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Susan Larson and Eva Woods, Eds. Visualizing Spanish Modernity

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*Susan Larson and Eva Woods, Eds.
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Both the difficulty of seeing as an allegory for the loss of ontological foundation and the field of visual studies as a way of way of looking at the world provide a compelling lens with which to analyze an epoch and, up until relatively recently, this lens has not been used much to scrutinize the Spanish context coetaneous to the time of the Parisian arcades so beautifully re-created in Walter Benjamin's incomplete magnum opus The Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk). Luckily the publication of Visualizing Spanish Modernity (2005), edited by Susan Larson and Eva Woods, has done much to change that. Throughout the pages of the volume, the authors of seventeen articles explore the rich visual culture of modern Spain, showing how technological advances and the creation of new modes of representation forever changed how Spaniards saw themselves and how they were seen by others. Thanks to the aggressive interdisciplinarity of both the editors and the critics, the analysis of visual culture asserts itself not as a precious, compartmentalized subset of Spanish

cultural studies but rather as a highly focused optic that illuminates previously dark, shadowy areas [1].

As in Benjamin's Project, the end result of a careful reading of Visualizing Spanish Modernity is a much deeper understanding of a very particular space situated within a very particular time. Yet here the space is not the city of Paris but the country of Spain; the time is not the waning of the nineteenth century but the slightly more than one-hundred years marked by the beginnings of major wars that would prove to have fundamental resonances in the history of Spain: the Carlist Wars and the Spanish Civil War. In the same fashion that the narrative worlds of Borges are full of characters that read, the modern worlds described by Larson, Woods, and their collaborators are full of people who see. If it can be said that those who read Borges will never read a book in the same way after entering into his fictions, those who read Larson and Woods will find that they just may not see modernity in the same way after entering into the wide-ranging criticism provided by the authors of each chapter. As we shall soon observe in our brief analysis of the volume, the hand—or at the very least, the eye—of Walter Benjamin is everywhere. And in order to appreciate the gift that Larson and Woods have given us, we must go first to Benjamin.

In the “Translators’ Forward” to the English edition of Benjamin's Project, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin attempt to explain how the German philosopher and cultural critic's collection of notes, observations, reflections, and citations—indeed, passages—coalesce into a whole that is a great deal more than the sum of its parts. Although Benjamin's own notes form the intellectual backbone of The Arcades Project, it is the seemingly disorganized cloud of passages, fragments, and excerpts floating in and among these observations that permeate the work with authenticity. The words of others as assimilated by Benjamin between 1927 and 1940 and then compiled for the reader are what transport us to the arcades of Paris in the years between 1830 and 1870. In this way, Eiland and McLaughlin assert:

These proliferating individual passages, extracted from their original context like collectibles, were eventually set up to communicate among themselves, often in a rather subterranean manner. the organized masses of historical objects—the particular items of Benjamin's display (drafts and excerpts)—together give rise to ‘a world of sacred affinities,’ and each

separate article in the collection, each entry, was to constitute a ‘magic encyclopedia’ of the epoch from which it derived. An *image* of that epoch. (x)

The fact that we describe the “Translators’ Forward” as a mere attempt at explication does not diminish the lucidity of Eiland and McLaughlin’s reading of Benjamin. Their recognition that some process of sacred magic is what makes The Arcades Project work is not the easy way out of a more cogent analysis but rather an admission that Benjamin’s work enters a realm that goes far beyond what at the time of its writing was thought of as traditional criticism. This passage into a very specialized sort of cultural studies—before the “discipline” of cultural studies was even dreamed of as such—is the brilliance of Benjamin, a critic who did not dissect a particular space and time by parsing it out into its smallest parts, but rather re-created a world by reconstituting its image.

The privileged position given to the image—the visual—in Benjamin’s work is a constant theme in The Arcades Project; yet, in spite of its primacy, it remains utterly spectral in its conception. During the first decades of the twentieth century, at the height of modernism, Benjamin was able to gain enough critical distance to realize what Terry Eagleton would come to observe many, many decades later in After Theory: “that Modernism, or so it imagined, was old enough to remember a time when there were firm foundations to human existence, and was still reeling from the shock of their being kicked rudely away” (57). In Benjamin’s re-envisioning of the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century, the nature of the visual was at least as shadowy, at least as ethereal, as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century, as it is now. The center—even then—could not hold:

A look at the ambiguity of the arcades: their abundance of mirrors, which fabulously amplifies the spaces and makes orientation more difficult. For although this mirror world may have many aspects, indeed infinitely many, it remains ambiguous, double-edged. It blinks: it is always this one—and never nothing—out of which another immediately arises. The space that transforms itself does so in the bosom of nothingness. [...] The whispering of gaze fills the arcades. There is no thing here that does not, where one least expects it, open a fugitive eye, blinking it shut again; but if you look more closely, it is gone. To the whispering of these gazes, the space lends its echo. (542)

