well. It is worth adding, to tell the whole truth, that hardly anyone has done it (except the Germans, who at least have done it better than anyone else). At least with respect to the harshest part of our past, we live permanently in a truth concealed behind a mask or make-up, because we do not like the truth: we like lies. Remember what General de Gaulle once said, when after the Second World War he managed to convince the French, or almost all of the French, that all or almost all of them had belonged to the resistance: “Les français n’ont pas besoin de la vérité [The French do not need the truth].”

### **Xavier Antich**

The recovery of the past in the name of a supposed general will can move dangerously close to a memory of consensus, articulated around unproblematic memories. Conversely, the act of remembering, whose purpose can only

be to revive the forgotten or repressed, has to do in the first instance precisely with the recovery and activation of those memories which, because of their problematic or even antagonistic nature, have been neglected in the name of a pacification of the present that dispenses with any memories that might disturb it. However, it is precisely this type of act of institutional memory, always implemented in the interests of a supposed pacification of antagonisms, which often favours the oppression of those other uncomfortable memories, which because they clash with the memory of consensus, trigger conflict and antagonism between conflicting accounts of the past. But there cannot be a common good or

memories of institutional consensus without at the same time triggering those other conflicting memories, whose activation undoubtedly causes discomfort due to the recollection of unresolved conflicts.

#### **Carmen Castillo**

In the name of national reconciliation? Of forgiveness, of ending the war? Sheer lies. The battle for memory is without concessions, but today we have to fight it in the name of humanity, in the name of dignity, in the name of the need to share and of affection. Not of “ideologies”, but with those who suffer, those who lose, “those on the bottom”, the oppressed, as a compass.

#### **4. Memory, particularly the memory of horror and of its victims, seems to us an inescapable duty. However, is there a right to forget? Moreover, has there been an abuse of memory? Or rather, as Primo Levi intuited about the Nazi death camps, has memory been trivialised? And if so, has the most terrible past also been turned into a commodity through a kind of memory tourism? Where are the places of memory and mourning?**

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#### **Maximiliano Fuentes**

There are many specialists who have been talking for years now about a certain abuse of memory, according to Levi, of a trivialisation of memory. This can be seen not only in the more mainstream cinema but also in some places of iconic memory associated with Nazism and the Holocaust (though not exclusively with them). To some extent, some museum displays on concentration camps—not all, fortunately—have lost a significant part of their explanatory power and capacity for critical commemoration and have turned into part of an almost obligatory point on certain habitual tourist routes which are not necessarily conceived in historical or memorialist terms. This has led to suggestions of a certain theme-parkisation of these sites. In reality, from my point of view, places of memory and mourning should be both spaces for explanation and reflection focused

both on the past and towards the present. They should be places that question us in the present tense about the connections between the recent past and our lives as critical citizens. Locally, the experience of the Exile Memorial Museum in La Jonquera demonstrates the potential of these types of projects.

#### **Miguel Morey**

The trivialisation of places of memory as consumer products, designed for use as theme parks, goes hand-in-hand with an effective and widespread memory loss, as we are now immersed in a temporality of immediacy entirely organised by consumer addiction. Nowadays, the places where certain memorable events occurred are just as much ritual tourist pilgrimage sites as the places where cult films or television series were made, both equally memorable ...



### **Mireia Llorens**

The right to forget differs depending on who claims it and for what purpose. In *Literature or Life*, Jorge Semprún mentions that soon after his return to the world of the living, deliberately and systematically forgetting the camp became the only possible option for survival. This cure of aphasia is prescribed as an existential condition in the task of returning to life. Similarly, if memory turns into memorial obsession, in the pejorative sense of the term, and abandons its capacity for criticism, reflection or even integration of other silenced or minority memories, then forgetting appears as the only possibility for regeneration of the same memory. Enzo Traverso offers an example of this with the case of Yehuda Elkana, an Auschwitz survivor and the director of the Institute for the History of Science at Tel Aviv University who, in 1982, in the face of the crimes committed in the wake of the Israeli occupation in Lebanon, invoked the right to forget in order to be freed from the burden of the memory. Consequently, when the sacredness of the official memory of the concentration camp in itself becomes a passport for evading any responsibility or condemnation for one's own acts of violence, this would constitute an abuse of memory.

The trivialisation of memory and its exploitation as a consumer product in the form of memory tourism both form part of a complex evolution of the process of reification of the past. In the case of the First World War, no doubt, it began with the Armistice in order to overcome the shock and initiate the process of community mourning. As Freud had described, based on this traumatic experience, grief and melancholy permeated a collective ethos in which the affliction involved the repression of critical thinking, the rage or condemnation that had inspired, for example, the direct and accusing poetry of certain British war poets during the conflict. In its place there spread an ecumenical vision of hope and a sense of national fraternity that facilitated the articulation

of the memory of the fallen and the possibility of public mourning through processions to war monuments. The commemorative rituals, such as the cult to the Unknown Soldier or the Armistice Day ceremonies, are inseparable from the public spaces which, over time, have become genuine pilgrimage sites for tourists. Without a doubt, the cult of memory can succumb to trivialisation when it turns into rhetorical, complacent, mystifying and myth-generating formulation. This is why history (the history of the professional historians), along with other disciplines in the humanities and arts, has such an important role in building a critical discourse that does not give in to the illusions and perversions often produced by the entertainment industry with the aim of facilitating—or, more accurately, simplifying—understanding for the public by theming the spaces of memory.

