

The humour factor: social media reactions to Franco's exhumation from the Valley of the Fallen

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Abstract

This article analyses the social reaction to Francisco Franco's exhumation from his burial place in the Valley of the Fallen at the end of 2019. This decision was taken by virtue of compliance with the so-called Historical Memory Law approved in 2007 and generated a great social debate. Apart from opinions in favour and against that decision coming from the political spectrum of the left and right, respectively, we observed a new attitude, that of humour, present in tweets and memes. By analyzing a collection of memes that circulated in Twitter and WhatsApp groups, our research shows that the new media have brought in content and symbolism that ridicule the late dictator, trivialise the treatment given to the "Caudillo" [Leader] of Spain for nearly four decades and contribute to an uninhibited interpretation of memory policies.

Keywords: social media, memes, humour, Valley of the Fallen, Francisco Franco's exhumation.

1. Introduction

The spread in the use of the Internet at the beginning of the 21st century has led to changes in the way we search, read, write, and publicly express our opinions. Digital technologies have promoted new ways of producing, accessing and disseminating information, but they have also changed our attitude towards the past and the understanding of historic events. Society has adopted a very active role in the conveyance of the recent past, providing private and family documents but also its interpretation of the most conflictive historic chapters.

Francisco Franco and Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) frequently come up in Spain in historiographic, social, political and media debates. If we search for key words such as Franco or Franco's dictatorship, search engines come back with a long list of findings in Wikipedia, biographical dictionaries, online graphic encyclopedias, or in Metapedia, the digital encyclopedia that reflects the opinions of far right, white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups. The former "Caudillo" [Leader], as he was named during almost four decades, is analyzed on blogs, websites, Youtube and in social media just like in material cultural production, that is, from a rigorous approach based on the study of documents from historic archives, and from a

propagandistic approach, generally coming from far-right political or media groups. But over the last few years, there has also been a humoristic approach – a narrative challenge that presents Franco as a peculiar individual, subject to mockery deprived from his controversial historical meaning.

This paper aims to understand the opinion expressed with memes by the different social and political groups regarding a historic event as relevant as the exhumation of Franco's remains from the Valley of the Fallen. Moreover, we wonder who the authors of those satirical creations were, and what were the text and visual resources used by different ideological communities. The starting assumption is that memes covered the whole political and legal process of the exhumation and caricatured the event and the protagonist, thus lifting the tension caused by the huge controversy arising from this complicated decision. From our point of view, memes were not just images, but also comical response units to a political agreement of enormous social impact due to the symbolism of the removal of the remains of a late head of state, buried until then in a symbolic place.

The type of sources of data chosen for the research was a collection of 127 memes spread in Twitter and WhatsApp groups started in March 2019 until the last days of October. We have used free research tools for social media, such as #Warble Alerts, and we explored with key words and hashtags related with the event, such as *Franco's exhumation*, *taking Franco out*, *Franco's grave* or *Valley of the Fallen*. The circulation of memes about the exhumation came to the attention of some media, which resonated with this phenomenon by randomly collecting some of the most appealing ones. This journalistic activity allowed us to compare their findings with ours and confirm the features we had observed in our analysis¹. By creating and circulating memes on Franco's exhumation, Spaniards participated in this controversy, being aware that the success of their ironic discourse could only happen in cyberspace. The article, thus, explores the forms through which many users voiced their thoughts about this historical decision through humorous memes. It argues that memes became successful as a site of relaxation and public distension facing social tensions generated by the exhumation. With this research, we aim to help show the way in which humour and satire are used to talk about difficult political situations, including those dealing with topics related to memory policies' demands.

G.D. Rosenfeld (2014) presented in his work the way in which Hitler was conveyed in contemporary culture by means of different cultural expressions such as cinema, literature, memes, or the Internet. In this sense, he believed that the common presence of the Fuhrer was helping to *normalise* his figure, with manipulated, comical, and adapted representations for each context. In the case of Franco, we believe that humoristic expressions helped trivialise this episode linked to measures adopted in terms of memory policies and not so much to the *normalisation* of the former Caudillo, in the sense of him being considered as just one more ruler of contemporary history.

The following pages include a sample of the most representative memes for each stage and opinions circulated during those months and days. We are aware of the limitations of the collection, but it has been verified that it is a fairly complete set of memes that have been distributed and, consequently, a representative sample.

¹ Amongst others, we quote: Crónica Directo, October 23, 2019, https://cronicaglobal.lespanol.com/cronica-directo/curiosidades/franco-memes-exhumacion_286284_102.html, ElPlural.com, September 24, 2019, "Los memes de la exhumación de Franco: El Supremo aprueba el unboxing", https://www.elplural.com/politica/los-memes-de-la-exhumacion-de-franco-el-supremo-aprueba-un-unboxing_224545102. Juan Ceña, Antena 3, October 23, 2019 "Unboxing Franco: Los mejores memes de la exhumación de Franco", https://www.antena3.com/liopardo/memes/mejores-memes-exhumacion-franco_201910235db0223a0cf252ab407af240.html

The paper is structured in the following way: firstly, it presents a short overview of several pieces of research on the Valley of the Fallen, the large architectural complex built during the 1940s and inaugurated by Franco in 1959 to house the Spanish Civil War dead. Secondly, a short overview of Franco on mainstream Spanish Internet sites and the confronted views and visions faced by those who defended the exhumation and those who were against it. Next, we examine the literature on memes and their use as a humour resource, particularly useful in difficult situations. Finally, we present our data collection and results reviewing the chronology of the relevant moments of the exhumation process through memes and messages behind them.

