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Review Essay: Fashioning a Consumerist Transition

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FRANCISCO FERNÁNDEZ DE ALBA. *Sex, Drugs, and Fashion in 1970s Madrid*. U of Toronto P, 2020, 169 pp.

ALEJANDRO J. GÓMEZ DEL MORAL. *Buying into Change: Mass Consumption, Dictatorship, and Democratization in Franco's Spain, 1939–1982*. U of Nebraska P, 2021, 163 pp.

JORGE PÉREZ. *Fashioning Spanish Cinema: Costume, Identity, and Stardom*. U of Toronto P, 2021, 265 pp.

Three ground-breaking books offer new contributions to Spanish cultural studies based on novel approaches. And they have much in common. Two of them appear in University of Toronto's ambitious Iberic series; two of them treat the still relatively rare topic of fashion; two reevaluate the much-treated question of the Transition to democracy. Most importantly perhaps, rather than opting for ideological critique, all three adopt a sympathetic attitude to their sometimes dismissed topics, arguing respectively that fashion in film is by no means trivial but rather crucial to the construction of cultural identities; that late Francoist attitudes to sex, drugs, and fashion were not simply hedonistic but rather worked to create a favorable outlook for social reform; and that mass consumption in such neglected areas as department stores, advertising, and supermarkets, far from mesmerizing a passive public, created a citizenship actively eager for a cosmopolitan democratization that challenged Francoist models of Spanish exceptionalism.

Jorge Pérez's *Fashioning Spanish Cinema: Costume, Identity, and Stardom* will perhaps feel the most familiar to Peninsularists, in that it focuses on film, a medium long central to the discipline, and gives accessible accounts of narrative and visual styles in individual works, some of them well known. However, *Fashioning* draws on an impressive range of disciplines, from the history of dress (which it carefully

distinguishes from the related but distinct terms of fashion, costume, and wardrobe) to celebrity and gender studies. And its new focus retrieves much valuable and piquant history: the handsome cover shows Conchita Montenegro, a Franco-supporting star with whom I was previously unfamiliar, in the aptly titled *Ídolos* (Florián Rey, 1943). She wears an extravagantly tasseled and ruffled black dress and hat by Balenciaga, both of which Pérez submits to close and loving analysis. (These detailed explorations of individual garments are one of the delights of his monograph.)

Most importantly in a book which has no explicit chronological through line, it is fashion, not film, that dictates the overall structure. Thus, Montenegro appears in the first chapter “Fashioning national stars: Balenciaga and Spanish cinema,” while the second chapter (“High fashion, desire, and modernity”) charts the continuing trace of Chanel in Almodóvar, from Victoria Abril’s prim white suit in *Tacones lejanos* (1991), via Antonia San Juan’s tacky knock-off in *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), to Penélope Cruz’s jewelry-heavy evening gown, in which she is almost literally “chained by wealth and affluence” in *Los abrazos rotos* (2009). Significant here is the choice as object of study of the classic Chanel brand, revealing as it does Pérez’s acute attention to the contribution of less showy costume to Almodóvar’s narrative universe than, say, the bizarre pieces or “spectacular interventions” (18) by Jean Paul Gaultier that have attracted most attention from other critics (including myself). The enterprising Pérez does not neglect less familiar fields of fashion studies either, devoting a further chapter to male garments and more specifically underwear (alternately clownish in the *sexy comedia* and queasily erotic in *La tía Tula* [Miguel Picazo, 1964], an unexpected choice); and “dressing the immigrant other,” where costume once more plays a crucial role, at once aesthetic and political, in fiction feature films like the emblematically named *El traje* (Alberto Rodríguez [2002]). Finally, Pérez boldly ventures outside the film text itself, to address the crucial institution of the red carpet and the canny self-fashioning of female stars’ public images, from Victoria Abril’s defiant eccentricity to Penélope Cruz’s meticulously crafted old Hollywood-style glamor.

As Pérez writes of their self-conscious practice:

By foregrounding their agency and authorship in the process of renegotiating their stardom Abril and Cruz prove that fashion should not be seen merely as a form of decoration attached or imposed onto stars’ image. Indeed, it is, at least in their cases, closer to the etymological meaning of the word: fashion, from the Latin *factio* (“making” or “doing”) originally designated an activity or something people did. (202)

He also examines in this context two minor gender-bending male actors, Eduardo Casanova (once the gay teen on Tele5’s *Aída* [2005–14]) and Brays Efe (the cross-dressing star of Netflix’s *Paquita Salas* [2016–19]), a rare excursus into television.

