

SPAIN WAS NOT LIVING A CELEBRATION

TVE AND THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST DURING THE YEARS OF FRANCO'S DICTATORSHIP

Juan Francisco Gutiérrez Lozano

University of Málaga
Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicación Dpto. de Periodismo
Campus de Teatinos, s.n.
20971 Málaga
jfg@uma.es

Abstract: Franco's Dictatorship (1939-1975) used Spanish Television (TVE) as a key element in the political propaganda of its apparent 'openness' during the 1960s. The propaganda co-existed with political interest in showing the technological development of the media and the international co-operation established with other European broadcasters, mainly in the EBU. In a country ruled by strong political censorship, the Eurovision Song Contest was used as a political tool to show the most amiable image of the non-democratic regime. Spain's only two Eurovision wins (1968 and 1969) are still, 50 years on, two of the building blocks of the history of TVE and of televised entertainment and popular memory in Spain.

Keywords: television history, Eurovision Song Contest, Spain, RTVE, Franco's dictatorship, television memory

In May 2008, Spain celebrated the fortieth anniversary of its first Eurovision Song Contest victory with the song [La, la, la](#) performed by Massiel. That same month, Spain's La Sexta channel broadcast a documentary calling the win into question. The production *1968 I Lived Through Spanish May* featured ambiguous claims by José María Íñigo, long-time anchor at Spain's state broadcasting channel Televisión Española (TVE). On hearing these allegations, some media commentators inferred that Franco's regime had bribed members of the jury and European television executives to secure the win. After repeating the feat a year later in Madrid (1969) Spain has never topped the contest again.

The documentary provoked a great deal of controversy. Some international media spoke to the main casualty of the alleged political scheme, British singer Cliff Richard, whose song [Congratulations](#) took second place during the 1968 song contest. [Sir Cliff](#) wielded the controversy to his advantage, claiming he found it rather odd at the time and requesting that the matter be officially clarified.¹

The documentary did not actually prove the string-pulling. It simply picked up on a rumour that has constantly echoed throughout the history of Spanish television. Nevertheless, it did reveal two things. On the one hand, its capacity to stir

¹ '40 years on, Congratulations may be in order,' *The Guardian*, 6 May 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/may/06/news.spain>

things up for **Massiel**. The former singer is still in the limelight, currently working as an actress and a regular fixture on gossip-based chat shows. On the other hand, it corroborated – yet again – that both Eurovision and TVE’s first ‘golden age’ in the 1960s are still a reliable source of content for contemporary Spanish television programmes.

This article aims to highlight the significance of Spain’s Eurovision victories as veritable turning points in Spanish television history. Franco’s regime made political use of these outcomes to convince Spanish society of the country’s international reputation. Spain’s official propaganda tapped into these patriotic accomplishments, which became symbols of the apparent openness of the Dictatorship during the 1960s. Apart from magnifying Spain’s international stature, that supposed openness mainly aimed to ensure social consensus and to enshrine the structures of power that emerged in 1939 after the Spanish Civil War.

1 Spanish Television under Franco’s Regime

Televisión Española (TVE) – the Spanish state channel– started broadcasting in Madrid in 1956. However, the scant initial investment in technology made for a slow introduction of television on the Spanish mainland and it took until 1965 for coverage to reach the whole of Spain and the Canary Islands. An official decree repealing the luxury tax on television sets was passed in 1965.² However, the widespread custom of congregating in houses – with friends, neighbours and relatives – or bars to watch television continued throughout the decade because of the high cost of televisions sets. Despite these problems television soon became Spanish society’s main source of information and entertainment.³

The regime’s authorities were quick to brand the technological progress of television as the most notable example of Spain’s ‘**modernisation**’. From the late 1950s onwards, Spain opened up to the world thanks to the introduction of the market economy, irregular industrial development plans and the growing tourist boom. However this did not stop thousands of Spaniards emigrating, in search of work, to other European countries where they first encountered television.⁴

The aforementioned processes, and a few other developments, consolidated the Spanish middle classes and the consumer society. However, television emerged in a political context characterised by a lack of political freedom and individual rights. After disregarding television during its early days, Franco’s authorities turned TVE into their most strategic propaganda tool.