2. An overview of existing studies

By looking into the existing studies on the paper's subject matter, we will analyse two converging aspects: research on Franco and the Valley of the Fallen on the one hand, and memetics on the other.

1. 2.1. Franco and the Valley of the Fallen

Research on Franco's biography and his political and military actions is very prolific and is included in many works that use different historiographical trends. During almost four decades, Franco was introduced to the Spaniards as a myth, a heroic warrior who saved the homeland from communism, fighting in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and after (Box 2010; Zenobi 2011). New archival resources, historiographical views and historical perspectives have dismantled this version built around the dictatorship (Moradiellos 2018; Preston 2017; Reig Tapia 2005; Viñas 2015). That research has highlighted his absolute and intimidatory power and has brought to light not very honest aspects of his career, such as his own enrichment despite being portrayed as a frugal leader without important economic intentions. However, there are historiographic essays that exalt his figure as a hero and his good management as the head of the country (Payne & Palacios 2014; Torres 2019). That research, sometimes the work of journalists, scholars and writers of different topics, tends to follow the storyline similar to the one disseminated during the dictatorship, that is, the line that praises his biography and political management.

With regard to the Valley of the Fallen, numerous researchers have analyzed its architectural site located in the little town of El Escorial, near Madrid. They highlight the architectural style and grandeur linked to power and domination (Delso et al. 2018). Some authors have emphasised symbolism of the funerary complex whose memory is that of Franco's dictatorship and the confrontation between Spaniards, as well as the slave labour of republican prisoners who served their sentence by building the site (Calleja 2009; Crumbaugh 2011; Hepworth 2014; Olmeda 2009; Sueiro 2006; Valis 2007). There is research that has in fact recovered from the archives the first transfer in the sixties of those fallen to this national cemetery, sometimes without the authorization of the deceased's relatives (Solé & Barjau 2009). Those works share the common idea of the possibilities of its resignification in the 21st century and the need to give a new meaning to this place in Franco's memory (Guixé et al. 2019; Guixé 2018). Different committees appointed to advice the Spanish government on the fate of the site have concluded that several actions are needed that affect the architectural site, the bodies there interred, and the destination of the leaders buried in the main altar of the Basilica who were close to the dictatorship and Spanish fascism: José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the leader of the fascist Falange Española, deceased on November 20th, 1936, and Francisco Franco, deceased on November 20th, 1975. Within this framework of fundamental contributions, our research adds to those studies an analysis of the social reactions to Franco's exhumation expressed through the use of humour on Twitter.

2. 2.2. Meme: a new humour resource

Research on the use of memes in digital culture, both for mobilizing and comical reasons, has been a subject of growing interest. Jocosity and humour are ways of exercising freedom of speech, relaxed and caricatured representations of everyday life and the sarcastic revelation of the system's imperfections and mistakes. Resorting to humour is common as an opinion genre in cultural and media narratives to express position on an event. Its use relieves ideological, mood and psychological tensions by addressing censored, forbidden topics or taboos, such as sex or death, or simply discrepancies regarding power. Jokes, parodies, gags, or sketches characterised by irony, ridicule and sarcasm aim to create a comical environment concerning what surrounds us, although it may be serious or dramatic, and may even try to beat the opponent through caricature.

The Web 2.0 has added memes to traditional humorous expressions, such as cartoons or jokes. Memes are a cultural product, often artistic, used to express thoughts or opinions many times through parody and irony (Boudana et al. 2017). Richard Dawkins (1976) defined it as a minimum cultural information unit conveyed from one person to another that deals with cultural reality, but its design and use, as we understand it in current times, started in the 21st century. Susan Blackmore (2000) approached what would be called an "Internet meme" and stated that the World Wide Web was the source of greater reproduction of those units that replicate through written word, drawings and art. Shifman (2014: 41) and Milner (2016: 1) agree in defining memes as a digital text made of an image, audio or video created, disseminated and transformed by cultural participants through networks and groups. It is a product whose existence depends on its viral nature, that is, the social impact it has thanks to its spreading. Sometimes spreading it becomes a way of digital activism, where the meme turns into an ideological resource to raise social awareness, although humour is the main goal of those creative units. Shifman (2014) and Wiggins (2019), for instance, insisted on the narrative power of those visual units that circulate on the Internet and multiply in social media. Yang Soh (2020) has studied the use of memes for political uses, and Olesen (2018) – for demanding reasons. Their dissemination on the Internet may take place via WhatsApp groups, social media accounts or websites, always looking for the places where it spreads best (Pérez Salazar 2014). Their success depends on circulation, scope and timeliness, and those criteria are only achieved if the meme captures the attention of individuals and fulfils expectations of being ironic, caricaturing or denouncing an event or person. Among others, Burgess (2008) stresses the humorous nature of Internet memes that propagate in the media. However, to understand the message and not to produce interpretations that may be offensive or that are simply not easily understood if not at the right time and location, recipients need to know the context. In comedy, context is a key to achieve humour.

Pages such as *Memegenerator.es* and *Generadormemes.com*, amongst others, offer the possibility of creating those digital units and transforming them into an image likely to become viral. Pérez Salazar (2014: 119) classifies their design into three types. The first includes those which have a chain of characters, that is, sentences, acronyms, emoticons or hashtags that are part of the jargon of the most active users on the Internet. The second type is the so-called "still images", that is, those that replicate an image. They can carry some text to explain the message the author aims to caricature or complain about. What the text says is shown in the image, offering veracity or reinforcing the message. Moreover, they may include embedded text, short sentences over the image, as well as sequential images or micro cartoons in which a story is told. The third type of meme, according to the author, is that of "moving images," which includes those created as animation sequences without audio, better known as gifs, widely used on social media. The form memes take can also change as they circulate and depending on the medium of dissemination. Therefore, we need to take into consideration the recipient's attitude, who may choose to participate by forwarding the meme as it was received, modifying it, or giving it a new sense.

