

All Dressed Up in Nostalgia

The Dichotomy of an Ironic Spanish National Identity as Told Through the Use of the
Flamenco Dress

by

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Figure 1. Photograph of “It’s a Small World” Figurines at Disney World. 2013. Digital Photograph. <http://blogs.laweekly.com/informer/Its%20a%20small%20world.jpg>

Despite being part of a children’s ride at the most heavily trafficked amusement park in the world, the image above is quite controversial. It depicts a “Spanish” male and female posed for a flamenco performance, the man with his guitar and white dress shirt, the woman with the iconic flamenco dress. This image, while slightly less academic in its formation, is the quintessential image of Spanish people. It draws directly on flamenco, the most widely recognized cultural marker of Spain, as well as the deep red that has come to be emblematic of the passion, fervor, and exoticism that Spain embodies. What we are confronted with in this image, however, is a representation of an acutely specific

form of flamenco, one that is not emblematic of the entire art form let alone of the entire country from which it gains its origins. In manipulating this image as a marker for all that is Spain, we are engaging with a stereotype that is just as much perpetuated by non-Spaniards as it is by those born and raised there. Art historians Xavier Arakistain and Lourdes Méndez comment, “These stereotypes have served to construct images of the (Spanish) woman, which still form part of the exoticizing imaginary of those who, year after year, visit Spain and are surprised not to find [...] a masquerade knowingly orchestrated to deceive the yank.”¹ This masquerade, as it has so aptly been labeled, exists at the frontier between truth and politics.

Throughout the history of all nations, Spain in particular, there has been a distinct awareness of the need for a national identity. This ‘identity’ acts as a model on which foreign countries may place their expectations and preconceived notions in order to make sense of the unknown. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss comments on this idea of the essence of a nation as boiled down to “reduced models”, or the product of a synthesis of data aimed at conveying a clear and linear image regardless of the historical accuracy that is forgone in the process of its creation.² ‘Reduced models’ are formed through political agents that identify a set of appearances or cultural practices that conform to the idealist image of the country that they wish to convey. As people, our encounters with reduced models trick us into believing that what has been presented before us is the truth, despite the fact that they are merely “forced readings” through a

¹ Xavier Arakistain and Lourdes Méndez, “A Rebellious View: Between Sexual and Ethnic Identity,” in *Mortal Cadencia: Pilar Albarracín* (Lyon : Paris: Fage ; Maison rouge, 2008), 113.

² Georges Didi-Huberman, “Mortal Cadencia or Gravity Danced,” in *Mortal Cadencia: Pilar Albarracín* (Lyon : Paris: Fage ; Maison rouge, 2008), 113.

“telescopic vision.”³ The idea of a “forced” historical reading pertains to the ability of a nation to dictate its own history, manufacture it, and spoon-feed it to those interested in its consumption. This becomes problematic, however, when muddled with historically factual accounts that may work against the romanticized version of history we have come to acknowledge as truth. As paraphrased by Georges Didi-Huberman, Lévi-Strauss makes sense of this tendency in stating, “Every time that, as receivers, we look at a visual work we are confronted, through our senses, with an act of knowing.”⁴ Here, Lévi-Strauss makes an important distinction between seeing and knowing. Whereas seeing is a present occurrence that takes place on the surface, knowing requires much more reflection. When we are presented with information we immediately compare it to what we already know or understand. We reference our memory bank of experiences and, however consciously or subconsciously, we weigh our current experience with those past conceptions taking into consideration the source of the information, its purpose in its presentation, and our own position of viewership. Doing so allows us to act as responsible consumers, and we are able to judge for ourselves whether or not we will accept or dismiss the information as authentic. This however, can only happen if we have experienced the information once before. Therefore, a person, without any previous exposure to Spain or its national image, going through the, “It’s a Small World” exhibit at Disney World and viewing the Spanish man and woman for the first time might accept the masquerade that Arakistain and Méndez describe as “...the Spain that Franco imagined as One, Great and Free: flamenco

³ D. Medina Lasansky, “Blurred Boundaries Between Tourism and History: The Case of Tuscany,” in *Architourism: Architecture as Destination for Tourism* (Munich ; New York: Prestel, 2005), 54.