Although TVE conveyed the ideological and moral tenets of the political regime, the broadcaster also illustrated the contradictions that existed during the final years of the regime.⁵ Consequently, TVE broadcast home-made productions and programmes geared towards extolling patriotic values and traditional culture, but also showed foreign fiction (especially US productions like *Bonanza*, *Ironsides*, *Perry Mason* and *The Invaders*). In addition, news from abroad introduced viewers to democratic lifestyles that had nothing to do with the Spanish reality.

The greatest paradox was that TVE, the leading exponent of Spain’s ‘national character,’ also contributed to broadening the country’s outward view. As television developed, TVE hooked up to foreign networks to exchange broadcasts. Spain joined the EBU in 1955, the same year it joined the UN, leaving behind the autarchy that ruled the period after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). TVE became an official EBU member in 1960.

² Josep Maria Baget Herms, *Historia de la televisión en España: 1956-1975*, Feed-Back, 1993, p. 152.

³ Manuel Palacio, *Historia de la televisión en España*, Gedisa, 2001, p. 53-72; Juan F. Gutiérrez, *La televisión en el recuerdo*, RTVA-UMA, 2006, pp. 185-294.

⁴ Mats Björkin and Juan Francisco Gutiérrez Lozano, ‘European Television Audiences: Localising the Viewers,’ in Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers, *A European Television History*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, p. 223-227.

⁵ Manuel Palacio, *Las cosas que hemos visto. 50 años y más de TVE*, RTVE, 2006, p. 16-19.

In 1959, TVE managed to connect the central antenna in Madrid to the one in Barcelona. The **first images** the TVE antenna in Barcelona received from Europe showed the nuptials between King Baudouin of Belgium and Spaniard Fabiola de Mora y Aragón in Brussels on 15 December 1960. The next event to be broadcast using a live feed from the EBU network was the New Year's Mass celebrated by Pope John XXIII in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome in 1961.⁶ During the early days of the network, TVE directors favoured this type of religious content.

A good part of TVE's listings comprised features with a strong patriotic or nationalistic content, hoping to promote greater popular loyalty to Franco, who had defined the country as 'the spiritual reserve of the West.' Those patriotic programmes focused on traditional festivities – both religious and secular – like bullfighting, Easter processions, and traditional Spanish song recitals and folk music performances, which were present even in **advertisements**. Football matches that featured Spanish teams, such as the European Cup, also fuelled the sense of national pride. Spanish television made up for the lack of democratic competitions by taking pride in any 'Spanish' success.

Therefore, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) appeared as a symbolic opportunity to dispense with Spain's isolation and convey an image of Spain on a par with other European societies. Spain debuted in the ESC in 1961, after permanently securing its connections to the Eurovision network. TVE's relations with EBU served to justify technological advances in Spain, such as the spread of television coverage, while TVE's programming promoted content that would stress the country's presence in Europe. The ESC is one vivid example of such programming.

2 TVE Embraces Europe... from a Distance

Manuel Fraga Iribarne – Spain's Minister of Information and Tourism between 1962 and 1969 – played a decisive role in the internationalisation of TVE. Fraga's 1966 Press and Printing Act afforded the print media some breathing room, although the censor's leniency did not affect TVE broadcasts.

Fraga could be heard on TVE more than Franco himself, since the General never liked television, although silent images of him were broadcast continuously. Fraga also became the main enabler of the national 'TV clubs' (Teleclubs) network, which was set up to boost the 'popular culture', a euphemism used to refer to the controlled information that TVE broadcast.⁷

Acting as both Minister of Information and Tourism, Fraga welcomed innumerable visits from international journalists and foreign television channel directors. One of these visits clearly illustrates how the regime envisioned television as a modern tool for promoting tradition. In April 1962, a meeting of the top EBU-UER authorities was held in Seville. To mark the occasion, TVE intended to broadcast the city's famous religious Easter processions live to the whole of Europe, although the plan fell through in the end.⁸

The most newsworthy international visit took place in February 1966. Dozens of reporters from around the world flocked to Spain to cover an incident that occurred in a town called Palomares (Almería), on Spain's south-eastern coast, on 17 January 1966. Two US Air Force planes collided mid-air and four small nuclear weapons jettisoned down onto this Andalusian village without detonating. Three of the bombs were located in the mountains and a fourth was found in the sea three months later during a 'Broken Arrow' recovery operation. The incident stirred up a lot of interest among the international media and it also revealed the informative restrictions imposed by the Dictatorship and just how suspicious the leaders actually were of foreign television. According to an article published in a Spanish newspaper:

⁶ Josep Maria Baget Herms, *Historia de la televisión en España: 1956-1975*. Feed-Back, 1993, pp. 39, pp. 63-65.