This new iconography has been spread significantly by social media and comes with unusual speed when users believe a situation can be trivialised or mocked. It has turned out to be the ideal platform to express an opinion, an attitude or a mood before a large audience that spreads not just on social media and the computer screen, but also on mobile phones. Scholars, such as Rossolatos (2015) or Wei et al. (2012) are concerned with the reasons for mimetic success and their degree of circulation.

However, Internet memes remain partially theorized, and studies on memes and history are still scarce. Milner (2016) and Markhorthykh (2015) gave attention to the simplification of world's history translated into memes. Shifman (2014) and Wiggings (2019), on the other hand, consider the importance of the ideological component of memes and the desire to intervene in the political debate with a very appealing tool that tends to cause a reaction in many users who normally do not react to written opinions. In complex contexts, such as wars, Bogerts and Fielitz (2019) examined the use of images from the past transformed into memes to mobilize and gain supporters by the far right. Their sources were Nazi Germany and the Middle Ages presented with contemporary highly appealing aesthetics to the supporters of neo-Nazism and other far right variants. Other researchers have analyzed memes to study Russian and Ukrainian nationalist narratives (Pavlyuk 2019), as well as the memory of the Second World War of the former USSR and its role in building national identity (Kalkina 2020; Makhorthykh 2015). The study hereinafter is related to those of the authors mentioned, in the sense that it shows the purpose of memes in a complex political context, when there is a need to resolve a topic linked to the memory of an anti-democratic past in the current political reality.

3. An overview of Franco in the social media: confronting views

Interest on the dictator in the social media during the first decades of the 21st century has been limited, compared to the attention given by the historians or memorial associative movement demanding truth, justice, and reparation for Franco's victims (Labanyi 2008; Guixé et al. 2019). Nonetheless, those decades opened up some virtual space for the dissemination of the idea of Franco as a "saviour and hero of the motherland" or "Caudillo by the grace of God".

The booming of neofrancoism has found space in the digital space and has been supported by some communication media. Specialised websites, however, are not very common. Some of them are the website of the Francisco Franco National Foundation (FNFF), which keeps considerable traffic, or Facebook pages such as *Francisco Franco en la Historia de España* [*Francisco Franco in the History of Spain*], *I support Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War*, *El Legado que nos dejó Francisco Franco Caudillo de España* [*The legacy Francisco Franco Leader of Spain left us*] and *Franco, memoria de España* [*Franco, memory of Spain*].

On Twitter, the following accounts @FranciscoFranco, @srfranco69 and @srfranciscofran have been created, but they have very little activity, barely reflected in a few dozen tweets since they were created in recent years, and have very few followers². More active are those accounts related to right and far-right movements that every now and again mention Franco in their tweets, such as: @D_Nacional, the official account of Democracia Nacional [National Democracy], a nationalist political movement, which has more than 16.000 followers; @MovtoXEspana, an account of Movimiento por España [Movement for Spain] with 1.050 followers; @RxEsp-religious account created to pray the rosary for Spain, 25.600 followers; and @lafalange, the political party Falange official Twitter, 12.000 followers. It is also common to find a mention of the dictator on the social media accounts of individuals who mention him

² The Twitter account @FranciscoFranco has 136 followers; @srfranco69, 12 followers, and @srfranciscofran only two followers. Last date consulted June 27, 2021.

in specific contexts to criticise the government. These parties and political movements are a minority, although they stimulate some activity on social networks and stir public opinion on the Internet.

This limited attention to Franco changed in the summer of 2018, when Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez pledged that one of his government's goals was to close pending issues from the past and that, in the near future, Franco would be exhumed from the Valley of the Fallen. The pressure of the memorial movement and the belief that Spain should put an end to the anomaly of exhibiting the burial place of a dictator in a preferential location in a public religious building are some of the most important arguments that explain this decision. The measure had been included in the Historical Memory Act of 2007, but it was delayed due to the legal complexity involved in executing a decision of great political and social weight. It was then that speculation arose about the dates, the judicial protocol, and the new burial place. Criticisms and confronting opinions on the issue worsened for several weeks, some of the expression channels were TV comedy programs and social media. Tweets and memes started circulating timidly with a sentence that later became highly disseminated: "Paco, calienta que sales" (*Paco, warm up, you are coming out*, with "Paco" being the Francisco's diminutive), or "Vamos Paco, que sales" (*Come on Paco, you are coming out*), referring to the warm-up prior to doing any physical activity. Nevertheless, several obstacles came up during the execution of this measure, delaying it.

Social reaction in social media livened up especially due to the judicial decisions adopted after the spring of 2019, with the decree of the Supreme Court in June that put on hold the exhumation process. The content of tweets reflected the opinion of those in favour, those who stated to be against and those who expressed uncertainty, although they were passive consumers of the controversy. From the onset of the discussion, humour was very relevant, and the authors of sarcastic tweets gained the attention of users who normally would not participate in political discussions.

Below we reproduce two tweets against Franco's exhumation, whose authors are, firstly, from the Spanish Falange, the inheritor of the only political party allowed during the Franco regime which currently exists, although without parliamentary representation³. And, secondly, from Vox, the far-right political party with 52 deputies in the Spanish Parliament since the November 2019 elections⁴.