As mentioned earlier, one major contribution of Pérez’s book will be as a role model for neophyte scholars in how to read individual garments with proper, respectful attention (the introduction opens with a dazzling exploration of Cruz’s wedge heels in Almodóvar’s *Volver* [2006]). But, although he modestly denies his

own specialist training in fashion studies, readers will also benefit from Pérez's skillful negotiation of the hitherto neglected interface between Hispanism and the field of general costume studies in many forms and with many authorities, from Leftist sociologist Georg Simmel to Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of SUNY's Fashion Institute of Technology, a pioneer and promoter of fashion theory. And, with Jorge Pérez, Hispanists now have a worthy companion to the established fashion and film scholars for other national cinemas that he cites so conscientiously, such as Stella Bruzzi, Pam Cook, Eugenia Paulicelli, and Ginette Vincendeau.

No longer the "bridesmaid," in Bruzzi's telling image, fashion can perhaps now become a leading player in Spanish cultural studies: Pérez cites a volume in preparation at the same time as his own, *Fashioning Spain: From Mantillas to Rosalía*, edited by Francisco Fernández de Alba and Marcela T. Garcés. (Full disclosure: I wrote the prologue to this collection.) And Fernández de Alba is now also the author of my second pioneering monograph, *Sex, Drugs, and Fashion in 1970s Madrid*. The cover image here, by famed Catalan photojournalist Oriol Maspons, is an arresting photo of a palazzo-panted model in 1969, accompanied by a posse of dashing photographers and a cute pet elephant. And, like Pérez, Fernández de Alba turns up much bizarre and fascinating material of this kind that challenges our view of a dour dictatorship. The focus shifts here, however, from primary artistic texts to commentary in mass media.

Although he initially appeals to television (via the wonderfully named *Tele-Club Campo Pop* of 1970), Fernández de Alba's most consistent sources come from print magazines, especially the famously progressive *Triunfo*. These mass media, he suggests, prematurely saturated with international trends, prepared the ground in collective sensibilities for the blossoming of political change, well before the dictator's long-delayed death. Lucidly composed and structured, Fernández de Alba's analysis treats not three but four apparently discrete areas that prove to be closely connected in unexpected ways. The fourth, beyond the triad listed in his title of sex, drugs, and fashion, is urbanism and the progressive town planning. This justifies the focus on the dull imperial capital, progressively transformed by local and transnational trends into a garden of earthly delights (complete with models and elephants).

After an introduction which posits a "reassessment of the Long Transition" and a "new sensibility" heralded by Raymond Williams and Susan Sontag, the first chapter focuses on "planning the democratic city" and (implicitly) defending the focus on Madrid from pretenders such as the Barcelona of the gauche divine or even the suddenly hip provincial villages of *Tele-Club Campo Pop*. Fernández de Alba charts meticulously the rise of public discussion on infrastructure and housing by planners and neighborhood associations alike, culminating with the Communist proposal "Madrid para la democracia" (1977), coedited by a young Manuel Castells. New and fascinating here to me was the influence in Spain of Henri Lefebvre, Castells' teacher, the famed French theorist of the right to the city. Fernández de Alba convincingly shows how, step by step, stakeholders worked towards "an open cultural public space where citizens had the right to inhabit, to participate, and to create" (13). The second chapter goes on to document a new collective sensibility, also necessarily urban, in relation to sex and gender. This was contradictory

in that it was based on both liberatory movements such as feminism and gay rights and on the capitalist exploitation of bodies such as the *destape*. Here, beyond his less familiar print media, Fernández de Alba appeals to some well-known films and novels (e.g., Jaime Armiñán's *Mi querida señorita* [1972] and Eduardo Mendi-cutti's *Una mala noche la tiene cualquiera* [1982]).

Chapter 3, "Drugs: The Burden of Modernity," treats a topic that remains perhaps less explored and more controversial. Here a broad and detailed exploration of changing media coverage of illegal narcotics builds to a conclusion that heroin use or abuse was seen by urban participants as an "identity making art of status-seeking rebellion" (14) with intellectuals such as Eduardo Haro Ibars, a key figure well discussed here, appealing to the literary heritage of drug use, beyond its soon squalid contemporary reality. Fernández de Alba has a knack for the appealing aphorism here as elsewhere when he writes: "opioids became the opium of the people" (87). Beyond empirical social history (although Fernández de Alba does provide scary figures of fatalities), the focus is on the affective dimension and the way drugs felt within a new urban and democratic sensibility. The same is true of Fernández de Alba's chronicle of fashion in the next chapter whereby a cobwebby Francoist *alta costura* gave way to a dynamic pret-à-porter that "tailor[ed] an alternative sense of identity" (14). Thus, while vocalist Massiel chose a pristine Courreges minidress for her winning performance at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1968, by 1981 model Laura Ubago wore a so-called "Baja Costura" outfit by Antonio Alvarado cunningly crafted from washroom hand towels (a different image from this same emblematic shoot also graces the cover of *Fashioning Spain*). Finally, a conclusion shows how the little-known creative achievements of the Long Transition preceded and underwrote the triumphs of the *movida*, so much more widely celebrated.