⁷ José Carlos Rueda and Mar Chicharro, *La televisión en España (1956-2006)*, Fragua, 2006, pp. 98-125.

⁸ *Ideal*, 4 April 1962, p.7; *Abc*, 17 April 1962, p. 17.

Information and features on the ‘Broken Arrow’ underwater recovery operation appear frequently on British television and radio newscasts, as well as in the print media. This afternoon, the ITN referred to the long statement issued by the Spanish Ministry of Information and Tourism explaining that the precautionary measures adopted to limit the presence of informers aim to put a stop to the exaggerated and distorted news that some foreign agencies and publications are running about this incident.⁹

Fraga stole the show when he bathed on a beach in Palomares – in the presence of the US ambassador and the foreign media, camera crews included – to prove that the waters had not been contaminated.¹⁰

The Spanish Minister combined his propaganda endeavours with his fervent interest in attracting tourists from all over the world, which explains the constant presence of foreign reporters who were invited over by his ministry to publicise the beauty of Spanish beaches. These stays were intended to promote a favourable image of the regime abroad, highlighting the friendly side that focused on the country as a tourist destination under the slogan ‘Spain is different’.

The media blackout and the content that TVE put together to socially legitimise Franco’s regime co-existed with a selection of fringe shows that were broadcast on the second channel and had a strong cultural component. These shows scooped up awards in international festivals and this recognition was then used to bolster the image of progressiveness that the Dictatorship was so eager to convey.¹¹

TVE’s increased presence on the international scene was helped by the recognition of Spanish professionals at international television festivals. Narciso Ibáñez Serrador received the Golden Nymph at the International Monte Carlo Festival in 1968 and the Golden Rose at the Montreaux Festival (Switzerland) for his programme *Historia de la Frivolidad* (1967). The show, which roughly translates as ‘[The History of Frivolity](#)’, was a collection of comedy sketches that depicted the development of eroticism over the centuries.¹²

However, the version that TVE broadcast in Spain was not the version of *Historia de la Frivolidad* that was seen abroad. This apparent censorship was timidly criticised by the Spanish media: ‘Given the information at hand, it seems that in this case, as in so many others, Spaniards are allegedly “not ready” to assimilate Serrador’s images, and it seems like we won’t be prepared for some time.’¹³

The commendable productions created by Ibáñez Serrador and other professionals like [Valerio Lazarov](#) afforded this period the epithet the ‘roses and nymphs’ era of TVE. Spain’s first Eurovision win occurred in the spring of 1968.

3 Eurovision 1968 and ‘Massiel of Europe’

The Eurovision Song Contest and Spanish television were both created in 1956, although TVE did not take part in the competition until 1961. Spanish results were not exactly brilliant during those [first years](#). Spain’s most notable entrant before Massiel was Raphael, a legendary Spanish crooner, who participated in consecutive years ([1966](#) and [1967](#)). Another well-known Spanish singer, Julio Iglesias, would participate in 1970 performing the famous [Gwendolyne](#).

Massiel’s victory certainly was timely, and it was used by the regime for political propaganda purposes. The song *La, la, la* was penned by Dúo Dinámico who had a strong fanbase among Spanish female teens. The jury that chose the song submitted Barcelona-born singer Joan Manuel Serrat as Spain’s candidate, but Serrat informed TVE that he

⁹ *Sur*, 10 February 1966, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Sur*, 9 March 1966, p. 1.

¹¹ José Carlos Rueda and Mar Chicharro, *La televisión en España (1956-2006)*, Fragua, 2006, p. 21-22.

¹² Manuel Palacio, *Las cosas que hemos visto. 50 años y más de TVE*, RTVE, 2006, p. 32-33.