³ It says: *Let the dead rest in peace. Enough of revenge.*

⁴ It says: *Franco's exhumation, and the safe subsequent demolition of the Cross, if carried out, if allowed, will be one of the greatest insults made to Spain, its history, its culture, its traditions, carried out by the PSOE.*



Figure 1. Tweets of the far right against Franco's exhumation

Memorial associations, many groups and individuals were in favour of the decision, justifying it with a necessary democratic measure in 21st-century Spain. That is the case of these two tweets written by *La Comuna Presxs*, an association of former political prisoners⁵, and *Foro Memoria Madrid* [*Forum Memory Madrid*], an organization dependent on the *Federación Estatal de Foros por la Memoria* (State Federation of Forums for Memory) established with the aim of recovering the historical memory of anti-fascists who fought in the Spanish Civil War, and dedicated to the vindication of memory policies, demanding human rights and universal justice⁶.

⁵ It says: *The first step towards democratic normalization will be achieved with the elimination of the remains of Franco's regime in the State apparatuses. #Truth #Justice #Reparation in relation to the countless crimes of the Franco's regime with impunity.*

⁶ It says: *Those of Vox attacking the #Franco's exhumation for the cost it has involved. Fascists do not want public spending. Well. Benedictines cost 380 thousand euros a year, the Valley much more. Out with the Benedictines of the Valley. Desecration*



Figure 2. Tweets of memorial associations in favour of Franco's exhumation

The tweets above are an example of the majority of the tweets that spread when news of the exhumation came up. Social movements, political parties and individuals in favour and against expressed their opinion based on several arguments; the latter, linked to right and extreme-right parliamentary groups, argued that it was advisable not to stir up the past and stressed the need not to offend those who are buried, whilst the former, those related to the parliamentary left-wing and memory groups, pledged the urgency to remove the dictator from a public place of worship and to comply with the legislation on memory policies that set forth the prohibition to glorify the symbols of dictatorship. Moreover, they added to those arguments the high cost for the State of preserving the architectural site and the maintenance of the religious order that inhabited the place. Besides, the collective memory also mentioned the fact that the Valley of the Fallen was part of one of numerous spaces built by republican prisoners and, therefore, a traumatic reminder (Sueiro 2006; Rueda & Moreno 2013; Olmeda 2009).

Adding to those two positions was humour, an agent that contributed to thawing the ambience and moving the controversy into the world of irony. Berger (1999) distinguished four types of humour: benign, whose intention is light fun; tragicomic, aimed at mitigating pain and overcoming it; witty, whose aim is to stimulate public's opinion and which, therefore, must be more selective; and, finally, satirical, aimed at provocation through mockery and ridicule when there is a difference of opinions or attitudes. As we will see later on, satire was the most widely used resource by producers and users of the memes on exhumation.

4. Data collection and selection

The time frame used for the analysis and monitoring memes on Twitter, but that spread simultaneously in Whatsapp groups, started in March 2019. According to Mariluz Congosto's research⁷, Twitter users' activity peak took place from the 4th of April to the 28th of October, with special intensity around the 3rd-5th of June, the dates when the exhumation was put on hold; the 24th of September, the day when the Supreme Court authorised it; and 22nd-26th of October, the days immediately before and after the exhumation, which took place on the 24th.

Table 1. The calendar and political-legal process for the exhumation

Year 2019	Measures adopted
15 th March	The Council of Ministers decides to set the 10 th of June as the date to exhume Franco from the Valley of the Fallen and inter him in the cemetery of El Pardo.
12 th April	An appeal is brought before the Supreme Court by the Francisco Franco National Foundation and the dictator's family asking the court to stop the process.
4 th June	Exhumation put on hold by the Supreme Court.
24 th September	Exhumation is endorsed by the Supreme Court after dismissing the appeal by the family and the Francisco Franco National Foundation.
24 th October	Exhumation of Francisco Franco's remains from the Valley of the Fallen and his subsequent burial in the cemetery of El Pardo-Mingorrubio is carried out.

Source: Compiled by the author

To collect the memes, the free tool #WarbleAlerts was used. It enables creating daily alerts and saving them through advanced search with the use of keywords. The search was triggered using the keywords “exhumación de Franco, Valle de los Caídos Franco, exhumar a Franco, sacar a Franco, tumba de Franco, Cuelgamuros Franco” [Franco's exhumation, Valley of the Fallen Franco, exhuming Franco, taking Franco out, Franco's grave, Cuelgamuros Franco]. Moreover, hashtags created during the months the process lasted were followed, such as #elvallenosetoca [#theValleyIsNoTouched], #exhumacionfranco, #ExhumaciónFranco [#exhumationFranco] (with accent and in capital letters), #Franco, #FormasDeSacarAFranco [#WaysToGetFranco], #HoySeSale [#TodayItComesOut], #funeraldeEstado [#stateFuneral], #ValledelosCaídos [#ValleyoftheFallen], #francoseva [#francoisleaving], and #sacaraFranco [#takeoutFranco]. Millennials' jargon was used for #unboxingFranco, a tag that generated a huge number of memes. The term comes from the world of the Youtube platform, and its meaning is opening before users a box which contains a gift that gives great satisfaction. The hashtag #unboxingFranco – with the double meaning of the word “box” for keeping things and “box” for coffin – propagated through the accounts of many users who wanted to express their opinion in a way that was closer to the younger generations. Those groups created those mocking and

⁷ Maria Luz Congosto @congosto (October 26, 2019) <https://twitter.com/congosto/status/1188047508133552136>

fun pieces, even though two taboo topics were being addressed: death and the dictatorship. Most of the findings with memes did not include hashtags, but they were retrieved because they used words linked to the exhumation.