### **Javier Cercas**

Of course there is a right to forget: a victim who does not want to remember has every right in the world not to do so and to try to forget, or at least to live privately with his or her own experience of the horror. Who the hell are we, we who are not victims, to impose an obligation on this person to remember? Such an obligation seems to me absolutely immoral. Moreover, it is obvious that the inflation of memory has made us forget the obvious fact that, just as we need memory, we need to forget, simply because without forgetting there is no real memory, but above all there is no capacity for understanding: think of Borges' character Ireneo Funes, who remembered everything and was a perfect idiot (in the etymological sense of the word). As to the trivialisation of the memory and history of the darkest moments of our past, it seems to me to be a fact that only a man as lucid as Levi was able to foresee and this of course applies not only to tourism: I have called it the memory industry. What has happened in Spain in recent years is, in this sense, and with every variation imaginable, something that has happened all

over the Western world: the Movement for the Recovery of Historical Memory—a movement, it almost goes without saying, that is absolutely necessary—was born out of necessity but after a few years turned into a fashion and an industry. And in the same way that, as Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out, the fruit of the culture industry is a kitsch culture (a degraded and false culture that gives consumers the illusion of consuming real culture without demanding effort from them or subjecting them to frenzies and ironies and contradictions that true culture demands), the fruit of the memory industry was a memory and a kitsch history, a watered down, palatable, amiable, reassuring and sentimental vision of the past, a vision without what Levi called the “shadow areas” or “grey areas”, those heinous places in which executioners are turned into victims and victims into executioners. It is hard and unpleasant to acknowledge this, but it would be cowardly and dishonest not to. The duty of writing and art in general is to do it: is not to submit to blackmail by the industry, or by the cultural industry or by the memory industry. To rebuild, with new artistic instruments, a truthful history and memory, without makeup or compromises.

### **Xavier Antich**

A right to forget? For centuries we have wanted to remember what happened and to prevent oblivion from destroying those things that we believe need to be remembered. Because the most natural option, it is worth highlighting, is in fact forgetting: we forget an extraordinarily higher proportion of things than we remember. And that is why it pains us to forget certain things that we think should be remembered. Nowadays, however, we live immersed in a historical culture, characterised by what Paul Ricoeur has called documentary frenzy. And this is not just a matter debated by specialists: just think of the controversies surrounding memorial laws in the

United States, the Lois Mémoires in France or, here in Spain, the Law of Historical Memory or the Law of the Democratic Memorial. It is thus a fair conclusion that sometimes the compulsive desire to remember can become pathological and sometimes even counterproductive. In a way, we are forced to choose between two absolutes, both of which seem equally inhumane: to forget even though we are burying a past that deserves to be remembered, or to remember it even if the past, due to its sometimes traumatic weight, threatens the very possibility of the present and the articulation of a common future. Perhaps it is only possible to choose what has to be memorable because, in part, it defines us. Without this effort, humanity would perhaps be nothing but a shadow.

Luis Buñuel said that “you have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life ... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our action, our feeling. Without it, we are nothing.” And the reality is that memory makes us, not only in our individual dimension, but also collectively. And in many cases collective amnesia, which, unlike the individual form, may not be pathological, but is sometimes programmed and induced. However, its effects are devastating, as the use of a collective can also be lost when sections of the past are erased. What remains of us, then, but an amputated story?

We know that memory defines everything we are, individually and collectively. We are what we are because our memories establish a continuity over time that forms the foundation for the present in which we live. Without this memorable past, all that remains, as the neurologist A. R. Luria says, is “a shattered world.”

On the other hand, a certain trivialisation of memory and the conversion of certain moments of the past into consumer products are fairly widespread phenomena, as is the transformation of places of memory and mourning into cultural tourism destinations. It is a relatively recent

worldwide phenomenon, and worthy of a distinct and specific analysis of its own.

### **Carmen Castillo**

Yes, it is true. A product to shed tears for a moment and turn the page without guilt, with a clear conscience. There is an extraordinary author, Jean Amery, who also committed suicide like Primo Levi and Walter Benjamin; in his book *Beyond Guilt and Atonement* he points out the evasion of the real work of remembering the horror in Germany and in Europe since the end of the war. Without real justice, without explicit identification of the responsibility of States, without consideration for the Struggle of the vanquished (sentient beings, with great courage and imagination for the future), there can be no

reparation and no creation of “a different world” of “something else”, of “a different future”. The fight for memory never ends. In Chile, Villa Grimaldi has an organisation of former fighters that manages the memorial, yet there is no guarantee that this space will not only be used to archive the memories of the survivors but also to build bridges with what is happening to these people and to their descendants in the present. And furthermore and more fundamental, to connect the tunnels of time: what is happening to us now, the harshness of a society’s life, is related to the torture and disappearance of thousands of combatants and their families. What matters is for memory to keep moving towards the future of the whole society.

