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Candelas Gala. *Creative Cognition and the Cultural Panorama of Twentieth-Century Spain*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

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Abstract

Review of Candelas Gala. *Creative Cognition and the Cultural Panorama of Twentieth-Century Spain*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Keywords

Book Review, Candelas Gala, Creative Cognition and the Cultural Panorama of Twentieth-Century Spain

Candelas Gala. *Creative Cognition and the Cultural Panorama of Twentieth-Century Spain*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 254 pp.

Candelas Gala, Charles E. Taylor Professor of Romance Languages at Wake Forest University, offers in this book a new instance of her long research engagement with the connections between twentieth century Spanish poetry, art, and science. The volume follows the approach employed in *Poetry, Physics and Painting in Twentieth-Century Spain* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, Spanish translation *Sinergias. Poesía, física y pintura en la España del siglo XX*, Anthropos, 2016). In a close intertwining of science and aesthetics, the introduction lays the theoretical foundation for later chapters devoted to individual authors, each of which are followed by a wrap-up in the “Closing Remarks.” However, there are two important differences between Gala’s two most recent works. First, the attention has shifted from physics to neurobiology, as the author is devoted here to the topic of cognition through creativity or creative thinking. Second, while her 2011 book focused exclusively on the poets of the so-called Generation of ‘27, in her 2015 volume we now encounter readings of artists whose careers span the entire century, including the painter Maruja Mallo and the creative collaboration between the poet Clara Janés and the sculptor Eduardo Chillida.

In the introduction, Gala discusses the findings of the latest developments in brain research without the burden of excessive scientific jargon. She emphasizes that creativity “is ingrained in the body and is directly connected with the individual experience of the world” (6) and proceeds to analyze creativity from two fundamental standpoints: as the imaginative force behind the production of aesthetic products and as a means for acquiring knowledge. In both cases, the outcome is the production of complex and startling images capable of synthesizing a wide array of phenomena (personal experiences, memories, perceptions, emotions, reflections, intuitions, and bodily processes), generating analogies and correlations, and offering alternative views of reality that depart from the everyday experience and the usual discernment of the world. In this sense, written and pictorial images are ensembles of forces able to express frustrations, struggles, opinions, feelings, investigations, and ultimately insights, while simultaneously conveying and revealing new forms of understanding. But the poems and paintings where these images appear are in no way transparent. They demand to be deciphered so the reader can gain the knowledge the producer at some point achieved; consequently, they compel the reader to carry out a creative process of interpretation. In this regard, artistic creations reveal themselves as both bearers of deeper truths and artifacts. The similarities between the insights achieved by creators working in different mediums, to which Gala points throughout the book, attest to their deep connections and unceasing dialogue. For instance, Jorge Guillén’s state of beautitude closely resembles Baruch Spinoza’s, and it depends

on both a shared vision of the world as deeply interconnected and a confidence in the power of the intellect to achieve a holistic vision of reality that accentuates these interconnections and delights in it.

The six chapters of the book are devoted to José María Hinojosa, José Moreno Villa, Maruja Mallo, Jorge Guillén, Clara Janés, and Agustín Fernández Mallo. Each artist expresses confidence in the cognitive power of imagination and exemplifies a different working of creativity in their output, which can be observed in three aspects: the strategies they employ (integration, dialectical movement, parataxis, desintegration), the vision of reality they convey (about the self, art, and the world), and the mental state they achieve through the creative process (mainly several forms of epiphany). Gala identifies maintaining the integrity of body and mind as the main goal of the creative process for each of the artists discussed and posits their common effect as the rejection of metaphysics and transcendence by way of grounding knowledge in a material experience.

While the depth of analysis of these works is astounding, we are to understand the reference to the Spanish “cultural panorama” in the title as mainly an indication that the authors included belong to different historical moments ranging from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century. In my opinion, the book would have benefited from adding more historical and cultural context, showing how the studied works dialogue with coetaneous ones and examining how they echo aesthetic debates or sociopolitical concerns. I know this is not the aim of the book, but I feel that the discussions on the intensity of the mind-body conflict in Hinojosa and the burden of repression, or the production of a postmodernist aesthetics by Fernández Mallo, would have profited from such a contextual allocation. On a different note, the excellent chapter on Maruja Mallo suffers from an unfortunate lack of any reproductions of her paintings.

In any case, Gala’s well-written book is an impressive example of a least three things. First, it showcases the benefits of applying scientific ideas in order to gain a greater understanding of poetry and art. Second, it puts the best practices of hermeneutics to work. Difficult poems, obscure metaphors (from the surrealism of Hinojosa to the mysticism of Janés), and their interconnection in the book (or the series of paintings) make sense and convey meaning powerfully. And third, the emphasis on dialogue and continuous feedback between artistic media offers a luminous exemplification of the virtues of interdisciplinary analysis and reminds us that artists, especially in the twentieth century, express themselves through several forms that they view as complementary venues for their creativity. That said, ultimately Gala’s book is a powerful reminder, in these dire times of the dismissal of the humanities, that art is a unique and irreplaceable form of knowledge.

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