The set collected, as we mentioned on the previous pages, is made up of a total of 127 memes created and distributed during the political and judicial exhumation timeline seen in Table 1. The results were organised in a data matrix which included metadata related to indicators such as the authors, circulation date, message, and impact in terms of tweets and likes. Most of them appeared around the 20th-26th of October, when, according to the already mentioned follow-up by Congosto, over a million of tweets were posted. They included sentences relating to the positions of each user on the political decision to exhume, and it was only a minority that expressed themselves via the memes. The day with the greater number of memes' circulation was the 24th of October, the exact date of the exhumation and subsequent burial in the cemetery of El Pardo-Mingorrubio (Madrid), accounting for 34.6% of the total. In order to look into the message of the memes and their visual information, we have implemented the content analysis technique – a tool that allowed us to know the structure, topic, protagonists and humorous rhetoric. Knowing the context when the meme was created and distributed was key in their collection and analysis, and that is why it was considered crucial to follow the calendar of political decisions that promoted the creation and distribution of memes. The memes selected here are, therefore, part of a specific context, shown with the message and with the visual medium, as well as with the humour strategy chosen (González & Herrera 2014).

TV's prime-time coverage of political and judicial decisions contributed to social participation in the media, given the intensity and frequency of the news items, marked by great details concerning the explanation of nuances of the preparation, the protocol, the arrival of the government authorities, the arrival of Franco's family and their reaction, the removal of the gravestone, and transfer to the new burial place, which encouraged the interaction of public opinion. Some used the same image, such as the panoramic view of the Cross and the Valley of the Fallen, the coffin with the body inside and the gravestone, but with different messages. The tag #unboxingFranco propagated hugely with tweets during the broadcasting of this historic TV event, although it mostly did not include memes. The most active users were individuals without a clear ideology but brought together by the message of humour, followed by the supporters of the political party Podemos and those close to PSOE, who declared themselves in favour of the exhumation. A different group would be the supporters of Vox and Partido Popular, who were against the transfer of Franco from the Valley of the Fallen. A similar assessment was made in Eiroa and Congosto's (2020: 11) and in Andrino and Pérez Colomé's analyses⁸ of over one million tweets, where they observed greater activity of messages linked to the parties of the left and satire. The dual role of the sender and recipient of those mocking creations implies that the authors wanted them to be broadcast and become viral, but also act as content interpreters, as they act on them and use them in their interest.

4.1. Memes and humour regarding the controversy over Franco's exhumation

The memes collected for this paper stress, above all, the will to caricature the characters represented, mainly Franco. In general, they show an ideology against the dictator, but expressed from a comical standpoint demystifying him. The images present a weakened dictator, subject to democratic decisions of the memory policies that strip him of the superiority he had during

⁸ Andrino, B., & Pérez, J. (2019). 'Las tres Españas que hablaron de Franco. Junto a las tradicionales izquierda y derecha, un análisis de un millón de tuits detecta que a la conversación se unió otro grupo más activo: el humor' [The three Spains that spoke of Franco. Along with the traditional left and right, an analysis of a million tweets detects that another, more active group joined the conversation: humour] *El País.es*, October 25, 2019. https://elpais.com/tecnologia/2019/10/25/actualidad/1572003002_304701.html

his years of rule. Yang Soh (2020) and Olesen (2018) pointed out to political uses and demanding reasons, but expressed through humour. As a media form, memes recontextualize his character and evaluate it from today's point of view.

We could say that the 2012 edition of the Art Fair Arco became the starting point that eased the path towards caricaturing the dictator. That edition of the fair exhibited a sculpture entitled "Always Franco", consisting of a drink's refrigerator with the Coca Cola design and, in it, there was a corpse-looking figure of Franco in military clothing. Its author, Eugenio Merino, aimed with this artwork to show the constant presence of the dictator in the collective memory of Spaniards. This peculiar work of art bewildered the public opinion and the communication media, and the Francisco Franco National Foundation even sued the artist for considering it an offence and claiming it generated hate. However, it was popular and non-elitist humour distributed via social media that contributed the most to the transformation of the person into a grotesque and obsolete character. What better way to weaken a flattered icon than to convert him into someone ridiculed?

The news piece of the death of Franco on the 20th of November 1975 broadcast on TV by Carlos Arias Navarro (head of government from 1973 to 1976) has been one of the most disseminated and used for satire over the last few years. Forty-five years after his appearance on the small screen, the recording became a mocking resource to inform people of not very sensible topics. Its aesthetics, words and gestures have been transformed from 1975 till today, a time in which the image of the former ruler seems laughable. The famous sentence by Carlos Arias "Españoles, Franco ha muerto" [Fellow Spaniards, Franco has died] said before the TV cameras, followed by a crying hiccup due to the pain of the loss, has been repeated and its words have been changed with a comical, ironic, or metaphorical goal. Even though the life of memes is short-lived, this still image persists in time and is reused because it is adaptable and recognisable by the public. In this case, it has been a parodical recontextualization of the appearance on television announcing Franco's death. Shifman (2014) asserted that memes could change as they spread. In this case, the change took place on the message but not on the visual resource. Thus, the Internet has given a new meaning to Carlos Arias' appearance, transforming it into a laughable presentation of current news.