Indeed, within Benjamin's Project, one of the first things that leaps to mind is the overtly self-reflective nature of modernity in both a literal and a figurative sense: in a literal sense as the people inhabiting the Paris of the arcades looked at themselves, each other, and their surroundings; in a figurative sense as we see the high degree of self-awareness those same Parisians—such as Baudelaire—possessed as they wrote about their own modern condition. Furthermore, as a study of modernity written still within the context of modernity, The Arcades Project is an extraordinary document by a critic at the height of his powers that tells us as much about the fragmented decade of the 1930s in a Europe on the verge of a Second World War as it does about the Parisian modernity of the nineteenth century. In sum, these reflections on the role of the image and the visual were far from mere navel-gazing: analyzing what we see and how we see it has the potential to open many new avenues of study, particularly in an area as rich as the subject of modernity. Within Visualizing Spanish Modernity these avenues are wide and they are many.

In Chapter 1, “Visualizing Spanish Modernity: An Introduction,” Susan Larson and Eva Woods show how the collection of articles “map[s] the relationship between the visual and modernity in Spain, starting with the objects and practices of mass culture that interact or comment upon the production and consumption of images” (2). Chapter 2, “Visibly Modern Madrid: Mesonero, Visual Culture, and the Apparatus of Urban Reform,” finds Rebecca Haidt analyzing the ways in which Mesonero Romanos tried to educate madrileños about new ways of perceiving the world in an effort to promulgate his vision of a monumental Madrid that was to keep in step with the progress of other, “more modern” European capitals. David R. George, Jr., in Chapter 3, “Foresight, Blindness or Illusion? Women and Citizenship in the Second Series of Galdós's Episodios nacionales,” explains how Galdós's emphasis on vision (in particular, the vision of his female protagonists), both in a literal and a metaphorical sense, provides a new optic with which to read debates of politics and gender in the nineteenth century. In Chapter 4, “Horror, Spectacle and Nation-Formation: Historical Painting in Late-nineteenth-century Spain,” is Jo Labanyi's close “reading” of two paintings that shows that both “high” and “low” art served to educate the masses in themes as difficult to comprehend as civic responsibility and democracy.

In Chapter 5, “Isidora in the Museum,” Luis Fernández Cifuentes discusses Isidora’s museum-going experience at the Prado in Galdós’s *La desheredada*, arguing that the museum provides a perfect laboratory to look at the role of vision at the turn-of-the-century. Andrew Bush turns away from the cultural centers of the capital in Chapter 6, “Thresholds of Visibility at the Borders of Madrid: Benjamin, Gómez de la Serna, Mesonero,” in order to analyze how three different kinds of “receptive vision” can shed new light on the margins of the metropolis. In “Seeing the Dead: Manual and Mechanical Specters in Modern Spain (1893-1939),” Chapter 7, Brad Epps compares the representation of death through the use of manual techniques (sketching) to its representation through mechanical processes (photography) in order to come to important conclusions regarding the role of death in the formation of national identity.

Elena Cueto Asín looks not at Rusiñol’s important corpus of paintings but rather at the writings that he considered to be complementary to his artistic vision in Chapter 8, “Santiago Rusiñol’s *Impresiones de arte* in the Age of Tourism: Seeing Andalusia after Seeing Paris.” Lee Fontanella, in Chapter 9, “Landscape in the Photography of Spain,” argues that within the Spanish context, modernist landscape photography was in fact more “painterly” than many Romantic landscape paintings. In Chapter 10, “From Engraving to Photo: Cross-cut Technologies in the Spanish Illustrated Press” Lou Charnon-Deutsch traces the use of photography in illustrated magazines from 1880 to 1910 as those magazines evolved from small market publications with very particular target audiences to full-scale mass-market journals. Jesusa Vega, in Chapter 11, “Spain’s Image and Regional Dress: From Everyday Object to Museum Piece and Tourist Attraction,” investigates how the need for a positive narrative in Spanish society brought regional dress from the streets of the periphery to the museums of the metropolitan centers.

In Chapter 12, “Observing the City, Mediating the Mountain: *Mirador* and the 1929 International Exposition of Barcelona,” Robert A. Davidson reads *El Poble Espanyol* of Barcelona and explains what its mélange of Spanish architecture and conflation of regional cultures meant for the citizens of Catalunya at the time of its creation. Félix Fanès closely analyzes a series of collages from 1929 in Chapter 13, “Joan Miró, 1929: High and Low Culture in Barcelona and Paris,” studying the tension between high and low culture in Miró’s

work as well as what could be seen as the artist's contradictory "membership" in both the Catalan L'Amic de les Arts anti-artistic group and Bataille's group of surrealist dissidents. Chapter 14, "Stages of Modernity: The Uneasy Symbiosis of the género chico and Early Cinema in Madrid" is Susan Larson's look at how zarzuela was able to effectively represent the arrival of silent film in the Spanish capital, even as some of the género's practitioners were worried about their own art's demise in the face of the new desires of the viewing public.