⁴ Didi-Huberman, “Mortal Cadencia,” 113.

hand claps, songs, and women wearing flamenco dresses”⁵ as an authentic representation of the country.

History, at its core, is little more than a measure of the authenticity of memory. It is created by people, for people, and through people and its aim is to narrate a collective identity such that outsiders may consume it with ease. D. Medina Lasansky, a professor of architecture at Cornell University, describes history as “...a product made and remade in a specific time and place that says more about the present than about the past.”⁶ Most recently, Lasansky’s writing has focused on an emerging sect of architectural study known as “architourism.” Architourism aims to look at physical sites through the lens of foreigners, allowing us to explore the ways in which tourism colors the histories that are fabricated through architectural landmarks. She claims that, “In the end, it is the need to continually monitor and contemporize the ‘authentic’ (through refinement and redefinition) that ultimately generates and sustains tourism.”⁷ This striving for authenticity, however, is difficult in that historical authenticity is not easily attained. Authenticity, or the nature of remaining uncorrupted and unchanged, cannot be manufactured out of the context from which it is born.⁸ Therefore, to preserve authenticity or “contemporize” it, as Lasansky suggests, would be to modify history in such a way that strips it of its genuine qualities. Tourism, however, is an industry based entirely off of an aesthetic essence that creates the masquerade of authenticity while still maintaining a level of comfort and safety. As a result, the industry is faced with the difficult task of manipulating a tourist attraction in such a way as to create an experience

⁵ Arakistain and Méndez, “Mortal Cadencia,” 113.

⁶ Lasansky, “Architourism,” 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

that is transformative and still accessible in the present. The aim is to preserve what already exists in order to transport the viewer to a time other than the present. To the same degree however, understanding that history is formed through a relationship with present modes of thinking means that without modification of some sort history can become less relatable, ending in detachment on the part of the viewer. While Lasansky's theories pertain directly to physical sites of tourism, one could extend her theoretical framework to encompass the use of people as sites of tourism. Lasansky argues that, "Tourism helps to choreograph both site and sight, teaching people what to look at and how to look."⁹ In doing so, we are also influenced to look at "locals" differently, and we place a touristic agenda on the people that we encounter as well as the sites that we visit for at the core of tourism is the role of the consumer. It is through an understanding of people as sites of tourism that I will introduce the main topic of this thesis: the flamenco dress.

In his essay, Jesusa Vega investigates the development of Spanish regional dress, such as the flamenco dress, from an everyday item essential for living into a museum attraction essential for touristic consumption. In regards to Spain, she states:

In scarcely a century and a half one finds a growing awareness of the need to conserve cultural heritage – that is, for dress to transcend the realm of art or history and to become ethnography, thereby preserving memory of the nation's customs and collective practices. Simultaneously, this new awareness sought to construct an image of Spain that would lure tourists who would eventually become one of the nation's principle sources of wealth.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jesusa Vega, "Spain's Image in Regional Dress: From Everyday Object to Museum Piece and Tourist Attraction," in *Visualizing Spanish Modernity*, English ed (New York: Berg, 2005), 207.

The movement of dress from art and history to ethnography is an important one when considering the creation of a national identity. It puts art at odds with authenticity in the sense that ethnography, or the study of culture, is considered to be a less manipulated and consequently more authentic historical account. It creates a dichotomy between the “native” and the “foreigner” that consequently, creates two distinct experiences of dress. If we take this to be true, however, what happens when a foreigner shifts into the culturally authentic realm of the native through the use of a social marker such as the flamenco dress? This was my experience as an American attending the *Feria de Sevilla* during my semester abroad and it is where the theoretical crosses into the personal.



Figure 2. Nicole Johnson. Photograph of La Feria de Abril in Sevilla, Spain. 2012.
Digital Photograph

La Feria de Abril is one of the most highly regarded fairs of its kind. For one week out of the year, part of Sevilla transports itself back into the romantic past of horse drawn carriages, *casetas* (tents) filled with live music and dancing and, perhaps most importantly, the *traje de flamenca* (flamenco dress). On the surface, the fair appears to be a seemingly apolitical event, encouraging visitors to remove themselves from modernity in order to reconnect with the rich cultural past that formerly pervaded the streets of Andalucía, the southern region of Spain. As we will come to learn however, nothing pertaining to Flamenco or Spanish national identity is ever far from politics.