Figure 3. Carlos Arias Navarro announcing the death of Franco, 1975. Source: Generadordememes.com, <https://www.generadormemes.com/imagenes/carlos-arias-navarro/>

In the following image, we can see the adaptation of a character stuck in time (Pérez Salazar 2014: 19) taken to September/October 2019, changing the "has died" to the announcement that "is moving" to announce his departure from his burial place.



Figure 4. Carlos Arias announces the “move”. Source: Generadordememes.com
<https://www.generadormemes.com/imagenes/carlos-arias-navarro/>

In the midst of social tension generated by the dictator’s exhumation, irony came in as a player that reinforced the opinion of social groups in favor of removing his corpse from the Valley of the Fallen. Berger (1999) distinguished four types of humour: benign, whose intention is light fun; tragicomic, aimed at mitigating pain and overcoming it; witty, whose aim is to stimulate public’s opinion, and therefore more selective; and, finally, satirical, aimed at provoking through mockery and ridicule when there is a difference of opinions or attitudes. We could say that this is the kind of humour that Berger classified as satirical, that is, the one that aims to provoke when disagreements exist.

One of the first memes that circulated was the one offering the still image of the dictator’s family against the background of the Cross of the Valley of the Fallen. That picture, in which he posed with his daughter and grandchildren, had been highly disseminated in the last few years of Franco’s regime to give a vision of happiness and well-being of the family surrounding the one considered to be an exemplary ruler, transforming him into a kind of grandfather of all Spaniards. In 2019, this historical picture was used to play with the metaphor of the forced removal from his grave set against the currency of house evictions taking place at the time due to tenants not paying rent because of the echoes of the financial crisis that started in 2008. The family portrait, therefore, was able to present an encapsulated past, but its manipulation transformed it into an image linked to the present. It was not only about showing the past, but about inserting what is contemporary with amplified content into other topics not related to the original one. This meme is an example of reusing an image in different contexts of social media. We could consider it a “still image” type meme defined by Pérez Salazar (2014) as the one that replicates a well-known picture.



Figure 5. Franco's family and the eviction from the Valley of the Fallen. Source: @sergito2001, October 22, 2019

One of the memes that reflected the news items about the exhumation was the following. In it, we can see Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and Unidas Podemos' leader, Pablo Iglesias, two of the most involved politicians in removing Franco from the Valley of the Fallen, holding the shabby body of the deceased. This meme is based on the poster for Ted Kotcheff's comedy film premiered in 1989 entitled *Weekend at Bernie's*, which had been translated into Spanish as *This corpse is very much alive*. The Spanish title made it possible to create a metaphor to compare a body dead for 45 years and the "vitality" of its figure by being current news in 2019. Humour also helped connect with the demands from the memory movement that urged immediate action with regard to the dictator's burial.



Figure 6. A lively cadaver. Source: @tuitsa, October 24, 2019

Ironic and along the same lines as the "living dead", the creators of memes for the exhumation thought that the look of Franco 44 years after his death would be similar to that of a zombie

from the music video *Thriller* by Michael Jackson. In the choreography, made up of sinister and corpse-looking people, we can see Franco as just one more dancer in the group of zombies whose dance and music became a world hit. The dictator, therefore, is shown with a look that, far from being scary, invites people to follow the beat of the famous song. The time of uncertainty and fear caused by the character had come to an end.



Figure 7. Thriller with Franco replacing Michael Jackson. Source: @skakeofanzine, October 22, 2019.

The uncertainties regarding the move to take place, how it would be done and where the new burial place would be led to numerous memes. In one of them, Franco appears with the well-known image of Hendaya's station platform where his famous meeting with Hitler took place on the 23rd of October 1940 to agree on the terms of Spain's participation in the Second World War. This topic was highly exploited by the dictatorship's official discourse, which presented the meeting as the success of Franco over Hitler, avoiding Spain's active participation in the war. However, historiography has disclosed most of the terms of that historic rendezvous and it actually shows the opposite, that is, Franco's willingness to participate in the conflict next to his German ally. Sources that can confirm what happened at that meeting between the two dictators are still being searched for to solve this controversial issue. One of the better-known sources are the images of Hendaya meeting where we can see a jubilant Franco because of the opportunity to have direct contact with Führer. That is the image used in the meme we present below, an example of polysemy and double meaning, only understood by those who know the historic episode and the debate around it (Boxman-Shabtai 2014). Once again, we find another example of a meme showing a parodic recontextualization of a crucial event in the development of World War II.

In the picture, Franco greeted his hosts with his arm high up, as per the Nazi salute. However, a gesture like this is also used in situations when one wants to ask a question or participate in a conversation. That is why the sentence that accompanies the still image ["Who does not know yet where New Year's Eve is going to be spent, raise your hand"] plays with the double meaning of the arm's position to respond to the question of where the next New Year's Eve Party will take place. This time, Franco raises his hand to warn about him not knowing where he will be located during the Christmas holidays. Thus, humour contributes to ridiculing this major episode and Franco's attitude before the German giant.

Quien no sepa aún dónde va a pasar la nochevieja, que levante la mano



Figure 8. Questions about the destination of Franco's corpse. Source: @electricismo, October 11, 2019

One problem put forward was the process to be used to remove the gravestone located on the altar of the Basilica in the Valley of the Fallen. Moreover, the most appropriate transport method to be used was also debated when thinking about the transfer of the body to the new burial place, and those technical and ethical difficulties led to a lot of satirical creativity.

