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***Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War:  
History, Fiction, Photography***  
**Vanderbilt UP**  
**by Sebastiaan Faber**

*Memory Battles* is an exceptional contribution to 21<sup>st</sup> century studies on the memory of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath after decades of politically imposed silence. In addition to the role of academics and artists, Faber considers the work of activists and journalists, and the memories of victims and

their family members, to be fundamental sources of public discourse in Spain's collective process of coming to terms with the past and consolidating democracy. Expressing his dissatisfaction with the "sterile formats and stylistic habits of academic writing," Faber positions himself as a mediator between academic practice and journalism, historiography and the discourses of civil society, the spaces of institutional power and activism. In his "search for relevance," he favors an eclectic approach and a diversity of genres (interview, review essay), as well as an engaging and accessible style, making the book relevant to broader audiences. Faber is also a heated polemicist who critiques the rigor and relevance of the works of some of the Spanish sacred cows in the field of historical memory.

The first half of the book is outstanding. Part I focuses on the visual archive left by Robert Capa, Gerda Taro and David "Chim" Seymour whose photographs became iconic after they were printed in newspapers and illustrated magazines around the world. Faber illuminates the tension between immediacy and manipulation, as the subsequent creative montages of photos taken during the war altered the location and sometimes the ideological meaning of the original pictures. A lost archive of thousands of negatives of their war photographs ("the Mexican Suitcase"), was retrieved in Mexico City in 2008, and brought to New York where it was inventoried, exhibited at the ICP, and documented in a film by Trisha Ziff. Faber provides an engaging and scrupulously researched account of the photographers' trajectory and working methods, and of the "serial repetition" of their images. In a fascinating analysis of the iconic poster of the war, *What Have You Done to Prevent This?* he interprets the symbolic and political readings of the

image and text following photomontage alterations. Faber's essential point here is that the visual archive of the civil war is a "massive recycling machine" that combined fiction and reality, ideological and affective manipulation inherent to caption writing during the war, and appropriation of images by the Nationalists after the war. For him, more important than the origin, ownership, authorship, and responsibility of the images, is access to the archive.

The section "History and Memory" offers a detailed summary of the main ideological debates between the left and the right in Spain regarding historical memory and the design of the Law of Historical Memory (2007). Faber rightly claims that new generations of Spaniards, in opposition to those who helped orchestrate Spain's transition, reject the notion of de-politicized and impersonal history and want to infuse it with affectivity and subjectivity. Contextualizing the case of Spain within the international trend of memorialization, Faber dismantles the rigid distinction between "objective" history and "subjective," "unreliable" memory, and proposes a more measured view of the relation between them as "different but mutually complementary ways of looking at the past."

In "Memory and the Law" Faber recounts the "Garzón saga" (following the charges against magistrate Baltasar Garzón for initiating proceedings against officials of the Franco regime as suspects in the death or disappearance of Spaniards between 1936 and 1951), with the purpose of clarifying the profound divisions regarding the transition's Amnesty Law. While the left invokes international law and universal jurisdiction to revisit the legal and political foundations of the Spanish Transition (following the recommendation of the UN Committee on Human Rights), historians from the

right and center, on the other hand, argue that international law does not apply to the exceptional case of Spain, and define “memory” as a partial, interested, and potentially dangerous tool to account for the past. As part of this debate, Faber analyzes literary and filmic texts (*Exilio*, *Soldados de Salamina*, *Els nens perduts del franquisme*, and *Les fosses del silenci*), emphasizing the role of political documentaries in making up “for the lack of judicial reckoning with the Franco regime.”