Feria is as much about an experience as it is about a performance. An explanation of this from my host mother, Rocío, encouraged my roommate (pictured on the right) and me to invest in flamenco dresses for the occasion. By the time I had convinced myself to purchase a dress, I had already been exposed to a multitude of dresses just by walking the streets of the city.

As Feria approaches, every clothing shop puts away its normal retail apparel in order to cater to what is arguably the largest consumer market among females in Andalucía. The dresses, which can be described as “...colorful and bright...whose shape, the so-called ‘guitar body’, enhances the physical qualities of the women and dissimulates her defects. Long and short, with dots, plain or patterned, no Andalusian woman is afraid to wear it to please herself and others.”¹¹ As a woman, the dress was everything it was described as being and, despite being a far departure from something I would normally wear, fit in such a way as if it had been waiting for me all along. Once in

¹¹ Cécile Bourne-Farrell and Pilar Albarracín, “To Go as Far as It Is Possible to Go,” in *Mortal Cadencia: Pilar Albarracín* (Lyon : Paris: Fage ; Maison rouge, 2008), 105.

the dress and at Feria, however, I realized it was so much more than an aesthetic marker; for me, it was a ticket into a cultural practice that otherwise would have remained impenetrable.

For centuries, ferias have been the epitome of Andalusian society. Despite taking place exclusively in Andalucía, the image of women at Feria has been so widely disseminated that it persists, as is evidenced in the image of “It’s a Small World”, as the most frequently associated image of women in Spain. Behind the superficial implications of the aesthetics of the dress is a much more profound commentary on the role of gender in the construction of a Franco and post-Franco era Spain. William Washabaugh, one of the leading historians in the field of flamenco, has written numerous times on the qualities of the Spanish woman as exemplified through Feria. He notes, “They sally forth to the fairgrounds, where the civilized city abuts the wild countryside, and there, dressed to provoke, they dance seductively, comporting themselves in such a manner as to challenge a man’s power to control passions gone wild.”¹² In another account, Washabaugh comments, “At this liminal time and in this marginal space, women dress in the most daring clothes and dance the most provocative dances, thereby presenting themselves as hot and ‘natural’ in contrast to cool ‘cultural’ men.”¹³ This distinction between women as natural and men as cultural is crucial in understanding the perception of females that prevailed during the Franco regime. Franco, the authoritarian ruler who served as the Head of the Spanish State from 1936 – 1975, remains a widely known and controversial Spanish icon. Mere mention of his politics still polarizes Spaniards to this

¹² William Washabaugh, “Flamenco Music and Documentary,” *Ethnomusicology* 41, no. 1 (1997): 52.

¹³ William Washabaugh, *Flamenco: Passion, Politics, and Popular Culture*, Explorations in Anthropology (Oxford ; Washington, DC: Berg, 1996), 3.

day. His regime is best known for its fascist inspired fortitude, creating a unified vision of Spain that both romanticized its alluring past while still asserting the nation as a global leader. Women, who were given the unique opportunity to work during the Spanish Civil War directly preceding Franco's regime, occupied a highly monitored and controlled space that lead to the erasure of many of their rights as people.

“Women were envisioned as the source not only of physical reproduction (i.e. babies for the *patria*) but also of ‘correct’ ideological reproduction via the socialization of children in the home – the goal here being the imposition of a social hierarchy. But, to ensure this outcome the state could not really afford to let the private sphere remain entirely ‘private’. Control, especially of women, had to be enforced.”¹⁴

Through the loss of their individual agency, women were seen as limited due to their “naturalness” and the biological necessity to bear both children as well as the burden of maintaining a proper household. It is through understanding this strict policing of women that Feria becomes a moment of self-expression, freedom, and, above all, a fleeting return to the independence that once was. Franco, who heavily policed Flamenco, was pro-Feria due to its aesthetic appeal, its importance in tourism, and its seeming inability to transform itself into a political act that might work against the message of his regime. While this afforded women with some freedom, their liberty was still seen as a threat to the gender norms that those during Franquista Spain had grown accustomed to. Washabaugh notes, “The woman, with arms curved over her head as if to imitate the horns of a bull, challenges the composure and self-discipline of the cultured man with her mild and dangerous naturalness.”¹⁵ This quotation, which harnesses flamenco and bull fighting as the two cultural markers of Spain during this era, is troubling from a present

