

Otherness in Hispanic Culture

Otherness in Hispanic Culture

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Edited by Teresa Fernández Ulloa

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FOREWORD

This book addresses contemporary discourses on a wide variety of topics related to the ideological and epistemological changes of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries and the ways in which they have shaped the Spanish language, literature, and film in both Spain and Latin America.

The majority of the chapters are concerned with ‘otherness’ in its various dimensions; the alien Other – foreign, immigrant, ethnically different, disempowered, female or minor – as well as the Other of different sexual orientations and ideologies. Following Octavio Paz, otherness is expressed as the attempt to find the lost object of desire, the frustrating endeavour of the androgynous Plato wishing to embrace the other half of Zeus, who in his wrath, tore off from him. Otherness compels human beings to search for the complement from which they were severed. Thus a male joins a female, his other half, the only half that not only fills him but which allows him to return to the unity and reconciliation which is restored in its own perfection, formerly altered by divine will. As a result of this transformation, one can annul the distance that keeps us away from that which, not being our own, turns into a source of anguish. The clashing diversity of all things requires the human predisposition to accept that which is different. Such a predisposition is an expression of epistemological, ethical and political aperture. The disposition to co-exist with the different is imagined in the de-anthropocentricization of the bonds with all living realms.

And otherness is, in some way, the reflection of sameness (*mismidad*). The other is closely related to the self, because the vision of the other implies a reflection about the self; it implies, consciously or not, a relationship with the self.

These topics are addressed in this book from an interdisciplinary perspective, encompassing arts, humanities and social sciences.

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Thanks to all the researchers who participated in that Symposium and in the Third one (online, January, 24-26, 2013); both conferences were the seed of this book and another entitled *Changes, Conflicts and Ideologies in Contemporary Hispanic Culture* (in press, in this publishing house).

For articles related, see also *Ideology, Politics and Demands in Spanish Language, Literature and Film* (CSP, 2012).

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PART 1.

MASS MEDIA

CHAPTER ONE

ADVERTISING AS A DISTANCING DEVICE: THE USE OF *MASS MEDIA* IN ALMODÓVAR'S FILMS— DENOUNCING THE RELEGATION OF THE FEMININE

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1. Almodóvar and Postmodernism

Postmodernism is most apt to characterize the philosophy of Pedro Almodóvar's films. For this reason, we will define what we mean by Postmodernism. Fredric Jameson defined Postmodernism as an *inverted millenarianism*, where the catastrophic or redeeming premonitions about the future have been replaced by the *end sensation*: the end of the arts, the social classes or the ideologies (Jameson, 1991: 15). Some of the characteristics that Jameson describes as typical of the Postmodernism are:

- a) **Expansion of the *image culture*:** the old opposition between *human being* and *nature* has been replaced by *human being* and *technology* (Jameson, 1991: 59).
- b) **The break in the chain of signifiers that isolate the individual from History:** For Jameson, Postmodernism schizophrenically produces a break in the chain of signifiers where the relationship between *signifier* and *signified* is replaced by the binomial *signifier-signifier* (1998: 48). Signifiers are purely material and are disconnected from the time.
- c) **Fragmentation of the individual:** Jameson talks about the extinction of the *hermeneutic model* (1991: 26), which produces a break in the image capacity of representation, especially at the

symbolic level. In this way, the great semiotic opposition *signifier/significance* is also cancelled (1991: 29). As the concepts of *loneliness* and *alienation* are no longer compatible with Postmodernism, a new concept is used: the *fragmentation of the individual* (1991: 31). The individual is disoriented and disappears in the administrative bureaucracy (1991: 31).

- d) **The dilution of History:** The present time gets diluted and this allows the spectator to receive the story out of the real historic time; there is an artistic attitude that manifests in *nostalgia for the past* and in the appearance of the *retro* fashion (1991: 39). There is a crisis in the concept of historicity that is demonstrated in the impossibility of the human being's adaptation to the speed of the new worldwide system. That is how the postmodern individual is not able to process History (1991: 47). Reality is a group of facts and there is no way to establish a distance between culture and multinational capital, because multinational capital covers everything. The new global space is the *truth* of Postmodernism (1991: 79).
- e) **Ethical relativity:** the death of ideologies has an enormous impact on the ethical level: Good and Evil turn into dysfunctional concepts. In this way, absolute moral judgments are annulled (1991: 100).
- f) **The absence of the interpersonal relationships:** the world is perceived through *screens*, and this fact produces the alienation of the individual who isolates himself from the real world and, consequently, from the interpersonal relationships. Jameson affirms that there is an *addiction* to image culture that eliminates any and all collective projects (1991: 76).
- g) **Pastiche culture:** the diversity of literary, musical and cultural styles is a consequence of the disappearance of *personal style* and, therefore, stylistic and discursive norms also disappear. Jameson refers to the *discourse through the mask* (1991: 37) to designate the mixture of styles typical of the Postmodernism.
- h) **Hedonism:** the principle of the postmodern behavior is satisfaction by virtue of *selfish passions* that eliminate problems of conscience as a consequence of the suppression of the moral norms.
- i) **The elimination of the boundaries between high and low culture:** Postmodernism is fascinated with the paraliterature, which not only quotes other works of art but incorporates its own (1991: 17).

This group of characteristics is found in Almodóvar's films and that is why we might consider his work as postmodern.

The Spain that Almodóvar shows in his movies, especially in his early films, is a country completely overtaken by the cultural transformation and the social revolution caused by the death of the dictator Francisco Franco. The most reactionary faction of the Old Spain and the predictable *wild life* of the ultramodern Spain started to coexist.

Almodóvar does not reject Spanish tradition but he uses the most characteristic elements of *gypsy* Spain in order to rewrite the stories that form the collective imaginary of the society. To sum up, he subverts those stories. Almost all of the topics that belong to the Spanish social imaginary are shown in his movies: religion, authority, authoritarianism, sexism, bullfighting. All of them are subverted so as to form a new imaginary: that of ultramodern and post-francoist Spain.

2. An Approach to the Distancing Effect

2.1. Epic Theatre and Aristotelian Theatre

Distancing an action or a character means to divest them from their obvious features, to make them unfamiliar. In short, it is to provoke astonishment and curiosity with regards to actions and characters. Human beings behave a certain way in certain circumstances (Ewen, 2001: 185).

In the antiquity, art was conceived as *mimesis* or imitation of the reality. The impact of World War I on Europe caused a break with Aristotle's representational model. This break produced the emergence of the historic avant-gardes that aimed to discover new aspects of the reality.

If we compare our postmodern society and the society that existed during the post-war years, we will come to the conclusion that there was a transformation from an *emptiness of significance* to a *superabundance of information*. In both cases, the legitimization of the discourses of *truth* were in crisis.

The German dramatist Bertolt Brecht was the first to discuss the *distancing effect*. Brecht noted that bourgeois culture was disappearing and that it was necessary to assume a combative attitude that rejected the *status quo* from classic theatre. Brecht established, in this way, a first distinction between the classic theatre and his own theatrical proposal (Brecht, 2004, 46).