**5. As we explained in the introduction, Enzo Traverso, quoting Benjamin, suggests that the emergence, in broad terms, of memory in the public space in our societies is part of a very general trend that is characteristic of modernity: the crisis of the transmission or of a particular mode of transmission, which could be called secular. Considering that this interview is for a film journal, we also thought it would be interesting to ask a question that attempts in some way to connect history and memory with cinema and, by extension, the audiovisual. What has been the role of cinema, and of audiovisual media in general, during the twentieth century, in the continued decline of transmitted experience? Could cinema, all differences considered, have made up in certain ways for the task of collective transmission? And at the risk of making our definition too vague or too ambitious, by cinema we mean everything from the Hollywood Western to a work like Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, for example.**

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### **Maximiliano Fuentes**

Indeed, cinema occupies a place of prime importance in the construction of common experiences. To a great extent, it has contributed to the creation of shared visions of the past which have often developed parallel, non-touching paths with academic historiographical reflections. This was already happening in the early years of the First World War—and even earlier—with the boom in films that focused on criticising the violence of war and advocating pacifist values. This focus became all the more intense in the

Second World War, as is well known. Without a doubt, the dominant interpretations in social terms of Nazism and the memories constructed around it would be inexplicable without referring to cinema.

### **Miguel Morey**

Audiovisual media constitute a privileged field for the presentation of different memories, with an influence that is highly uneven in proportion to the power and interests of the companies that promote and distribute them. Consequently, the

ethnocentric point of view seems inevitable. It is worth noting, however, the emergence of a good number of what could be called post-colonial products which, although at an obvious disadvantage, have come to correct these ethnocentric habits of our memory while at the same time opening a new market.

### **Mireia Llorens**

I admit that I have difficulty in making sense of the concept Benjamin uses to refer to the crisis of transmitted experience that emerged symbolically as of the First World War. I understand it to refer to the trauma experienced by millions of people, especially young farmers who had inherited from their ancestors a way of living and thinking, forged in a stable cultural and social context. A highly industrialised warfare, which would launch the century of mega-death, burst onto the scene and literally tore apart this mechanism of vital transmission. However, in the British case, which is the case I have most experience with, the decline of this transmitted experience could be discerned much earlier, during the Industrial Revolution. The existential continuum between generations was broken in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by an unstoppable and relentless industrial process that would condemn men, women and children to subsistence in appalling conditions of poverty and slavery, with no chance of redirecting their own personal or family heritage. The countryside, as a metonym for rural society, ancestral knowledge or even the community that was replaced by the nation itself, England, then became, as Raymond Williams posited, a space for literary recreation, nostalgic reminiscing and panegyric. Consequently, the memory of the past tends to repeat the same elegiac evocation of Old England supported by a rural backdrop of beauty and serenity, and a stable social system, free of divisions and conflicts above the purely individual level. An example of this is Siegfried Sassoon's war memoirs, in which

he limits the first part of his autobiographical account to narrating his childhood and youth, with the aim of constructing an Arcadia sentenced to disappear after 1914. Obviously, I believe it important to highlight the seminal and symbolic nature of the First World War, not as a moment of a rupture of values, but as the consummation and intensification of a much earlier process. After the war, literature and art in general would enjoy an extremely fruitful period in which different movements of literary and artistic renewal coexisted with the need to narrate the war experience in the first person, leading to a veritable boom in war stories. All this certainly had a decisive impact on the task of collective transmission, as the cinema would be, especially from the Second World War on.

### **Javier Cercas**

I do not know; I have not thought about this issue. For me, cinema has done wonderful things in the twentieth century (for example, as Borges noted, preserving the epic, which the novel had abandoned), but I cannot see how it could do what you are suggesting, at least, not on its own. Perhaps it is because identity is not forged today like it was in the nineteenth century, in relatively small and isolated communities, but in a way that is much more open or, to use the buzzword, global, and also plural, and thus by means of many different instruments with many different origins, including cinema, at least in the era of its heyday in the mid-twentieth century, when it was the great form of entertainment and perhaps the great universal art form, or one of the greatest. So maybe now identity is forged through cinema and television and the Internet and social networks and literature and theatre and also, as always, through community and family. In any case, I do not think that ephemeral personal experience has completely replaced transmitted experience; indeed, I do not think, if he was alive, Benjamin would think so either.

### **Xavier Antich**

There is no doubt that, indeed, cinema has contributed, as a privileged medium of visual culture in mass society, to the collective transmission of history, the awareness of certain traumatic events of the past and the knowledge of realities that are absent from the official narratives. And, certainly, this will continue to be so, due to the immense communication potential of cinema as a medium.

