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Jo Labanyi. Spanish Culture from Romanticism to the Present: Structures of Feeling. Legenda, 2019.

Wadda C. Rios-Font
Barnard College at Columbia University, wriosfont@barnard.edu

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Abstract

Review of Jo Labanyi. *Spanish Culture from Romanticism to the Present: Structures of Feeling*. Legenda, 2019. 349 pp.

Keywords

Spain, culture, romanticism, feeling, emotion, realism

Jo Labanyi. *Spanish Culture from Romanticism to the Present: Structures of Feeling*. Legenda, 2019. 349 pp.

As its title suggests, this volume is (at least) two books in one: a broad-ranging study of over two centuries of Spanish culture, and an expansive self-reflection on over two decades of critical practice. The order of the twenty-four chapters—originally published separately between 1995 and 2018—is presented somewhat tentatively. Labanyi clarifies that they “could have been organized in many ways,” even providing their publication chronology as an alternative reading blueprint that would illustrate our profession’s engagement with “evolving academic trends” (5). Nevertheless, a collection of this sort draws attention to overarching patterns: both as cultural history and as the trace of an academic career, Labanyi describes the book as bound, at one level, by the search for the pulse of new formations underneath what becomes hegemonic, and at another by an increasing sense that cultural study is as much an (itself emotional) history of emotions as it is intellectual history.

The chapters concentrate on literary and audiovisual cultural production, and are divided into six parts following a sort of periodization: “Romanticism,” “The Realist Novel and Historical Painting,” “Modernity and Politics in the 1920s and 1930s,” “Popular Fiction and Film in the Early Franco Dictatorship,” “Cinema of the 1970s to 1990s,” and “Historical Memory.” It is interesting that the first two parts (covering the nineteenth century) are named in terms of aesthetic movements, whereas the rest appear to engage with a cultural field seen as more ideologically and politically fragmentary. This distinction, reflected in the title’s counterposition of “Romanticism” and “the present” as if both were equally temporal markers, would not, of course, stand up to firm scrutiny, and is not posed thus by Labanyi; it does however suggest the book’s concern with the question of comprehending Spanish culture historically without arriving at artificial historical unities. Possible answers emerge unexpectedly along the individual studies: I am thinking, for example, of Chapter 12, “The Politics of the Everyday and the Eternity of Ruins: Two Women Photographers in Republican Spain (Margaret Michaelis 1933-37, Kati Horna 1937-38),” where Labanyi interprets these anarchist women’s photographs of Republican Spain on the eve of civil war through recourse to Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history”: “His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe. . . This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward” (Benjamin, qtd. in Labanyi 150).

That essay focuses on how Michaelis and Horna’s visual stances separate them from such a “historicist notion of history as a causal continuum that does not, in fact, link the past with the present” and bring them closer to Benjamin’s collector, a productively destructive figure that Labanyi presents as “driven by passion for

the objects which he assembles in new arbitrary configurations that infuse them with a personal meaning or ‘transfiguration’” (154). The observation is interesting because for years I have heard Labanyi ponder her own position as cultural historian or practitioner of cultural studies (as she still does in this volume) and, as read between the lines of the essays included, she is perhaps finally claiming the vantage point of the collector in search of the “trouble in the text” (4) upon which her perspective itself confers new meaning. One of the connecting threads between the book’s chapters is precisely the rejection of any notion of history as continuum, and indeed of grand narratives as present both in the cultural phenomena Labanyi studies and in critical practice itself. Here Labanyi perhaps comes closer to Bruno Latour’s search for *sui generis* and context-specific networks of relations suggested by objects of study brought into “arbitrary configurations” than to the systematicity still present in Raymond Williams’s thought, which she places at the origin of her own approach.

The chapters addressing nineteenth-century “Romanticism” and “Realism” concentrate on breaks within these two paradigms. In reading early-century Romantic plays and late-century narrative, painting, and waxworks as sites of construction of both modern subjectivity and Spanish national identity, Labanyi takes pains to link past and present by establishing networks that reach across time—as when she places Francisco Martínez de la Rosa, Angel Saavedra Duque de Rivas, Antonio García Gutiérrez, and Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch in dialogue with psychoanalytical and feminist accounts of the formation of gender identity.

The chapters on twentieth- and twenty-first century production (narrative, photography, various cinematic genres) explore similar ruptures: the uncertainties and complexity often overlooked in fascist writing by women and men, as well as in state-sponsored film projects; the contradictions involved in the construction of both masculinity and femininity; the fragility behind Francoist conceptions of citizen and nation even when backed with the regime’s full force; the tension between victimhood and agency among Spaniards of different ideologies who were forced to make pragmatic choices to survive the dictatorship. In these articles, and perhaps incrementally throughout her career as it shows through them, Labanyi (as collector) is suspect of holistic approaches, and especially psychoanalysis and its recent incarnation in trauma-based memory studies. In effect, Part VI almost parallels Part I in critiquing paradigms that have almost achieved “movement” status—in this case “Historical Memory”—and searching for the possibilities opened up by alternative ways of looking. In the last chapter, “The Languages of Silence: Historical Memory, Generational Transmission and Witnessing in Contemporary Spain” Labanyi expresses her “increasing disquiet at the dominance in memory studies of trauma theory” (330) and explores the strategic, rather than traumatic, uses of silence by Civil War survivors and the extent to which these

throw into question now-entrenched notions about the transition to democracy, for example the *pacto de olvido* ‘Pact of Forgetting.’

The essays in *Spanish Culture from Romanticism to the Present* are suggestive in their individual approaches; the book as a whole is nevertheless unique as a window into the thought of one of the most influential scholars of Spanish culture in recent decades. Whether or not one always agrees with Labanyi, it is impossible not to be in awe of her mind and method, and how she has carried the profession forward. I am particularly struck by her position-taking: conscious of reading as an outsider (a non-Spaniard, British transplant to American academia with an impressive canonical and noncanonical theoretical apparatus, and always as a woman) yet also eager to not make the critic, herself, the protagonist of the criticism—something doubly challenging in a self-compiled collection. Even in disagreeing with colleagues’ arguments, she is never dismissive or disrespectful, something many of us have regretfully been guilty of at one point or another. Her pedagogical disposition is also evident throughout the volume: from moments when she brings up discoveries actually made by or with students (335) to the clarity of her prose, which does not fall prey to the notion that stylistic incoherence is an indication of theoretical sophistication. The book is also deeply personal: Labanyi’s passion for her subjects and the “transfiguration” that her perspective brings to them are notable (154). After reading this volume I feel even luckier than I already did to have shared the field with her. And hope to continue to do so, as she begins a new stage in her intellectual and emotional history.

Wadda C. Ríos-Font
Barnard College