¹⁴ Ibid., 187.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

perspective in that it portrays women as objects which can be disseminated in any image that the male chooses, stripping her of her agency and placing her in a passive role as a second-rate citizen.¹⁶

The naturalness of women draws a direct connection between femininity and motherhood while also proposing a direct opposition to the cultural man. In this sense, women were not only prohibited from being contributing members of the household economically, but also culturally. Flamenco, which had long been accentuated by the passionate voices of women, provided a space in which the feminine soul could be released in a way that was defiantly un-feminine.

Flamenco, as an art form, is intended to connect the experience of the *cantaor* (singer) with that of the audience through the universality of sorrow and tragedy and the catharsis of release. As a result, the musical performance provoked a tendency to be felt rather than simply viewed or heard. This allowed for women, or *cantaora*, to be heard not based on their gender but based on the universal connectivity of their message.

In *Rito y Geografía del Cante* (The Rite and Geography of the Song), perhaps the most renowned flamenco documentary of the Franquista era, Cristobalina Suárez comments that there is very little difference between male and female flamenco singers. Apart from the tonal differences in the quality of their voices, male and female *cantaores* are striving for the same sense of cathartic release. This lack of distinction allowed women to be people separate from the maternal duties, limitations and pressures that had been imposed upon them under the watchful eye of the Franquista regime. Opportunities

¹⁶ Ana María Mata Lara, “Control Social y Vida Cotidiana De La Mujer En La España De Franco,” in *Femenino Plural: Palabra y Memoria De Mujeres*, 10 (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 1994), 223.

to partake in flamenco were few and far between during this period and the image of women was perpetuated as removed from society and culture for the sake of remaining indivisible from the family.

Franco's emphasis on the importance of family life was not unprecedented. However, the degree to which it was enforced was unlike anything Spain had seen before. "The family, as envisaged by the regime, was unthreatening because it connected vertically with the state rather than horizontally within society. Thus it reinforced the unity and power of the state, rather than challenging it as did the horizontal solidarities of civil society."¹⁷

When considering Franco as a ruler and the trajectory of his mobilization of Spain's image into the realm of global powers, we must also take into consideration the role that Catholicism played in reinventing a unified vision of Spanish people and, in particular, Spanish women.

Women, as the matriarchs and the embodiment of the social norms promoted by Franco's regime, were considered to be the direct tie between family and religion. In this sense, their behaviors, ways of thinking, and the upbringing of their children were regulated by both Franco and the Catholic Church. This created an impossible dichotomy between both institutions' expectations of the female character. As María Dolores Ramos Palomo describes it, "Por una parte, la mujer es tenida por frágil, débil, en constante peligro de caer en las más indignas tentaciones, pero por otra, ha de ser la que recoja, guarde y transmita a las futuras generaciones todos los valores esenciales de la ideología dominante" (On the one hand, woman is colored as fragile, weak, in constant danger of

¹⁷ *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction: The Struggle for Modernity* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 184.

falling under the most unbecoming temptation, on the other hand, she is the one who picks up, guards, and transmits all of the essential values of the dominant ideology).¹⁸ Not only did these set unattainable standards for women, but it also put their societal role, as matriarch, and their religious role, as virginal and pure, into direct opposition. Despite these forces of contradiction, *Rito y Geografía del Cante* depicts women as engaging in both the natural sector and the social sector. In the same interview with Cristobalina Suárez as was mentioned before, we see the singer interacting in what is arguably the most serene convergence of these dichotomous female roles. Amidst singing a tango, Suárez is found seated around a table, presumably in her home, accompanied by a guitarist and another female friend who is *tocando las palmas* (clapping). What is notable about this scene, however, is the presence of her son who lays quietly in her lap, his head resting against her breast, as she wails her song of sorrow, all the while a smile painted on her face. Washabaugh notices the uniqueness of this representation of women, commenting, “Not only are *Rito* women presented as approachable contributors to flamenco song, they are often portrayed as matriarchs, and as pivots around which all musical activity turns... for here the female sings, not in detachment from family bonds, but from the very center of those bonds.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Mata Lara, “Control Social y Vida Cotidiana De La Mujer En La España De Franco,” 227. Author’s translation.