### **Carmen Castillo**

In Chile, films have played a role, of course. But there is still a lot left to do. The films of Patricio Guzman, of course, his masterful *La batalla de Chile* (*The Battle of Chile*, 1975), chronicling the

energy and the hopes of a generation at war is essential today to connect the past and the future. But our films should be accompanied by debates about the present. As long as the actors of the past, even the filmmakers, can make footprints, we will have contributed something. But we also need to fight to distribute these films, we need to go out and debate. We need to offer keys to understanding them with the words of our present experience, to bring these films out of the film libraries and into the streets. It is always essential to find the meeting point between then and now. The clash, the emotion that opens up a window in minds put to sleep by entertainment and consumption. It is a difficult task, but not impossible.

**6. Finally, considering that this issue of *L'Atalante* is dedicated to the First World War, it also seems appropriate to ask a question directly related to the war and to the strategies to commemorate the anniversary, but focusing on our country. Although it is a well-known fact that Spain did not participate directly in the war, why do you think the First World War forms no part of any political memory in our country? Can the explanation be as simple as the obvious point made above, that it was not one of the belligerent nations?**

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### **Maximiliano Fuentes**

The explanation for the absence of the Great War in our country is related to various factors. Spain's neutrality is an obvious and basic factor. However, it is essential to consider another element that I believe is central: the idea spread by numerous intellectuals that Spain was not part of Europe; that is, that it kept out of the debates and the consequences of everything that happened outside its borders. This is what explains, among other factors, why a country which, although it did not take part in the war, suffered most of its consequences—economic crisis, serious social tensions, authoritarian projects after the conflict—was and is still absent from the major commemorative processes that began on the centenary of the outbreak of the war.

### **Miguel Morey**

I think that any attempt at an explanation must also take into account that we are separated from 1914 by the memory erasure that Spain was subjected to during the forty years of the Franco regime, and the imposition of a history of the victors, presented as the victory of (Western Christian) civilisation over barbarism; that the resistance to this identity theft was based on a memory of the vanquished; and the First World War was too distant and insufficiently malleable to be of interest to either side.

### **Mireia Llorens**

I do not have in-depth knowledge of the impact that the First World War had on Spain. But although it may seem obvious, the fact that Spain

did not participate in the conflict directly and, therefore, did not have to overcome the traumatic effects discussed earlier in relation to the articulation of a collective mourning, influences how the First World War is perceived: possibly, as a distant historical fact, unrelated to the collective transmission. It is also true that Spain has not been exactly notable for its agility, after the Transition, in terms of dealing with the presentation of the memory of the vanquished, among other memories, which had been deliberately concealed. Therefore, given this less than swift response to its own recent history, it would be difficult for the First World War to occupy a prominent place in Spain's memory policy. The tragic magnitude of what was to happen after 1918 would be significant enough to reduce the Great War to a merely symbolic importance as an inaugural event.

### **Javier Cercas**

Of course; we should not read more into it than there is. We might think it good or bad, but it is a fact: in our country there is neither memory nor history of the First World War, just as there is neither memory nor history of the Second or of the Holocaust, or if there is, their existence is only incidental. How can we commemorate something that was never in our memory? It is true that the First World War changed the world and therefore, for better or for worse, it changed Spain too, and there are many things that could be done about it; but the fact is that they are not done. These things are the result of sitting on the side lines of Europe for centuries. To quote General de Gaulle once again: "Ah, l'Espagne, c'est déjà l'Afrique".

### **Xavier Antich**

Undoubtedly, that may be a decisive reason. But nevertheless, in my opinion, the most important reason is broader, affecting Spain's problem with memory and the public and institutional absence of a systematic policy of memory that can address

the past in a way that is analogous and equivalent to that of neighbouring countries, due mainly, albeit partly, to the inability to critically address the immediate past of the Franco regime, which has yet to be condemned at the highest political levels in Spain. ■

conclusion

# PAST AND PRESENT: HISTORY, MEMORY AND JUSTICE

RAMÓN GIRONA

IMMA MERINO

While we were working on (Dis)agreements for this issue of *L'Atalante*, the French (and, to a lesser extent, the Spanish) press reported on the opening of the Memorial of Rivesaltes, located at a camp in Roussillon occupied by a compound which, from 1940 until as recently as 2007, had housed a multitude of people displaced for political or economic reasons, and people outcast or persecuted by different regimes that imprisoned and repressed them. Thus, acquiring a symbolic dimension, this camp in Rivesaltes, covering a vast expanse of 640 hectares, is a site of a memory of the twentieth century that remains for us today, and a reflection of that century's history; it could be said, of a part of that history that is no stranger to silence, to culpable concealment and, therefore, to forgetting. At the opening ceremony for the Memorial, an austere, earth-coloured building that is practically invisible against the terrain into which it appears to have sunk, Prime Minister Manuel Valls stated, and was quoted by various media networks, that this was a space to remember one of the darkest episodes in the history of France; and not only France, but the

forgetful Spain as well, as among the first people to be imprisoned in the Rivesaltes camp were Spanish Republicans.

