

On images and symbols of dictators

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One of the most used, reinterpreted, exposed and reused artistic images on Catalonia's recent past, regarding the Civil War and the dictatorship, is the photography '[Aixafem el Feixisme](#)' (Crush Fascism), by Peter Catalan i Pic. Taken in 1936 and classified as an artistic allegory, it is part of Catalonia's national heritage and since 2011 is exposed at the National Art Museum of Catalonia (MNAC). The swastika is shown as an explicit, powerful and perhaps even offensive symbol, but the author used the technique of printing mechanics to create an image with a symbolic walk of an espadrille shoes transmitting precisely the opposite of what initially appeals to the viewer. This was the original intention and that is the intention that we interpret from this picture, his memory – and ours. Without reinterpretation, the image would be considered Apologetic and prohibited by law in countries like Germany.

Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is shown with elements of personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile. "The main aim of the interpretation is not instruction, but provocation." These words by [Freeman Tilden](#) were written nearly 60 years ago in his classic 'The interpretation of our heritage'. The aim of any exhibition is to ask questions, making the visitor raises its own questions. Europe is rich in experiences in which the use of assets from dictatorships and other traumatic episodes from its past have been interpreted and used to open present debates among citizens. Other more recent examples can be found everywhere, from the Baltic countries to Germany, Italy, and France.

The new memorial of the [Wewelsburg Castle](#) (Germany) is filled with Nazi images and iconography. The debate is how to show it, and discussions have invested millions on a new exhibition and memorial in the castle where the leadership of the Nazi SS used to meet and where the symbol of the black sun was revered by Himmler himself. The original piece is present in the exhibition along with many other Nazi icons and images that are shown to visitors, mainly students and interested tourists, as part of the right to German citizenship to reach its own memory. That is also the right to know, to ask about and revisit the symbols of the atrocities of the past from the present, learning to create dynamic, educational and cognitive spaces based on democratic and also transformers values.

In the ex-orbiting Soviet countries (Baltic States, Hungary, Romania, etc.), even where the Communist Party was outlawed, hundreds of statues of dictators and Soviet leaders were massively and forcedly withdrawal of their original sites. But many are still preserved and used in memorials, museums, exhibitions, parks, memory 'performances' and other actions that explain history, memory, art and public space.

The [Memento Park](#) in Budapest could be an example: this public memorial park was recently used by the artist [Liane Lang](#) for an action where she pretends to be a continuation of the statues of Lenin, Stalin, and other Soviet leaders. Documented in a series of pictures, the work won the first prize at ExperimentoBio Photography Festival in Bilbao in 2015. Another example: the Estonian government removed Soviet statues in museums and cemeteries – its democracy is even younger than Spanish one – and they have been shown, exposed and reinterpreted in order to question the Stalinist dictatorship and the Nazi occupation. The [Museum of Occupations](#) in Tallinn uses these images and even contract new ones through the hands of artists like [Leonard Lapin](#), who created the 'Locomotive', a machine train with the emblems of the swastika and the red star. Or the excellent work of the artist [Kristina Norman](#), who was chosen by the government to present the intelligent and scathing replica of the Soviet 'Golden Soldier' in the prestigious Venice Biennale in 2009. It was controversial, but the Ministry of Culture of her country supported the work by its ability to reinterpret the past and for its exhibit quality.

In any case, the social and memorial purpose are, in most of the cases, the same: to remember, to create, to learn, educate the society and question it about what happened and what is still happening. These frames that are played throughout exhibitions of memorial, artistic and conflict heritage are one of the most contemporary ways of transmission of the past, and often the most effective ones.

In Barcelona, the artist [Francesc Abad](#) and I have made a memorial piece in the form of file cards, with housing plates of the neighborhoods of Poble Sec and Gràcia that had been retired some years before. The [piece](#) was conceived to avoid the disappearance of the plates and aimed to explain the historical role of this symbol in a wider context of an exhibition on Franco's symbols – but above all, to explain the current social process of citizen action on the removal of the public message imposed by the dictator through all his symbolic and sculptural legacy.

It is clear that memory is conflict and transgression. In an international level, art, architecture and public action are increasingly the fields which arise most of the questions and debates concerning the conflicts about the traumatic, violent and repressive past.

Spain and Catalonia still have many debts to their past and democratic memory. The public space still keeps many symbols of the dictatorship, one of the longest imposed regimes in Europe and in the world during the twentieth century. And one thing is clear: the debate on symbols reveals democratic maturity, although public policies have acted shy and nocturnal often too many times. Just remember the recent texts and public discussions on the largest monument in Catalonia to honor Franco's victory at the Battle of the Ebro and commemorate the 'peace' brought by the military in [Tortosa](#), or the huge dictator's mausoleum of [Cuelgamuros](#), and [Mola and Sanjurjo's monument](#) in Pamplona. And so on.

For those, and for many other examples, it is surprising and worrying the fierce criticism to the future exhibition in Barcelona of two statues that were removed from their original sites and rested in the municipal warehouses until someone could use them with artistic, social or educational purposes, to explain, reinterpret and show what was the dictatorship, represented in these sculptural volumes. The statues of 'La Victòria' (The Victory) by Frederic Marés, and the one by Josep Viladomat that shows Franco riding a horse – curiously the dictator lost his head – also raise questions on what the current democracy have done or have not done, have said or have not said, about that period.

While waiting for the definitive account of the exhibition, planned for October and announced to be much broader than the 'performance' of statues, it would be out of place to analyze it. But the debate about the visit and the contemporary use of symbols of the atrocities of the past in the present shall be done precisely to defend public ethics and democracy challenging dictatorship like many European countries have already done. It reveals civic maturity and is a positive task, as well as necessary from the standpoint of the memorial work.

About the European Observatory on Memories

The European Observatory on Memories –EUROM is a transnational network of institutions and organizations committed to research and promotion of public historical memory policies. Its main objective is to contribute to the reflection surrounding recent history defending memory diversity and plurality. EUROM is driven by the [Solidarity Foundation of the University of Barcelona](#) with the support of the European Commission's program *Europe for Citizens*.

About the University of Barcelona

The UB is the top public university in Catalonia due to its size of student population, 64,000, and its course offerings. The UB is also the principal centre of university research at state level and has become a European benchmark for research activity, both in terms of the number of research programmes it conducts and the excellence these have achieved.

The UB has a prominent position in the most prestigious international rankings: it is the only university in the Spanish State that has managed to get in among the world's top 200 according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) —a classification also known as the Shanghai Ranking. Moreover, the UB is the top Spanish university and one of the best 200 universities in the world according to QS World University Rankings 2014-2015. In addition, it is the only Spanish university which is among the 200 best worldwide universities in 25 out of 30 subject areas, according to the QS World University Rankings 2014 by Subject.

The University of Barcelona is member of the most important international excellence university networks, such as the League of European Research Universities (LERU). It has overseen the creation of two campuses of international excellence, the Barcelona Knowledge Campus (BKC) and the Health University of Barcelona Campus (HUBc). It has assimilated their goals as its own to increase competitiveness; these goals include the attraction of academic and research talent, full internationalisation, the enhancement of teaching quality and scientific quality, and an increase in the transfer of knowledge generated at the university to wider society.

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