¹⁹ Washabaugh, “Flamenco Music and Documentary,” 62.



Figure 3. Cristobalina Suárez in *Rito y Geografía del Cante*, 1972. Still image from Film²⁰

As we place women of the Franquista era into a socioeconomic context, we begin to learn more about the deeper social differences that existed in Spain as well as the polemic nature of a regime blind to the nuanced differences between women of different social classes. Historian Helen Graham states, “The sheer extremity of the times makes 1940s Spain a clear illustration of the axiom that there is no such thing as ‘women in general’ and no such thing as their ‘typical experience’. Gender cannot denote a single experience because it is always bisected by socio-economic class and other competing cultural and political identities.”²¹ The inability to unite women under the expectation of motherhood shows that when it came to an understanding of the female population,

²⁰ *Rito y Geografía Del Cante Flamenco - Cristobalina Suárez*, 2011, (16:18), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYrosijNuRs&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

²¹ Helen Graham, “Gender and the State: Women in the 1940s,” in *Spanish Cultural Studies* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 183.

Franco's regime neglected to understand the differences in necessity between women of the lower classes versus women of the middle classes. Whereas women of the upper or middle classes were expected to promote an idea of 'womanhood', women of the lower classes were more concerned about having the material tools needed for survival than they were with a social construction of feminine identity.²² This is perhaps best exemplified in another franquista era Flamenco documentary entitled *Duende*.²³ In Washabaugh's opinion, "In this film public women are consistently portrayed as alluring but untouchable, an image that hides and forgets the secluded domesticity of women in everyday life and pretends that the liminal experience of the fair or carnival is real and normal."²⁴ Returning to our conversation of authenticity, the portrayal of women in *Duende* propagates this easily digestible vision of Spanish women as liberated and cultural, perpetuating a reduced model of their identities by negating the vast majority of the restrictions that dictate their lives and instead focusing on their rare and fleeting moments of independence.

Taking this notion of reduced models one step further, I will now move into a discussion of Spanish national identity as it pertains specifically to the use of the flamenco dress in Pilar Albarracín's work. Albarracín, a contemporary artist born in Sevilla and currently residing in Madrid, is best known for her satirical works that convey the stereotypical images of Spanish women through poignant, and often tragic, performances, photographs, and videos that are saturated in irony. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to isolate those works that directly incorporate the flamenco

²² Ibid., 194.

²³ Washabaugh, "Flamenco Music and Documentary."

²⁴ Ibid., 55.

dress in order to argue that much like our bodies, the dress itself cannot be removed from political or ethnic ties but instead is as intrinsically linked to self-identification as it is to aesthetic appeal or cultural tradition. In connecting Albarracín's work to the history of Spanish women during the Franquista era, particularly those shown in the *Rito* series, my aim is to move a discussion of Spanish female identity into the present and to further the argument that despite Albarracín's collective and narrative style, it is impossible to create a work that is encompassing of all women. Through the contemporary nature of her work, however, she is able to show the development of the "reduced models" of the Franquista era into the "inherited models" of Post-Franco Spain.²⁵

Albarracín has been vocal in asserting her work as a cathartic practice not just for herself but also for all those still grappling with the aftermath of the Franco regime. In a 2008 interview, Albarracín comments,

"En la época Franquista lo que se importó poco al extranjero fue la imagen del andaluz como representación de España. Sí, ese uso pero independientemente tiene otra lectura. Creo que es reversible, por eso he trabajado sobre el tema. Me parece que esa ha usado en esa época concreta con una finalidad y yo quiero decir que ya quede descargado y me apetece revolver a tomar estos símbolos que han usado para una política anterior y hacer una nueva lectura de ellos. (The image of Andalucía as representation of Spain mattered very little to foreigners during the Franquista era. Yes, they used it but independently it had a different interpretation. I think that it's reversible and that's why my work focuses on that topic. It seems to me that during that era, they used that image of Spain with an objective and I aim to return to those symbols that were used during a former political climate and create a new reading through them)"²⁶

²⁵ Rosa Martínez, "Para Volar," in *Pilar Albarracín: Del 16 De Septiembre Al 31 De Octubre De 2004, Reales Atarazanas De Sevilla* (Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía, Consejería de Cultura : Caja San Fernando, 2004), 2.