¹³ *Sol de España*, 9 May 1968, p. 3.

intended to sing some lines in **Catalan** (a language that Franco's regime associated with Catalan separatists). In the end, young Massiel was brought in as the second best option and had to learn the lyrics to *La, la, la* in just a few days (which can't actually have been very difficult).

According to the reporter that a Spanish news agency sent to cover the event in Great Britain (a country that Franco disliked on account of the delicate Gibraltar issue):

La, la, la sounded powerful, solid and convincing in the Royal Albert Hall. I trembled with pride as Massiel transmitted strength, vigour and warmth through the song, giving it everything she'd got, proving what she's worth and emphasizing her lineage, her 'Spanish stock'. Her skill, voice and figure serviced a song that every Spaniard had put his and her heart and joy into. There are many ways to be of service and tonight Massiel outgrew 'Massiel of Castille' to become, first, 'Massiel of Spain' and, then, 'Massiel of Europe.'¹⁴

There is no proof that Fraga's constant flattery of European television directors had anything to do with Spain's win. However, Spanish television historiography has hinted that Germany's decisive vote might have concealed an interest in the Spanish government endorsing the German PAL standard for their future colour transmissions – as it ended up doing. According to this conspiracy theory, in exchange, Germany would have handed Fraga Iribarne and Spain the long-awaited ESC on a platter.¹⁵ Although there is no evidence to actually prove the string-pulling, these facts do demonstrate the close linkage between the ESC and Spanish politics at the time.

4 Spain Organises the Festival for the First and Only Time

Fraga Iribarne outdid himself when Spain hosted the ESC the following year, in 1969. The ministry invited fifty-odd international journalists to Malaga and the Costa del Sol before the event. Although the number of journalists that actually travelled to Spain fell short of the 150 professionals that were expected, the Spanish newspapers featured photographs of their arrival at the airport and their week-long visit to the main coastal villages in Malaga.¹⁶

Eager to relay a positive image of the country abroad, the regime hastily put an end to the 'state of emergency' that had been declared three months earlier due to the university revolts. After declaring the state of emergency, the government decreed the closure of all universities between January and March 1969 after a student died in strange circumstances. The new Law on Press, promoted by Fraga himself, was also suspended and the Spanish media once again found itself under the Regime's fierce control. Since Spain was slated to host the ESC on 29 March that year, the minister pushed for those extraordinary measures to be lifted. Fraga had to make sure the event would run smoothly and wanted all European delegations to be present.¹⁷

TVE pulled out all the stops to **cover** its debut in Europe. The contest was broadcast from Madrid's Teatro Real and was the largest economic and production investment in TVE's history. In fact, the event was so costly that TVE was forced to cut back on other expenses in subsequent months. Artist Salvador Dalí was commissioned to design the poster and some of the sets.

Even though it was RTVE's first colour broadcast, Spaniards watched in black and white, since colour television was not available in Spain until the mid 1970s. The German television broadcaster lent TVE a mobile production vehicle to broadcast the colour signal to the rest of Europe. The Spanish government approved the introduction of the German

¹⁴ *Sur*, 7 April 1968, p. 5.

¹⁵ Josep Maria Baget Herms, *Historia de la televisión en España: 1956-1975*. Feed-Back, 1993, p. 184.

¹⁶ *Sol de España*, 25 March 1969, p. 9; *Sol de España* 27 March 1969, p. 19.

¹⁷ Josep Maria Baget Herms, *Historia de la televisión en España: 1956-1975*. Feed-Back, 1993, p. 199.

PAL colour standard in 1969. Fraga and his team were instrumental in facilitating the implementation of that system, cleverly eluding the French government's insistence that Spain choose their SECAM system.¹⁸

Finally, Spain achieved in Madrid its second (and to date last) ESC victory: Salomé performed *Vivo cantando* and was in a four-way tie with the entrants from Great Britain, France and Holland. Paradoxically, the very year that Fraga realised his dream of hosting the ESC in Spain was also his last year in the government, since he was replaced in the ministry in October 1969.

5 Television Opens Up, but the Media Blackout Continues on TVE until 1975

After the 1969 ESC had taken place in Madrid, TVE produced one of the first contest formats in its history: *Pasaporte a Dublin/Passport to Dublin* (1970). A contest where young singers would compete to represent Spain at the ESC, *Passport to Dublin* relied heavily on pop music and was presented by Julio Iglesias and the Eurovision winner Massiel.