Fernández de Alba's parallelisms can sometimes feel just a little glib, as when he writes that just as junkies were described as "artists of addiction," so fashion designers could be seen as "dealers of modernity" (115). But more typically the close connections he draws between urbanism, sex, drugs, and fashion are convincingly argued and minutely documented. But while his main aim is to herald the arrival in Spain of progressive international trends, Fernández de Alba never diminishes the toll of dictatorship and the continued role of reaction. I enjoyed his account of conservative columnist Ignacio Agustí who in 1964 was nostalgic for a made to measure age of domestic dressmakers when one still "got dressed slowly." This felt suddenly so distant from the frantic modern era of cosmopolitan department stores and youthquake boutiques (100).

Coinciding to some extent with Pérez, Fernández de Alba argues that "the fashionable is the political" in its many different contexts: "Fashion was a recurring topic in the public sphere for reasons other than style. For No-Dos [official cinema newsreel], fashion was entertainment, the bolstering of the upper-class values, and an opportunity to fan national pride. In *Triunfo's* pages, meanwhile, fashion was used obliquely to critique the regime" (102). This latter rise of consumerism is the main theme of my third and final book, Alejandro J. Gómez del Moral's *Buying into Change: Mass Consumption, Dictatorship, and Democratization in Franco's Spain, 1939–1982*. Gómez del Moral's impressively researched work is of course much broader than Pérez's in its appeal to a wide range of social phenomena

and wider also than Fernández de Alba's in its geography and chronology, charting as it does the rise of the department store, of advertising, and of the supermarket over half a century and throughout the Peninsula. And as an extraordinarily minute exploration of archives, its irreproachable empiricism poses a decisive challenge to less diligent cultural studies approaches that are sketched with a broader brush and are, incidentally, much more negative in their verdicts on the causes and consequences of the Transition. The many, unknown illustrations, often discovered in Madrid's Archivo de la Historia del Trabajo, Fundación 10 de Mayo-CC.OO, are once more a delight: from the 1954 comic strip of Galerías Preciados' pet cat Boliche in the store's staff bulletin, via the ad of the same year for "what your husband does not dare tell you" (the wife's grey hair is showing), to the 1979 cartoon "Santa and the Magi at High Noon" from Sears Roebuck de España's in-house magazine.

With its rivalrous American and Spanish seasonal gift givers, this last image exemplifies Gómez del Moral's main theme: how the development of a mass consumer society, alternately obstructed and facilitated by the Dictatorship, slowly inserted Spain into transnational consumer networks (especially with the democracies of northern Europe) long before the political Transition could take effect. Much more extended than my other books at 363 pages, *Buying into Change's* chapters proceed in more or less chronological order and with a plethora of detail. Chapter 1 treats the new department stores as "world class" and "(inter)national ambassadors" in the early Dictatorship from 1939 to 1957 (although the predecessor of Galerías started out even before the War). Patriarchal and paternalist, preaching a moralistic and gendered workplace culture perfectly compatible with National Catholicism, still these stores displayed a marked international orientation which would eventually come to challenge the regime (I was surprised to learn that their founders had first trained in Havana's legendary store El Encanto). Chapter 2 draws on new consumer magazines that encouraged readers to "perform middle class identities" through unaccustomed products like American home appliances. Gómez del Moral identifies a "new señora" invented for this new consumerist experience. In chapter 3 we follow the challenging introduction of the supermarket into Spain, bringing changes such as self-service and more professionalized retailing (frozen meat required special coaching for consumers to accept). Chapter 4, meanwhile, charts the rise of the advertising industry in the late-Franco era (an international meeting of the industry hosted in Barcelona in 1966 used Don Quixote as its logo and staged inoffensive bullfights with calves no bigger than goats). Finally, Gómez del Moral returns to the department store in the final chapter when the "social liberalization" of Spain in 1960–75 rendered paternalistic control of staff and customers more problematic than in an earlier era and Galerías Preciados and Sears Roebuck de España would close their doors for good, abandoning the retail realm to arch rival Corte Inglés. A brief epilogue begins by citing the lyrics of Radio Futura's classic hit of 1980 "Enamorado de la moda juvenil" (also cited by Fernández de Alba), a song which Gómez del Moral claims "crystallized the radical sociopolitical changes that Spain experienced during . . . four decades" (215). These included of course an insurgent youth culture imported in part from London's Carnaby Street and, later, Kings Road.