In one of the most captivating sections of the book, “Reframing the Past,” Faber rearranges excerpts from interviews he conducted with historians of different countries and generations (Gabriel Jackson, Angel Viñas, Paul Preston, Helen Graham, and Pablo Sánchez León); with a social anthropologist (Francisco Ferrándiz); the founder of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (Emilio Silva); a war photographer (Gervasio Sánchez); and a filmmaker (Montse Armengou). The five historians declare the resistance and skepticism they have confronted while being critical of the Spanish right during the war and the Franco dictatorship, unlike historians of World War II who have analyzed the workings of the Nazi and fascist dictatorships. The interviews with Ferrándiz and Silva illustrate the tortuous process of exhumation of the Republican mass graves since it was initiated in 2000. They agree that the exhumation has provided civil society with a greater awareness of historical memory. Sánchez and Armengou defend the value of photography, film and journalistic rigor to present a documentary vision, which prevents the facts from being buried and anticipates an educational task that should consist of connecting the past with taking action in the present.

Faber reserves the last two parts of the book to expose, and at times severely critique, the work of Spanish intellectuals, historians and novelists who have written about the memory of the Civil War, late Francoism and Transition years. In “Intellectuals at War,” Faber is himself at war with three intellectuals. After careful analysis of Andrés Trapiello’s book *Las armas y las letras*, Faber concludes that, although entertaining and seductive, its power is limited due to its narrow focus, lack of political and social context, and anecdotal style. In contradiction to intellectuals who have highlighted positive cultural activity under the Franco regime, Faber underscores Gregorio Morán’s pessimistic vision of Franco and post-Franco Spain as periods “marked by repression, mediocrity, frivolity, opportunism and shamelessness.” Similarly, his analysis of Antonio Muñoz Molina’s *Todo lo que era sólido* focuses on the author’s judgment of the low moral level of Spain’s political class, democratic immaturity, and obsession with revisiting the years of the Republic and the Civil War. Muñoz Molina’s distrust of Spanish society’s “natural” instincts, fits into a long list of Spanish writers, but Faber deems his call for moral regeneration utopian and reads it “as a paradoxical defense of the status quo.”

“Fiction as Memory” delves into the crucial role of narrative fiction during and after the dictatorship: it was one of the few spaces to subvert the regime’s false interpretations of Spanish history, and a crucial venue for explaining the war to the larger public. Through excellent analyses of landmark novels by Sender, Barea, Aub, and Ayala, written during the war and in exile, and of five post-Franco novels by Cercas, Marías, Chacón, Martínez de Pisón and Grandes, Faber examines the composition of the canon of Civil War fiction and refutes

the distinction between “mere propaganda” and “true literature.” For him, new novels about the civil war present an affective relation to the past and invite the reader to affiliate with the witnesses of the conflict, incorporating the dialogue between generations into their very format.

Faber concludes his book with meticulous yet disparaging interpretations of novels by Javier Marías and Javier Cercas. He refutes Marías’ premise (in his trilogy, *Your Face Tomorrow*) that fiction is independent from reality and therefore is not subject to the norms of responsibility, arguing that Marías’ declaration of irresponsibility “camouflages his desire to vindicate his father and exact vengeance on the traitors that ruined his career.” After establishing the common elements in Cercas’s novels, Faber condemns the author’s moral scrutiny in his novels *El impostor* and *Anatomy of a Moment*, and his vague political position toward the memory movement (which he has called “problematic” and a “memory industry”). Faber reserves his most virulent critique for Cercas’s short-sided reading of Spanish democracy, which Faber considers to be “the result of intellectual laziness and failure to acknowledge the many debates on the matter that have generated dozens of productive and nuanced reflections in Spain and elsewhere.”

The practice of engaging in pugilistic linguistic exchanges with other intellectuals is well engrained in the history of Spain’s culture, academy and politics. It has, indeed, determined the fate of the historical memory of the war, postwar, and transition years. Faber’s book provides an accurate, personal and polemical assessment of those battles. As he notes in his epilogue, citing *Contratiempo* (a Spanish collective of scholars and activists), the Spanish university and academic practice has not “modernized” enough, or facilitated the articulation of other voices, other than

“those occupying the spaces of institutional power: politics, the university and the media” (209). His book succeeds in filling that void and expanding the circuits where history and politics are debated.

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