With the hashtag #FormasDeSacarAFranco [#WaysToGetFranco], many memes were circulated offering very imaginative solutions. Using the topic of Nazi Germany's support to Franco during the Spanish Civil War, the following meme was distributed featuring Hitler taking his ally out of the Valley of the Fallen, rescuing him once again from trouble in the Fuhrer's favourite Mercedes Benz. This meme was accompanied with a sentence in which Franco said to Hitler "Bloody hell, Adolfo, moves really stress me out".



Figure 9. Proposals to remove Franco: Hitler's help. Source: @nollorencielo, October 24, 2019

Other humoristic options were humbler. For instance, in the following image, we can see one of those proposals with a frame of the film *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) with children taking E.T. to the meeting point with their family. This time, the group of

children on the bike are taking Franco just like the famous alien, a teasing idea regarding the potential transport method to be used to take Franco discretely from the Valley of the Fallen to his new grave.



Figure 10. Proposals to remove Franco from the Valley. Source: @Runnercervecero, October 22, 2019

There were also jokes about the preparations for the departure of the body to the new location. In the following images, we reproduce a collage of several memes with a still image with a sentence in which the dictator peeps discretely and asks if the time has come – *Shall I come out now?* His liking of golf is even used by resorting to the “hole” as a pun, in its sense of hole for the ball and the space where the casket goes into. Moreover, his departure was compared to the free days Erasmus students have, normally planned from Thursday, for a long weekend of non-stop partying. This was mentioned on Twitter by Gerardo Tecé – @geradotc – on October 21st, when he said: “Franco leaves on Thursday. Like the Erasmus students”, that was retweeted 1570 times and received 6275 likes.



Figure 11. Image collage of preparations for the departure. Source: WhatsApp groups

Resistance to the exhumation and protests against the decision came from neofrancoist groups, from parties on the right, such as Partido Popular (PP), but also from citizens who believed the measure meant stirring up the past and focusing on topics that were not a priority for Spaniards.

One of the memes that parodied this disagreement can be found using a cinema resource that became a film blockbuster. The poster of the film *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) was used. In it, we can see at the front the leaders of the political parties against the exhumation: José Abascal from Vox, Pablo Casado from Partido Popular and Albert Rivera from Ciudadanos political parties. At the bottom of the poster, we find the mummy of Franco in his coffin with the sentence “*Salvar al soldado Paco*” (*Saving Private Paco*, as Paco is the colloquial name given to people called Francisco), and, in the background, you can see the profile of the helicopter that would move the body from the Cross of the Valley of the Fallen.



Figure 12. Political party leaders against the exhumation. Source: Javier @JAVIER9090, October 23, 2019

Finally, on Thursday 24th of October 2019, the exhumation ceremony took place with a very well-meditated protocol and with the participation of the country's high authorities, such as Justice Minister Dolores Delgado, the Kingdom's highest judicial authority, Franco's descendants, and their lawyers. Images of the family carrying the coffin on their shoulders on their exit were televised as a historic event. "Long live Spain, long live Franco" was shouted by Franco's descendants and theirs were the only voices heard during a highly tense event. Hashtag #Funeraldeestado [#Statefuneral] was propagated during the day in the midst, once again, of great activity in social media.

Meme creators used the scenes of *The Simpsons* cartoon series to stage the funeral but they also resorted to puns using words from the *Fast and Furious* (directed by Justin Lin 2009) film saga in which the word "Fast" was replaced by the word "Fach", the initial letters in Spanish for the colloquial word "Facha", which is the shorter version of the word *fascist*. Moreover, the photo of the coffin was replaced with that of a chocolate cake. In other memes, the image of the coffin leaving the basilica on the shoulders of Franco's descendants is used, but with variations in the message, sometimes regarding the skeleton or the personality of the relatives carrying the coffin. This type of meme corresponds to those which feature sentences or hashtags, some of the most common elements among the most active users of social media (Pérez Salazar 2014: 19).



Figure 13. Departure of Franco's coffin carried by the relatives. Source: @Ridonsplash, October 24, 2019

The ceremony was broadcast live on public TV, turning the coverage into the viewing of a historic event of great interest. The average audience of TV stations on the 24th of October was over seven million viewers and over seventy communication media from several countries asked RTVE to receive institutional signal to broadcast the event. Nevertheless, it was not only a TV audience success, but the whole media circuit also made up of social media reacted with activity, creating a “social audience” that gave their opinions on the programs, content, as well as government decisions regarding protocol and the funeral staging (Montemayor 2016). As a result of the media convergence and the interaction possibilities, there were transmedia narratives where different media and citizens told the same story but with a different language, including that of humour (Rueda & Moreno 2013).

That historical Thursday, social media brimmed with conversations in large communities that replicated messages with hashtags to tag the moment. Thus, groups close to the left populated hashtags such as *#pormemoriayreparación* [#formemoryandrepair] and *#aunquedaporhacer* [#stilltodo], referring to the fact that although this was a huge historic milestone, it had to be followed by the adoption of other actions that led to victim's reparation and the final closure of this chapter of national history. As for the right, hashtags *#exhumaciónFranco* [#exhumationFranco] and *#ahoraparo* [#Istopnow] mentioned that, once again, Pedro Sanchez's government's pledge to remove Franco from the Valley of the Fallen had been accomplished and that it was now time to talk about the real problems affecting the country. Amongst the most humorous Twitter users, hashtags *#hoysesale* [#todayitcomesout], or *#unboxingFranco* were used. Moreover, several video games were prepared, amongst them Franco's exhumation, which includes the Valley of the Fallen, the relatives bringing the coffin out and a row of characters representative of Franco's regime⁹.