The Rivesaltes camp is also called Camp Joffre in honour of Marshal Joffre, who was born in this town, located about fifteen kilometres from Perpignan. Joseph Joffre was considered a French hero in the First World War for having stopped the advance of the German troops in the Battle of the Marne. Camp Joffre, in fact, is one part of the Rivesaltes camp where, after the Great War, military exercises were carried out until the reduction of the French army under the Vichy government. Vichy, allied with the Third Reich, converted it in July 1940 into a concentration camp for enemies or those deemed undesirable: communists, socialists and anarchists; Jews, both French and Jews from Central Europe who had come to France to escape the Nazis and who, caught by the Nazis once again, passed through Rivesaltes before being deported to Auschwitz and other death camps; Gypsies, all kinds of *métèques* and other nomads; Spanish Republicans who, having passed through other refugee camps

that were turned into concentration camps in the south of France, had not yet found a destination since their retreat from Spain; also retreating were members of the International Brigades, some of whom were also held there; thousands of foreigners, coming from northern and eastern Europe, were left without resources within French territory.

It should also be noted that after the liberation of France and the end of the Second World War, German prisoners and Nazi and Vichy collaborators were held at the Rivesaltes camp, and later on, defectors from the First Indochina War and other conflicts with the colonies, such as the Algerian War; then, when the War of Independence was over, the so-called Harkis (Algerians of Arab and Berber origin who had been trained to fight against the independence movement in their country) were transferred to the camp: corps exploited by the French state which, once they ceased to be useful, were hidden away temporarily in that confinement until most of them were given work in mining regions of the north. The Rivesaltes camp, where soldiers from Guinea and Indochina were also confined, was officially closed in 1966, but subsequently, from 1986 to 2007, the compound was used as an administrative detention centre, an equivalent of any deplorable immigration detention centre, for the imprisonment of “illegal immigrants”, the so-called *sans papiers*, many of whom were held there before being expelled from France.

The detention centre in Rivesaltes has not been shut down, but was moved to another location so that, in a bitter irony, the Memorial could be erected here. The Memorial consists of a 220-metre long building designed by Rudy Ricciotti, extending to the compound which, at the request of the architect himself, has not been pulled down, but stands in its ruinous state as the last vestige of those spaces of confinement. It was not in this compound that the *sans papiers* were held for twenty years, but in prefabricated

buildings in which they lived in subhuman conditions.

We thus visited the Rivesaltes Memorial on a sunny November day on which not even a light north wind was blowing. There was the compound in ruins, the desolate expanse of the camp we passed through, and yet, how difficult it was on that beautiful day, and perhaps even on a day with less sunshine, to imagine what had happened there.

The Memorial building, which offers no views of the landscape outside it, contains a large hall where different screens show images that document the historic events that led to the establishment of the Rivesaltes camp: the Spanish Civil War and the Republican defeat; the Second World War and the deportation of victims to the death camps; and the wars of independence in the colonies. The history of the Rivesaltes camp was therefore framed by a series of different historical contexts. The Memorial, which will host temporary exhibitions and seminars, is presented as a place for the organisation of educational projects. In any case, it is a “space to not forget”, as Manuel Valls said at the opening, which was created in a climate of controversy surrounding the policies of memory and their alleged manipulation. We can say that some voices linked to France’s National Front vindicated the Harkis as fighters for France who were not recognised and who were supposedly relegated to the background at the Memorial. These may have been the same voices who claimed that it must have been part of a plot against the National Front that some of the camp’s files, related mainly to the period 1941-1942, were found in November 1996 in a municipal dump in Perpignan. They were found by a municipal employee, Jacques Chamoux, who rescued them from the garbage and reported the fact to the journalist Joël Mettay, who then wrote an article in *L’Indépendant* and who, on the basis that “these ‘waste papers’ are the history of the everyday injustices and suffering endured by thousands of



human beings”<sup>1</sup>, undertook an investigation that led him to write the book *L'archipel du mépris* (2001), published by the Trabucaire publishing house with the subtitle *Histoire du camp de Rivesaltes 1939 à nos jours*.

As he explained in the epilogue to his book, Joël Mettay was accused of airing the case to promote the electoral interests of the Socialist Party in Perpignan. One such accuser was the prefect Bernard Bonnet, who also spoke of an “outrage à la mémoire” comparable to the desecration of Jewish graves in Perpignan’s Haut-Vernet cemetery in 1993, on the night before the first round of municipal elections. Nevertheless, the controversy raised awareness about the history of the Rivesaltes camp and its significance. Hence the research by journalists and historians, such as Mettay or Nicolas Lebourg and Abderahmen Moumen, the last two being the authors of *Rivesaltes, Le camp de la France* (Trabucaire, 2015). In a recent interview, published by *Libération* on October 16, 2015, Moumen asserted that “the history of the Rivesaltes camp brings to light the technocratic management of human flows on the part of the State. This camp is the sign of the State’s desire to control migrant communities on its territory”<sup>2</sup>. The recovery of this history began with the act of a municipal employee who saved the files from destruction. This act, so real but also containing such extraordinary symbolic force, laid the foundations for the Rivesaltes Memorial fought for by citizens and groups who understand that for memory to survive, we must work for it and reflect on the ways to transmit it.

