



Prologue

What we see that they did not. What they see that we did not*

Estrella de Diego

I Dance, the dance

Anyone you tell the story to surely remembers, because it was tainted by a regression at the wrong time, to a past that was too distant. Faces which had had work done and were testament to the years gone by. A comeback, even, for those that swore they would never do so.

Familiar faces standing in line for the “hand-kissing”, all playing the part of themselves in the newspaper photograph, on the television. They greeted the hosts: “How very pleasant, the royals!”.

It was extraordinary and excessive, what a paradox. Half-way between delirium and the radical absence of surprises, as if they had been taken out of an Almodóvar film. A show of that exportable image of “the typical Spanish”, chaps who looked like they had come out of a catalogue of eccentricities gathered within the notebook of a French nineteenth-century traveller.

In truth, the guests invited to the March 2008 Monaco ball did not look like characters from an Almodóvar film. At some point, they had been actors working for said film director.

And there they were, a testament to their roles, part of that local History, a hyperbole of that forced cultural identity, which above all had been digested and swallowed to portray what was expected of ‘us’. Spain must be, still and for all eternity “different”, as the popular slogan stated. Similar to *Guernica* by Picasso or *The Shootings* by Goya, which years ago were part of a touristic promotional campaign for French television: “Spain, one passion: life”. Temperament and heroes, martyrs and blood, the mother figure, the saints... Who could offer more?

* This text is part of the R&D research project of the Ministry of Education “What is ‘Spanish’ as a masquerade”, HUM2005-04403.

And in between dances they made the news, some temperamental, yet not Europeans (it must be said), the divide is painful. “Spain” dressed up as “Spain”: Goya, Picasso, Lola Flores, Almodóvar... it is all the same. Like looking into a satiny surface like a mirror, where one cannot see more than a mere portrait with imaginary Spanish combs. A constant search for a space, impossible to fill, which evokes a past before the past itself, before order and name. A past that searches for itself in every reflection, a past pertaining to what was lost so long ago, that now seems sweet.

“Antiquity is a vast country separated from our own by a long interval of time” D’Harcenville proclaimed for his introduction to the Hamilton Collection volumes.¹ And that party had a sense of antiquity, with a pinch of myth, a portion of embellished memories, a *Costus* camp after-taste. *Costus* dreamt of being Warhol, and he dreamt of being Garbo... what a whirlwind! The epitome of camp in its eternal and falsely trivial attitude, somewhat like Elsie De Wolfe’s comment when seeing the Parthenon for the first time: “Beige. My favourite colour!”²

“How very pleasant, the royals!”. And behind the façade of this event, the strategy of the periphery, the minorities, the marginal, the temperamental, the “exotic” remains. Thus (re)presenting ourselves without shocking, reiterating what the mainstream discourse has described many a time; in sum, representing ourselves accommodating the discourse of the powerful.

It is an enactment similar to the one presented by Joan Riviere in 1929 in relation to *Womanliness as Masquerade*. Intellectual women try to emphasize their femininity to send a clear message to men: “you have nothing to fear”. Thus, they masquerade as women; in a game that seems to be connected to what Robert Cantwell called “ethnomimesis”. Basically, what arises in social interactions: the way in which we understand cultural influence, traditions and habits and how we then present them to others. In sum, the representation of culture.³

Perhaps at the ball, everyone was masquerading beyond their fancy dresses, much like a fetish where the part represents everything in a kind of non-stop spiral: the guests represent “La Movida”, “La Movida” represents the “typical Spanish”, and so on and so forth. Yet, were we like that? Was that “La Movida”? Was the cultural phenomenon of the Eighties like that? Could it be simplified, reduced to a group of Almodóvar’s characters playing themselves to supposedly

1 Jenkins, I.: “Contemporary Minds: Sir William Hamilton’s Affair with Antiquity”, *Vases and Volcanoes. Sir William Hamilton and His Collections* (eds. Jan Jenkins, and Kim Sloan), London: The British Museum, 1996, p. 40.

2 This is how one of the chapters of his book begins, Ross, A.: *No respect. Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, New York and London, 1989, p. 135.

3 Jenkins, I.: *op. cit.*, p. 40.

be “Spanish”? Much like those *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* that New Yorkers watched, entertained and reassured, faced with an image of Spain that did not cause any conflicts? The portrayal was preposterous but it had an order; a corporate image without cracks; exportable. Hence, a representation of culture for tourists, deactivating – in turn – culture and identity through a very profitable game of exaggeration (which is how stereotypes work).

Nonetheless, the new “Carmens” – in a sense – had an *exotisme de pacotille*; much like Berlioz's nineteenth-century *The Trojans*. What if, after all, the guests at the ball were not (re)presenting even themselves, but the expected and fostered construct – like those women always on the verge of that edge? As Susan Hawthorne suggested: “hegemonic culture” does not allow “ethnic culture” to really express itself, but through its voyeurism forces it to tell what it wants told of it (sometimes created to satisfy power), while the “hegemonic culture” watches.