⁹ Repelucio Productions: “Franco's exhumation”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt4mwS8JMa> October 23, 2019

Simultaneously, there was a discussion about what to do with the Basilica and the architectural site of Cuelgamuros, the original name of the Valley of the Fallen, an issue related to memory policies and the complex management of what to do with the remaining bodies buried there, which belong to soldiers of the rebel army and the republican army alike. Many remains were taken there without authorization of the relatives and most of them are unidentified. It is, therefore, the biggest war cemetery existing in Western Europe and kept in these precarious conditions, considered to be a huge mass grave of the Civil War that lasted from 1936-1939. Another relevant aspect was the monetary amount needed to give a sustainable response to the architectural site, an issue that satire resolved by proposing to use the funeral venue as a public car park. With that same photograph, other memes proposed building a supermarket or a theme park, that is to say, creative satirical solutions that came up as they spread amongst users.



Figure 14. Proposal to solve the problem of what to do with the Valley of the Fallen.

Source: @NicoOrdozgoiti, October 23, 2019

All of them mention the interest and social expectation given that this is an event of great historical importance due to the symbolism of moving the body of someone who was Caudillo [Leader] for nearly four decades. With the exhumation, the left parties believed that democracy had now better foundations and that the past was now a bit more resolved, whilst the right and far right parties saw it as an attack against a great historical figure. Most users perceived it as a necessary measure in the 21st century but opted to remove any solemnity from it. Independent users of any political party were the most active in the world of humour and in the dissemination of memes about the event. As mentioned by Shifman (2014) and Wiggings (2019), memes were a very effective tool to make users who normally do not react to political debate react. Thus, Franco was left as a demystified character, subject to the memory policies of democratic governments that had a very negative view of his management as a leader.

5. Conclusion

New technologies and their expression in social media are playing a transforming role in the way the past is perceived and conveyed. There are many individuals and groups that act as prosumers – producers and consumers – with different purposes, such as leisure and fun, opinion, advocacy and contribution to current controversies.

Memory policies in Spain are quite recent. They have been mainly fostered from the memorial associative movement organised since the beginning of the 21st century. There are still many measures left to implement in order to reach the trilogy of human rights of Truth, Justice and Reparation, but, gradually, some aspects have been resolved since the approval of the so-called Law of Historical Memory in 2007 and the push given by the first government of Pedro Sánchez in June 2018. That month, the prime minister announced that regulations be approved to remove dictatorship's symbols, one of the main objectives of the aforementioned law, and throughout that summer, the process to give a new meaning to the Valley of the Fallen was agreed on, which included the removal of Franco's remains from his grave in the centre of the Basilica. Since then and until the carrying out of that measure, nearly a year and a half later, opinions in favour and against were expressed in newspapers and in social media. Some private TV stations and Twitter were the channels where the humour factor came out from a group that was mostly in favour of the exhumation and gave it a comical nature.

Memes were the technical unit used by comical authors to participate in the open debate on the decision, expressing their agreement with Franco's removal from the Valley of the Fallen, but from a viewpoint brimming with irony. Their creators, mainly individuals using pseudonyms, used images from cinema productions, from pictures dating from the dictatorship or images that had been manipulated and adapted to the topic. The left political parties (PSOE and Podemos), the right parties (PP and Ciudadanos) and the far right (Vox) also stated their opinions. Moreover, the memorial associative movement also expressed their opinion, conveying to the general audience the collective memory of the Valley's past, a place of repression and forced labour for republicans, who were forced to build it whilst serving their sentences.

Memes reflected the past and present: a “dead” past that, nonetheless, had become a “living” present because of the approval of legislation in Parliament, and the confrontation between those two in favour or against the measure. The most active circulation of the 127 memes collected in this study took place around the key dates of the event, especially the 24th of October 2019, and were highly viral in Twitter and in WhatsApp groups. However, they were in general circulated in the social media with great speed of propagations since the summer of 2018 when the measure was announced. They continued with great intensity in the summer of 2019 and followed up the vicissitudes of the process of exhumation until the day it was done. Moreover, they covered the whole process with news on how and when it would be done, the funeral protocol and the interment in a new cemetery. However, discussions were short-lived, even though they generated a lot of noise amongst different communities and users.

The image of the dictator reflected by the memes was that of a weakened all-powerful, a cadaverous soldier stripped of his capabilities, impotent before the decisions adopted by the democracy he fought against; a character that did not inspire fear in the population as during the years of his rule, but rather fatigue due to his long presence and the desire of putting an end to the pending task of moving him to a more discreet location and to better manage the Valley of the Fallen. The memes and circulation of humorous tweets also managed to bring attention to the policies about the past, contributing in this manner to a reflection on the identity of the national past and its management in the third decade of the 21st century.

To end, we understand this research complements the aforementioned studies on issues related to memetics, history and memory. It has revealed how humour contributed to the state

of affairs related to memory policies, such as the exhumation of Franco from the Valley of the Fallen. This contribution can be valued as follows: firstly, it gave a different viewpoint, a caricatural one, to an event of huge historical significance. Secondly, it created a different community in the social media, different from those organised by political parties from the parliament's spectrum. Its objective was to remove tension in a context of very contradictory political and social positions. Thirdly, the memes managed to raise interest in the history and past of the Valley amongst many users. Finally, we believe those memes supported the demands of the memorial associative movement and the government's decision to exhume the body because they showed the need to resolve his fate – an issue that had to be decided on in the democratic setting of the 21st century.

The analysis of this specific case study reveals how humour distributed through memes on social media can bring a different approach to state policies linked to complicated historical events. In contexts of high social and political tension, it shows how humour acts to defuse the situation without losing the ideology or vindication of the authors.

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