Gómez del Moral summarizes his whole research project in a typically evocative contrast, words which connect with Jorge Pérez on fashion and Francisco Fernández de Alba on urbanism:

Forty years before Pepín Fernández had ordered Sedería Carretas' [the precursor of Galerías Preciados] storefront decorated in honor of Generalissimo Franco, whose newly established dictatorship soon distinguished itself by its embrace of an exceptionalist Spanish nationalism, its legal imposition of conservative Catholic morality on the populace, and, relatedly, a socially imposed reverence for adult paternal authority that found maximum expression in the person of Franco himself as paterfamilias of the Spanish people. Now, by contrast, the Paris-educated brothers Luis and Santiago Auserón, Radio Futura's frontmen, sang of a revelation they had as they walked through the Puerta del Sol in Madrid and witnessed the self-assured air with which the city's youth circulated across the plaza. (215)

Beyond his favored archives (and the odd pop song), Gómez del Moral makes occasional recourse to film. And a glance on YouTube at fragments of *Las muchachas de azul* (Pedro Lazaga, 1957), a film which he cites (61–62), confirm his main theses: in the credit sequence, the new shop girls in their blue Galerías uniform stride down the Gran Vía, arms linked, but singing a hymn to their future husbands, who will no doubt swiftly remove them from their workplace; while in the very first scene a shop assistant struggles to cope with an impossible customer and is warned that she is being closely monitored by the management at all times. Discipline thus long remained a feature in daily life (54). Like Fernández de Alba, then, Gómez del Moral is ambivalent in his account and does not magic away repression: department stores offered women new roles as workers and consumers, but at quite a cost.

Elsewhere we witness a general loss of traditional sociability, stamped out by modern mercantile rationalism. Marketing manuals warn against “Doña Gárrula,” the talkative lady who will insist on holding up the checkout line and cutting into profits. Conversely, we learn that some Spanish consumers actively welcomed the new lack of interaction with shopkeepers, with whom they had previously been forced to haggle or by whom they had felt pressured to buy (130). Elsewhere new supermarkets with standardized frozen products, at once feared and desired, were located inside traditional covered markets, the very image of Spain's uneven development. Once more a humorous but pedagogic cartoon seeks to teach a lesson to the untrained Spanish housewife, shown peering into a microscope as she clutches her shopping basket: “la conservación de alimentos por el frío” (124).

Throughout his book and by process of accumulation, Gómez del Moral offers us a new and invaluable thick description of changing everyday life in Spain from the years of hunger to the consumer boom. Neglected moments of this microhistory prove unexpectedly affecting: I was moved to read of a job application from Miss Rogelia Astorga Alda, an unmarried woman identified as “a veteran of our War of Liberation” and care-giver to her blind father, who seeks a new working life in the new field of self-service administration (supermarkets were at first run

directly by the regime's Comisaría General de Abastecimientos y Transportes [118]). Likewise, the theme of increasing transnationalism is redirected in Gómez del Moral's minute account from the overfamiliar topic of tourism to the less known arena of shopping (the foreign tourists that populate *sexy comedias* were carefully courted by the cosmopolitan management of Galerías). And Gómez del Moral is careful to vary his focus from Madrid and Barcelona with their grand emporiums to the small towns that were also transformed by new modes of consumption: a photo from 1962 shows a SPAR supermarket with wide windows and a big sign reading "AUTOSERVICIO." It is as if a spaceship had just landed in a modest Oviedo street (131).

In their different ways, then, these books are essential reading. *Fashioning Spanish Cinema* introduces a whole new discipline into a familiar field, where it need no longer feel like a bridesmaid. *Sex, Drugs, and Fashion* expertly rewrites social history in the 1970s and offers a new and earlier context for the overfamiliar *movida*. And *Buying into Change* quietly challenges those many scholars who have denied the legitimacy of the Transition to democracy by focusing on the vast, tiny, and happy improvements to individual Spaniards' lives effected in the perhaps unlikely arena of mass consumption. It is an intuition convincingly reassembled from a myriad of dusty archival sources in which, still, Spanish voices speak. Taken together, and despite their different disciplines, these three volumes form a trilogy of the Transition and of Spain in the twentieth century that deserves to transform our understanding of the nation's cultural, social, and political field.

Sanguine
Aliphanis
Kumbe