Of course, it is also possible that what was being publicised was not really “La Movida”. Furthermore: it is possible that there were infinite “Movidas” which, when faced with the corporate and dull image frequently portrayed, were still hopeful (even if most of their wishes never came true). It is worth searching within those hopes, there must be answers there.

II Yesterday's Girl⁴

And we are still searching for them. Of late, we search as if we needed to explain something important that happened, and that we could not really understand. To make sure it really happened and it was not fiction. Reissues of old albums, DVDs of *The Golden Age* that television advertises as if they were collectables from ‘The Incredible Egypt’. Exhibitions, conferences, texts... even a reconstruction of those times at the cinema for the most daring. *Liquid Sky* – the “post-movida” post-punk cult film – when replayed attracted a younger public which could not understand what we had seen in that narcissistic and androgynous story. “Do you want to join us?”.

No, we did not want to. We did not want to see how badly the film had aged. A representation of itself, to which we held on like a rotting floating piece of wood called modernity that was left from the wreckage. We dreamt of living in that New York loft. Oh! how badly hope ages.

And so, the witnesses spoke. They once again went on screen to sing old songs “*play it again, Sam*”. Yet, did they realise they were changed? Did they want to admit it? What to say, what to tell? And how much do we believe? Given that

4 Translator's note: Title referring to the band Nacha Pop's song "La Chica de Ayer", 1982.

every time the witnesses tell it, they tell what they remember? How can they remember? Kearney explains that “The need to retell is (...) as inevitable as the impossibility to do so”,⁵ in his discussion about the most controversial narration of the twentieth century: the Holocaust, which he calls “The Paradox of Testimony”. Does the need to retell guarantee the “reality” of the testimony (in less extreme cases than the example above)? Is the impossibility of finding the right words to describe the indescribable not implicit? When at the same time we feel the need to find words that do not exist?

In truth, we have very few documents from that “Movida”: exhibitions without catalogues, private meetings, idle time where everything happened... Where does the true story reside, the truth of those cultural constructions and hopes? What do we call “authentic” if “authenticity” is one of the most incredible fallacies of that time? As McCanner pointed out: we are all tourists. If the gaze of tourists implies a degree of alienation – not seeing clearly because the way we look has already been shaped before leaving home – the “local’s” gaze adapts to fit certain verisimilitude patterns in order to be understood by others. We always end up representing ourselves: for tourists, for foreigners, for the other. Versions of what is considered the right image of the past and of the local. At the end of the day, History is a manufactured memory. “The discourse of heritage plays an essential role when reflecting about the relationship between the past and the present” Hodgkin and Radstone pointed out.⁶

Was “la Movida” really thus – beyond the ultimate representation for tourists, that “modern” Spain where taxi drivers had platinum blonde hair and “genuine” people had chickens in their penthouse?⁷ What really happened – beyond what we wanted to tell and what people wanted to hear from the outside? It could well have been the opposite, who knows.

What was for the future and what only for the past and present, now malevolently mixed into an abrupt ‘all’? Was it a product of the counter-culture or was it manufactured? Or was it a dream? The “filthy” hope (as the French philosopher⁸ pointed out) that things would finally begin to be different and that we would change with them in turn? The dream of leaving behind the cliché and the “typical Spanish”, that ethnographic autobiography that only tells the story that power wishes to hear.

5 Kearney, R.: *On Stories*, London and New York, 2002, p. 65.

6 Hodgkin, K., and Radstone, S.: "Introduction. Contested Pasts", *Contested Pasts. The Politics of Memory* (eds. Hodgkin, K., and Radstone, S.), London and New York, 2003, 1.

7 Translator's note: Reference to Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* film.

8 Translator's note: Reference to D'Harcenville's introduction to the Hamilton Collection volumes present in Jenkins, I.: *op. cit.*

III No regrets⁹

What should have happened that never did? What was on the verge of happening during those times when even from the official standpoint they were trying to promote “the Spanish as modern”? From the exhibition *New Images from Spain* at the Guggenheim New York Museum, to other initiatives in that same city, such as *Five Spanish Artists* from Artists Space, Spanish art seemed to be taking off. North American critics seemed to be intrigued by the country's institutional model, to the point of even awakening the ambivalence of critics like Jamey Gambrell, who in 1988 wrote an article about the status of art in Spain within *Art in America*: “The institutional help (...) is at the same time a blessing and a curse – allowing for a lot of flexible and swift change, but simultaneously making things difficult to achieve”.¹⁰

There we were, astounded – discussed by the New York press – half-way between being eternally “ethnic” and super modern; on the verge of having our fifteen minutes in the city of the fifteen minutes of fame... when all of a sudden, our dream shattered to pieces. We were no longer interesting with our peculiarities and our enthusiastic aspirations. The Russians were in. Who from within the “Eastern” ones, (Spanish or Russians, quoting Stein in her text about Picasso from 1939¹¹), could compete with the Russians? Perhaps Spain did not tell stories that were real enough in order to be successful in New York. As opposed to the marvellous Kabakov exhibitions – that captivated the spectator and the critics – which told the story of a small and isolated world, so very “authentic”.