²⁶ PILAR ALBARRACÍN, 2008, (0:00 – 1:10), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtzdbFXCUIM&feature=youtube_gdata_player. Author's translation.

Her works deal less directly with the Spanish reaction to Franco's regime but instead focuses on Spain as a reaction of Franco. The way that we envision Spain, and in particular Spanish women, is fully formed by the cultural signifiers that came to bear meaning during Franco's era and still persist today. In this sense, the motivation for her work stems less from a place of indignation and more from a recognition of the need to exorcise the oppressive nature of Franquista Spain that continues to reverberate through the nation.

In this regard, we are able to draw a parallel between Albarracín's artistic motives and those of the flamenco cantaores discussed earlier. "Albarracín has focused on the analysis of dominant narratives and, specifically, on the clichés which represent Andalusian identity; not from a remote and intellectualized perspective, but through an emotional and subversive immersion in the anthropology of the everyday."²⁷ It is through this emotive and subversive immersion that we hearken back to the type of flamenco shown in the *Rito* series, one that is consumed with the music and yet places that music in a context that is both relevant and penetrable. For both Albarracín and the *Rito* singers and musicians, flamenco, as shown through the use of dress and music, is not removed from the context in which it is born. Instead, the use of the universality of tragedy to create a collective narrative of Spaniards is accomplished through an acknowledgement that in order to move past these "inherited models" and reach a more authentic portrayal of Spain as it exists today, we must "ventilar" (ventilate) these models in order to purge them and reinvent ourselves.²⁸

²⁷ Martínez, "Pilar Albarracín," 1.

²⁸ *PILAR ALBARRACÍN*.

In Albarracín's work, we find that she uses herself as a prop for modeling the reconfiguration of self-identity that is possible in the post-Franco world. In acting as the protagonist in many of her works, she fabricates a collective narrative for women while still prefacing this narrative with her own personal experience. "By putting her personal energy on the line she becomes fully involved in her multiple personalities: 'It's like being a medium through whom each character enters and later leaves to make room for the next one.'"²⁹

The work that I have found to be most emblematic of this appears in *Lunares* (Dots), a performance piece completed in 2004. In this piece, she stands head to toe in an ornately constructed flamenco dress in front a full *ópera flamenco* (flamenco opera) band as she pricks herself with a needle repeatedly in order to create the illusion of red polka dots on her dress. Red, as we have discussed, is one of the cultural markers of Spain and, as seen in the "It's a Small World" doll, is the color most associated with flamenco.

Art historian Cécile Bourne-Farrell notes, "In *Lunares* Albarracín reminds us that both flamenco dance and singing were small centers of resistance and are a fundamental part for the recovery of the new signs of post-Franco Spanish identity, less restrictive and more open to the outside world."³⁰ In this sense, we can read the excretion of her blood onto the dress as a purging of this fabricated image of nostalgia in order to recover, both emotionally and culturally, and to establish a new symbolic vocabulary for Spain, one that is more consistent with the emergence of a global population in Spain. Albarracín herself states, "It speaks about the insults received from the outside; about the responsibilities, which consume women; about the need to externalize this burden. As

²⁹ Martínez, "Pilar Albarracín," 2.

³⁰ Bourne-Farrell and Albarracín, "Mortal Cadencia," 106.

others do not share in your pain, you have to show it yourself...Although the pain of needles might always be less than internal pain.”³¹



Figure 4. *Lunares* (Dots). Performance. 2004. Digital Photograph

As *Lunares* portrays the purging of a symbol, *Techo de Ofrendas* takes the exaltation of the reinvented image of Spanish women to new heights – literally. In this massive installation, shown once in her hometown of Sevilla and again in Paris, Albarracín introduces us to a spin on the Marian traditions of many Andalusian churches. The Marian tradition focuses on the veneration of the Virgin Mary inviting worshipers to present an offering of oneself to the Virgin in order to receive a blessing. *Techo de*

³¹ Martínez, “Pilar Albarracín,” 5.