Despite all the fanfare, the regime still kept a close eye on the most unruly artists. Serrat did not appear on TVE until 1974. Even Massiel suffered the consequences of her bravado for a while. Although she became Spain's sweetheart after winning the contest (TVE played the song six times the day after the festival), she was punished and snubbed by TVE for a whole year for turning down the opportunity to meet with Franco when she was honoured with the ribbon of Queen Isabel La Católica: 'They sent it to my parents' address by registered post after seven months', recalls the singer.¹⁹

The Dictatorship's biased publicity subsequently turned Spanish viewers into loyal ESC fans. However, despite outwardly flaunting the openness of Spanish television, internally that ostensible tolerance did nothing to change the lack of freedom of expression in Spain or the surveillance of the news that was broadcast by TVE, which continued until the end of the Regime in 1975.

Only a small part of the Spanish press spoke out against the absolute control that the Dictatorship held over TVE newscasts and how dissenting opinions were censored. A month before Massiel's win, for example, Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia* ran an article criticising how the television channel closed its eyes to the university riots, rising prices and the alarming unemployment figures in some cities:

To what extent can those thousands of viewers turn to television for a non panegyric and topical image of Spain; for information on a country that is experiencing the active, logical and understandable tensions of any developing society?²⁰

Those wins in the ESC are still, 50 years on, two of the key moments in the history of TVE and of televised entertainment in Spain. The images of the participants, the politicians who intervened, and the numerous programmes that have subsequently capitalised on the nostalgia of those victories are now available for all to see in TVE's online archive (<http://www.rtve.es/archivo/>).

The Spanish state-run channel has also capitalised on its audiovisual archives, a process that has required on-going time-consuming digitalisation procedures. Although work is not finished, the national channel TVE has been very

¹⁸ Josep Maria Baget Herms, *Historia de la televisión en España: 1956-1975*. Feed-Back, 1993, p. 214-215.

¹⁹ Interview with Massiel, *El País*, 25 March 2012, http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2012/03/23/actualidad/1332508373_533550.html

²⁰ 'Los silencios informativos de TVE', *La Vanguardia*, 20 March 1968, p. 11, <http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/1968/03/20/pagina-11/34329590/pdf.html>

successful in reconnecting with Spain's past, both in terms of fiction and entertainment.²¹ For instance, the fiction series *Cuéntame como pasó* ('Tell me how it was'), one of the country's biggest successes since 2001, narrates the adventures of a typical Spanish family, the Alcántaras, during Franco's Dictatorship.²² The final minutes of its [first episode](#) were, naturally, devoted to Massiel's victory at the ESC.

Biography

Juan Francisco Gutiérrez Lozano is Professor in the Journalism Department at the University of Málaga (Spain). His research and teaching interests are: television memory and audience research, Spanish and Andalusian television history and culture (transnational and regional comparisons) and broadcast journalism. Currently he is main researcher of the projects 'Public image and cultural model of Spanish Television (TVE) in Andalusia (1971-1989)' and 'The Audiovisual sector in Andalusia: assessment, public perception and trends (2002-2010)', both funded by the Ministry of Economy, Innovation and Science of Junta de Andalucía (Regional Government of Andalusia). He is a member of the [European Television History Network](#) and the [Spanish Association of Historians of Communication](#) (AHC). He is coordinator of the "Production and media content" of the [Spanish Association of Communication Research](#) (AE-IC).

²¹ The exploitation of television memories through magazines, shows, comedy or even parody has also been evident in the last decade. See, for example, the programme devoted to the Eurovision Song Contest in the RTVE show [Los mejores años de nuestra vida](#) (2009), a Spanish adaptation of Italian RAI's format [I migliori anni](#). Cfr. Juan Francisco Gutiérrez, 'Algunas reflexiones y numerosos retos en la investigación de las relaciones entre memoria y televisión,' *Aurora. Revista de Arte, Midia e Política*, 10, 2011, p. 20-35. Available at: <http://www.pucsp.br/revistaaurora>

²² *Cuéntame como pasó* is essentially an adaptation of the US series *The wonder years* and similar versions have appeared in Italy and Portugal. Images of the show were even used in the opening ceremony for the 2012 Olympic Games in London.