And remnants of that memory are in the big hall, on the screens showing, in a loop, fragments of the retreat from Spain, images of deported Jews, of Algerian soldiers... And there are also audio testimonies by survivors, turned into stories that visitors can listen to on headphones; and other testimonies, like fragments of letters, of drawings, of identity documents, of items used for daily existence in the camp, of suitcases,

pieces of wire and of walls... Vestiges, memories, fragments, too, like the compound outside, and faced with them, once again the same question, the same conclusion: how difficult it is to imagine, to feel, what happened there.

In his essay “The Abuses of Memory”, Todorov points out that a phenomenon is unique to personal experience. In the section entitled “Memory and Justice” (TODOROV, 2006: 6-26), the philosopher and historian distinguishes between the public and the private sphere, recognising that everyone has a right to recover the past, their past, but that this is not the function of the public space, or it is in a different way. The public space cannot submit to the cult of memory because to do so would make it sterile. The philosopher distinguishes between the literal recovery of the event,<sup>3</sup> of the experience, and the exemplary—and therefore patterned—use of that event. The literal use makes it unsurpassable and renders the present a slave to the past. Todorov advocates the exemplary use of the event, which allows the past to be used with the present in mind, taking lessons from the injustices suffered and abandoning the self to reach out to the other. The literal memory is nothing more than memory; the exemplary memory is justice, according to the philosopher. Todorov adds a final reflection or warning: preoccupation with the past cannot be an excuse to ignore the present. And especially not in this present, in which thousands upon thousands of people are fleeing wars, dictatorships and poverty in search of a refuge that they do not always find. On the evening of the day we visited Rivesaltes, the jihadist attacks took place in Paris. A new pretext to close and control the borders, in spite of the fact that the perpetrators of the attacks grew up in France, in urban slums where people live with a sense of exclusion. ■

## NOTES

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- 1 Quote translated by the editor. In the original text: “ces ‘vieux papiers’ sont l’histoire de jour à jour des injustices et des souffrances subies par des milliers d’êtres humains”.
- 2 Quote translated by the editor. In the original text: “l’histoire du camp de Rivesaltes dessine en creux celle de la gestion technocratique des flux humains par l’Etat. Ce camp est le signe de la volonté étatique de parvenir à contrôler les corps migrants sur son territoire”.
- 3 “Suppose an event—let us posit a painful segment of my past or of the past of the group to which I belong—is preserved literally (which does not mean truly); it remains an intransitive fact, leading nowhere beyond itself” (TODOROV, 1996: 14).

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## FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR TO THE PRESENT: HISTORY AND MEMORY, A CENTURY FOR REFLECTION

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### Abstract

Taking the First World War and the commemoration of its centenary as a starting point, this article/questionnaire offers a reflection on the past in the broadest sense, on the uses of history and memory, or memories, and their use by the most diverse groups; from their appropriation by power –or powers– in an attempt to offer an official history that legitimizes it in the public eye and perpetuates it, to their utilization by those who do not support the powers that be and develop narratives of resistance and reparation. The article also reflects on the uses of history and memory as a cultural or consumer product, the consequence of a commemorative obsession in Western societies, and the perhaps inevitable conversion of many of the sites of memory into tourist attractions.

### Key words

History; Memory; First World War; Commemorations; Memory tourism.

### Authors

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Miguel Morey Farré (b. Barcelona, 1950). Professor emeritus of Philosophy at the Universitat de Barcelona. He has translated the works of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Colli, Gilles Deleuze, and Pascal Quignard, among others. His main publications are:

## DE LA PRIMERA GUERRA MUNDIAL AL PRESENTE: HISTORIA Y MEMORIA, UN SIGLO PARA LA REFLEXIÓN

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### Resumen

Tomando como punto de partida la Primera Guerra Mundial y la conmemoración de su centenario, el presente texto/cuestionario propone una reflexión sobre el pasado, en sentido amplio, sobre los usos de la Historia y la memoria, o memorias, y su utilización por parte de los más diversos colectivos; desde su apropiación por parte del poder –de los poderes–, en un intento por ofrecer una historia oficial, que lo legitime ante la opinión pública y lo perpetúe, hasta su utilización por parte de aquellos que no lo sustentan y que elaboran relatos de resistencia, de reparación. El texto también reflexiona sobre los usos culturales o de consumo de la Historia y la memoria, fruto de una cierta obsesión conmemorativa, en las sociedades occidentales, y de la conversión, tal vez inevitable, de muchos de los lugares de la memoria en polos de atracción turística.

### Palabras Clave

Historia; memoria; Primera Guerra Mundial; actos conmemorativos; turismo de la memoria.