Perhaps we did have our fifteen minutes of fame, but they went by very fast, giving us no time to enjoy them. It was difficult to ride high for long. Now it is clear, we were never modern like the German Neo-expressionism or the Transvanguard (which were essential to the recovery of the New York market); we never had the exotic halo that the Latin American artists had, they who caught all the attention and enthusiasm so quickly.

And all of a sudden, it seems impossible not to ask – even if just for a moment – what would have happened to us had it not been “us” present in that period? How would they have told our story or allowed us to tell it? What did we see that they did not and what did they see that we did not? Why did we insist on being “post-modern” before being modern, expressing in the use of that word our exaggerated need to please?

⁹ Translator's note: Reference to Alaska y Dinamara's song "A Quién le Importa".

¹⁰ Gambrell, J.: "Report from Spain. Gearing Up", *Art in America*, September 1988, pp. 37-47.

¹¹ Stein, G.: *Picasso. The Complete Writing*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, p. 30.

Who are we now? That could be a pertinent question when discussing the “la Movida” phenomenon, its relation to the construct of what is “Spanish” and the widely addressed “internationalisation” of local art. How we decided to portray and (re)present ourselves seems to be the pertinent question.

Perhaps some of the answers could be found in the comments published recently in the brief article by *El País* (28th March 2007), which focused on a longer article published the day before in *The New York Times*. That piece intended to help tourists navigate Madrid and, to that purpose, offered a curious little glossary with the eleven essential words that would allow anyone to pose as being from the city. Next to each one was their pronunciation in English, so they would get it right.

Aside from the fact that the eleven essential words were complete clichés – such as *cutre* (shabby) or *juerguista* (fun-loving) – they could only have been useful within an Almodóvar film, with his over-used purist formulas “for tourists”. What was most incredible about the article was what it recommended one did in Madrid: having a coffee at 5pm at *El Espejo* (a bar that is currently not at its best), taking a walk at sundown around the Plaza de Oriente (beautiful but predictable), and spending the night listening to flamenco. These were some of the suggestions that the future traveller could follow when in Madrid according to *The New York Times*. Or at least, some of the suggestions mentioned in the article that was published there the following day (in the always interesting section of the newspaper).

In any case, the interesting fact about this story is not how Madrid is (re)presented in *The New York Times* article, as the expected stereotype. But rather, the fascinating part – at least in what concerns us – is that the typical visit to the Prado Museum (a must for every visitor), was substituted by a visit to Picasso's *Guernica* at the Reina Sofía Museum (not even a visit to see the museum itself, but just to see that painting).

Which begs the question: why replace the Prado Museum with a particular icon – *Guernica* – in the Reina Sofía Museum (one of the most frequently used and abused works by the artist)? How can we interpret this change? Did *Guernica* fit the idea of what is “Spanish” that interested *The New York Times* better than the Prado Museum (which the *El País* journalist wanted to portray but without going into depth)? Did it fit better with the image that the Spanish authorities have tried to consolidate in the last few years?

Furthermore, if this turns out to be true: why is Picasso's *Guernica* more appropriate than the Prado Museum to construct that image of what is “Spanish”? One which requires what we could describe as “the images of an updated country”? That country is absolutely imaginary, as much as the country of “La Movida” was. A country which appears from time to time in the newspapers, the one that always seems to want to fit within the classic *Carmen* story (Andalusian but very

modern), the Spain that it wants to represent itself as. A country that is characterised by: mystery, blood, and passion, as some advertisement campaigns describe Spain (i. e. *The Time Out*, edition of 2007).

Mystery, blood, passion... Who the hell decided to link what is “Spanish” to those ideas once again? More specifically, who corroborated it, without asking questions, and happily dancing away?

Enough. The time to grieve is finished. The time to accept that it is all in the past (and therefore gone) has come. It is time to review all of those things that did or should have happened, without emotions or implications, without dashed hopes or looming dreams. Because *Liquid Sky* aged badly, as have we, we who lived during those years dreaming of living in a New York loft. And yes, our friends from the younger generation are correct when seeing the film as peculiar and a relic. This book by Julio Pérez Manzanares seems a good start for this new and necessary story. It is about time we leave “La Movida” issues in the capable hands of those that were not at the Nacha Pop¹² concert.

12 Translator's note: Pop group who sang the previously referred song "La Chica de Ayer".