Eva Woods, in Chapter 15, "Visualizing the Time-space of Otherness: Digression and Distraction in Spanish Silent Film," scrutinizes the role of digressions in the silent films La gitana blanca (1923) and La condesa María (1927) and how those digressions constituted important reflections on both race and modernity in a Spain whose military was mired in North Africa. In Chapter 16, "Modern Anxiety and Documentary Cinema in Republican Spain," Geoffrey B. Pingree examines how the government of the Second Republic used the low art of documentary cinema in order to promote the high ideals of the time, with very mixed results. Finally, in Chapter 17, "The Last Look from the Border," Joan Ramon Resina's extended meditation on what it means to see a nation from a border, from a threshold, from the edge of history, opens our eyes to what is at stake when vision becomes involved with national identity and politics.

A cursory glance at the well-thought-out index of the volume reveals that Benjamin's authority is an important one for the authors of these uniformly solid essays, with the German critic being cited more than forty times, appearing more than "Madrid," "modernity," and "mechanical reproduction," the latter being a concept highly developed by Benjamin himself. Although one could argue that Benjamin's theories can be found at least tangentially in each and every one of the essays within the collection, some articles are more richly endowed with their presence, including those by Larson and Woods (Chapter 1), Bush (Chapter 6), Cueto Asín (Chapter 8), Charnon-Deutsch (Chapter 10), Fanès (Chapter 13) and Resina (Chapter 17).

Within Larson and Woods's "Introduction," for example, the authors foreground Benjamin's views on modernity by using his words as the epigraph to open the study:

“History decays into images, not into stories” (1). For Benjamin—and for Larson and Woods, so it seems—pictures are certainly worth at least a thousand words and need to be at the center of any study of an epoch. This is the guiding thought behind the collection, eloquently expressed by the editors:

Benjamin’s prophetic words remind us that history is less than a narrative than a series of visual moments or scenes which inescapably permeate the present as well as the past. We see with modern eyes: the way history ‘looked’ is lost to us, yet at the same time reborn through our present-day vision. Historicizing Spain’s visual culture is, therefore, a task of historical perception, of making out constellations of dialectical images that hover between the past and the present and making them our own.

Since we live in such a highly visual age and are more “visually literate” than ever, according to the editors, “it is essential to incorporate the study of visual culture, practices of looking, and visuality into the methodologies of Spanish Peninsular Studies” (2). Perhaps even more importantly, however, is the fact that incorporating the study of visual culture into Peninsular Studies helps to bring Spain back into the fold of the rest of Europe, a move that exists in flagrant opposition to the tired assertion that “Spain is different.” While certainly unique—in just such the same way that every country is unique—Spain has much in common with her Western European counterparts, particularly in terms of the visual culture of her modernity, in both social and aesthetic terms [2].

Indeed, rather than separating Spain from the rest of Europe, visual culture helps to universalize the Spanish experience, especially regarding the Spanish Civil War as one of the foremost examples of the fragmentations and dislocations of modernity. In the final chapter of the collection, Joan Ramon Resina’s eloquent meditation on seeing at the threshold —in extremis—constitutes an important phenomenological reading of various texts that relate to the Civil War, among them Robert Capa’s photography, Antoni Rovira i Virgili’s autobiographical narrative Els darrers dies de la Catalunya republicana, and Javier Cercas’s Soldados de Salamina. In his analysis Resina questions how much we can ever know about what the Other sees; however, in spite of the seeming impossibility of this project, the critic’s unrelenting insistence on the importance of the human within the study of visual

culture shows us that when we visualize Spanish modernity, we are doing much more than simply playing intellectual games.

Notes

[1] In his extraordinarily brief yet insightful work *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, critic Jonathan Culler proposes an ideal definition for the practice of cultural studies:

In its broadest conception, the project of cultural studies is to understand the functioning of culture, particularly in the modern world: how cultural productions work and how cultural identities are constructed and organized, for individuals and groups, in a world of intermingled communities, state power, media industries, and multinational corporations (41).

Visualizing Spanish Modernity, as a beautifully crafted work of cultural criticism, addresses all of these issues as they are present in the modern world as well as in the world of modernity.

[2] The idea that the desire to incessantly reiterate Spain's uniqueness—on both the part of Peninsular critics and foreign critics—has done much to retard the advance of studies of modernity within the Spanish context. With this in mind, in his book La canonización del Diablo: Baudelaire y la estética moderna en España, Luis T. González del Valle forcefully argues for a reassessment of the “España es diferente” paradigm: “Es decir, al asignarle un papel privilegiado o especial a lo español, implícitamente, se aísla su literatura sin necesidad. Al hacer tal cosa se ignora lo que claramente comparte con otras culturas. Esta situación podría ser rectificada si los autores de obras creativas españolas y sus críticos—unos y otros dentro y fuera de España—optasen por establecer conexiones entre autores y corrientes literarias que, sin lugar a dudas, trascienden el ámbito español. Lo ya dicho no implica, no obstante, que en estos nuevos estudios comparativos se dejen de discutir también aquellos matices de los textos que nos conciernen debido a que están bien anclados en la realidad española.” (19)

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