### Autores

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Miguel Morey Farré (Barcelona, 1950). Catedrático emérito de Filosofía de la Universitat de Barcelona. Traductor de Michel Foucault, Giorgio Colli, Gilles Deleuze, Pascal Quignard, entre otros. Sus principales publicaciones son: *Camino de San-*

*Camino de Santiago* (1987), *El orden de los acontecimientos* (1988), *Nietzsche, una biografía* (1993); *Deseo de ser piel roja* (winner of the 12th Anagrama Essay Prize, 1994); *Pequeñas doctrinas de la soledad* (2007); *Monólogos de la bella durmiente. Sobre María Zambrano* (2010); *Hotel Finisterre* (2011); *Lectura de Foucault* (2014); and *Escritos sobre Foucault* (2014).

Jordi Font Agulló (b. Sant Miquel de Fluvià, 1964). Historian, cultural administrator and curator. He has been the director at the Museu Memorial de l'Exili (La Jonquera, Spain) since February 2008. In recent years his research work has focused on the field of cultural history and the relationship between history and memory. Contemporary art is also one of his main professional interests. He is a member of the research group GREF-CEFID (Grup de Recerca sobre l'Època Franquista i Centre d'Estudis sobre les Èpoques Franquista i Democràtica) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, the research group Història, Memòria i Identitats de la Universitat de Girona (Institut de Recerca Històrica), and researcher for the project *Memoria y sociedad. Las políticas de reparación y memoria y los procesos sociales en la construcción de la memoria pública contemporánea en España: conflicto, representación y gestión* (Universitat de Barcelona, 2011-2014). He is also a member of the ACCA (Associació Catalana de Crítics d'Art).

Javier Cercas Mena (b. Ibañerando, 1962). Writer. In his famous novel *Soldados de Salamina* (2001), he offers a fictional treatment of a real episode of the Spanish Civil War (a mass execution by firing squad which the Falangist writer Rafael Sánchez Mazas survived) vindicating the unsung heroes who do not even receive a footnote on this page in history. His latest book, *El impostor* (2014), takes up the case of Enric Marco (who falsified his biography claiming, along with other fabrications, that he had been interned in a Nazi concentration camp) to reflect on how the past is constructed. Cercas calls into question the concept of historical memory, arguing that memory is individual, partial and subjective, while history is collective and aspires to be complete and objective. His other books, which usually combine research with narrative techniques and metaliterary reflections, include *Anatomía de un instante* (2009), about the attempted coup d'état in Spain on 23 February, 1981.

*tiago* (1987), *El orden de los acontecimientos* (1988), *Nietzsche, una biografía* (1993); *Deseo de ser piel roja* (xxii premio Anagrama de Ensayo, 1994); *Pequeñas doctrinas de la soledad* (2007); *Monólogos de la bella durmiente. Sobre María Zambrano* (2010); *Hotel Finisterre* (2011); *Lectura de Foucault* (2014); *Escritos sobre Foucault* (2014).

Jordi Font Agulló (Sant Miquel de Fluvià, 1964). Historiador, gestor cultural y comisario de exposiciones. Desde febrero de 2008 dirige el Museu Memorial de l'Exili (La Jonquera-España). En los últimos años ha centrado su atención profesional en el ámbito de la historia sociocultural y las relaciones entre historia y memoria. Asimismo, el arte actual es también uno de sus principales intereses profesionales. Es miembro del GREF-CEFID (Grup de Recerca sobre l'Època Franquista i Centre d'Estudis sobre les Èpoques Franquista i Democràtica) de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, del grupo de investigación Història, Memòria i Identitats de la Universitat de Girona (Institut de Recerca Històrica) e investigador en el proyecto *Memoria y sociedad. Las políticas de reparación y memoria y los procesos sociales en la construcción de la memoria pública contemporánea en España: conflicto, representación y gestión* (Universitat de Barcelona, 2011-2014). También forma parte del ACCA (Associació Catalana de Crítics d'Art).

Javier Cercas Mena (Ibañerando, 1962). Escritor. En su famosa novela *Soldados de Salamina* (2001), aborda a través de la ficción narrativa un episodio real de la Guerra Civil Española (un fusilamiento colectivo al cual sobrevivió el escritor falangista Rafael Sánchez Mazas) vindicando los héroes anónimos, que ni tan siquiera tienen una nota a pie de página en la historia. En su libro más reciente, *El impostor* (2014), parte del caso de Enric Marco (que falseó su biografía haciendo creer junto a otras invenciones que estuvo internado en un campo de concentración nazi) para reflexionar sobre cómo se construye el pasado. Cercas pone en cuestión el concepto de memoria histórica considerando que la memoria es individual, parcial y subjetiva mientras que la historia es colectiva y aspira a ser total y objetiva. Entre otros libros, que suelen combinar la investigación con procedimientos narrativos y reflexiones metaliterarias, también ha publicado *Anatomía de un instante* (2009), sobre el 23-F.

Xavier Antich Valero (b. La Seu d'Urgell, 1962). Doctor of Philosophy at the Universitat de Barcelona and Professor of Aesthetics and Art Theory at the Universitat de Girona. He is the principal investigator of a R+D+i research project for the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness Excellence Program (with the research group Teories de l'Art Contemporani de la UdG). He has been Visiting Chair at Stanford University (Palo Alto, California, US) and The Lisbon Consortium (Universidade Catolica Portuguesa, Lisbon, Portugal). He has also been the director of the Programa d'Estudis Independents at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and of the Master's program in Communications and Art Criticism at Universitat de Girona. He has published several books and more than 100 journal articles on philosophy, aesthetics, art, photography and music (especially contemporary). His articles also abound with reflections on the universe of the Nazi concentration camp and on art after Auschwitz. He received the Premi Octubre d'Assaig Joan Fuster prize for his essay *El rostre de l'altre. Passeig filosòfic per l'obra d'Emmanuel Lévinas*. He is a regular contributor to the newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *Ara*, and is assistant director of the philosophy program *Amb filosofia* (TV3. Televisió de Catalunya).

Carmen Castillo Echeverría (b. Santiago de Chile, 1945). A writer and film documentary maker with a degree in History, she is a member of Chile's Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR), and remained in Chile resisting the dictatorship after the Pinochet coup. On October 5, 1974, the Chilean secret police (DINA) raided the house where she lived secretly with Miguel Enríquez, leader of the MIR. He was assassinated and she survived the raid in circumstances which, thirty years later, she reconstructed in *Calle Santa Fe* (2007), a documentary in which personal memory is linked to the collective, specifically for the purpose of recovering the history of the MIR movement massacred under the dictatorship. Another of her landmark documentaries is *La Flaca Alejandra* (1994), which owes its title to the nickname of Marcia Alejandra Merino, another MIR member who, under torture, betrayed her comrades and became a DINA collaborator. This exemplary documentary explains the modus operandi of the dictatorship's killing machine through the testimony of someone who crossed over to the other side, without ever falling into the temptation to judge or punish the traitor.

Xavier Antich Valero (La Seu d'Urgell, 1962). Doctor en Filosofia por la UB y profesor titular de Estética y Teoría del Arte de la Universitat de Girona. Es el investigador principal de un proyecto de investigación de R+D+i del Programa de Excelencia del Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (con el grupo de investigación Teories de l'Art Contemporani de la UdG). Ha sido *Visiting Chair* en la Universidad de Stanford (Palo Alto, California, EEUU) y en The Lisbon Consortium (Universidade Catolica Portuguesa, Lisboa, Portugal). Ha sido el director del Programa d'Estudis Independents del MACBA y del Máster en Comunicació i crítica d'art de la UdG. Ha publicado diversos libros y más de un centenar de artículos en revistas especializadas sobre filosofía, estética, arte, fotografía y música, especialmente contemporáneos. En sus artículos también hay abundantes reflexiones sobre el universo concentracionario del nazismo y sobre el arte después de Auschwitz. Recibió el Premi Octubre d'Assaig Joan Fuster por el ensayo *El rostre de l'altre. Passeig filosòfic per l'obra d'Emmanuel Lévinas*. Colabora regularmente en los periódicos *La Vanguardia* y *Ara*; es subdirector del programa *Amb filosofia* (TV3. Televisió de Catalunya).

Carmen Castillo Echeverría (Santiago de Chile, 1945). Licenciada en Historia, es una escritora y documentalista cinematográfica. Militante del MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario), permaneció en Chile resistiendo a la dictadura después del golpe de estado de Pinochet. El 5 de octubre de 1974, la policía secreta (DINA) asaltó la casa donde vivía clandestinamente junto a Miguel Enríquez, máximo líder del MIR. Él fue asesinado y ella sobrevivió al asalto en unas circunstancias que, treinta años más tarde, reconstruyó en *Calle Santa Fe* (2007), un documental en que la memoria personal se liga a la colectiva, sobre todo con el propósito de restituir la historia del MIR, movimiento masacrado por la dictadura. Otro documental fundamental de Carmen Castillo es *La Flaca Alejandra* (1994), que debe su título al sobrenombre de Marcia Alejandra Merino, una militante del MIR que, bajo tortura, delató a sus compañeros y se convirtió en colaboradora de la DINA. Es un documental ejemplar que, para que explique el funcionamiento de la máquina de matar de la dictadura, recoge el testimonio de alguien que pasó al *otro lado*. Lo hace sin caer en la tentación de juzgar a la *traidora* o vengarse de ella.

Mireia Ruiz Llorens (b. Girona, 1970). A cultural administrator with a degree in Catalan Philology (Universitat de Girona) and a doctorate in Humanities (Universitat Pompeu Fabra). She works in the field of local administration as a Special Management Technician, and is the service manager of the City of Banyoles' Department of Services to the Public. She has studied British war literature of the First World War extensively, especially T. E. Lawrence (Eastern Front) and Siegfried Sassoon (Western Front), on which she has published two books: *Autobiografía y ficción épica. Lectura de T.E. Lawrence* (2004) and an abridged version of her doctoral thesis under the title *Siegfried Sassoon. L'experiència de la Gran Guerra i la seva transformació literària* (2011).

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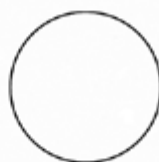


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