Ofrendas (Ceiling of Offerings) invites us to view this religious practice on display in the form of hundreds of flamenco dresses attached to the vaulted ceilings of the Reales Atarazanas in Sevilla. The artist invites us, "...to 'flee' to the 'protection' of these one thousand prayers inscribed by her as lace flounces, ribbons, bobbin laces and multicolored embroidered strips which ride up and float before us like the waiting room of the celestial world promised to us."³² Through this openly religious motif, Albarracín is able to acknowledge the directive role religion played in the lives of women during the Franquista era while creating a present space for these customs that is less oppressive and more supportive of the female. She continues to draw upon Franco era conceptions of the female when she openly asserts that standing underneath the installation, "...it is like looking at the entrance to a large uterus where all children can fit."³³ Considering this, it is almost as if Albarracín is welcoming women, or perhaps more generally, the viewer, to reenter the notions of the feminine that were perpetuated during Franco's era (purity and maternity) in order to show us that as contemporaries, we can return the notion of the church or of the mother to a space of nurture rather than resentment. By elevating the dresses so that they are positioned above us rather than below us, the artist suggests that these symbols of femininity, ones that were traditionally meant to drag on the floor, and subsequently drag the wearer down with them, have risen "...to give it another status."³⁴ By occupying a different space with the dresses, Albarracín is able to show the transition in social stature that has taken place in the wake of Franco's Spain. Her statement of this transition is assertive without alienating the viewer and it follows the notion of political

³² Bourne-Farrell and Albarracín, "Mortal Cadencia," 104.

³³ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

bodies that we have come to experience through flamenco. These political bodies act as both receptors and indicators of change and while this is one of the few works in which Albarracín herself is not the protagonist, she creates a space as if to say that each dress represents a viewer who has been lifted out of resentment or sorrow through experiencing the work.



Figure 5. *Techo de Ofrendas* (Ceiling of Offerings). Installation. 2004. Digital Photograph



Figure 6. *Techo de Ofrendas* (Ceiling of Offerings). Installation in Reales Atarazanas in Sevilla. 2004.

Perhaps the highest form of exaltation that has taken place for the flamenco dress, and arguably the aesthetic of the Spanish woman, can be seen in the integration of the flamenco style into the Paris fashion house of none other than Spanish designer Cristóbal Balenciaga. Born in 1895 in San Sebastian, the northern Spanish town that later became the initial headquarters for Franco's regime, Balenciaga did not begin to move his boutiques to Paris until 1937, just at the start of Franco's regime. While most historians attribute his move to the start of the Spanish Civil War, an argument can be made that at a time of political turmoil and the rise of an authoritarian dictator, Balenciaga, who has been known to keep silent on all political matters, sought an environment that would allow for more freedom in his art.

I would speculate that Balenciaga was aware of Franco's desire to fabricate a unified Spanish identity and that dress had the potential to play a large role in acting as a dominant Spanish signifier to the rest of the world. In an effort to preserve his creative freedom, Balenciaga was welcomed into Paris where his designs were able to exist independently of any coercive political forces. Despite his change of scenery, Balenciaga was unable to shake himself from his Spanish roots. While his native San Sebastian is not home to flamenco, Balenciaga would have been traveling enough within Spain in order to

see flamenco in some capacity, be it in the *café cantantes* (small bars and inns) in Andalucía or in the larger *ópera flamenca* form that would have exhibited in Madrid.

The implications of Balenciaga's use of the flamenco dress form during the Franco era can be read in two ways. The first corresponds with the actions of Albarracín's later works, such as *Techo de Ofrendas*, in which the dress is used as a symbol for the Spanish woman. Albarracín and Balenciaga both break the traditions of feminine space by bringing the flamenco dress to a new level of appreciation and acknowledgement. While Albarracín does this more literally in vaulting her dresses, Balenciaga achieves the same effect by bringing the dress to the global stage. Balenciaga was not shy about being Spanish and regardless of whether or not his flamenco accents were acknowledged explicitly as coming from Spain, his customers and critics were aware of his influence and background. By hoisting the dress into the world of high fashion, Balenciaga, in many ways, legitimized it as a piece of art, moving it away from a garment that could exclusively be explained or understood as a cultural or social reference.

The design that I have found to be emblematic of this transformation of the dress from costume to art can be seen in the Cecil Beaton photograph taken in 1971 (Figure 7). In this figure, we see the *bata de cola* form, earlier described as the "guitar body", in which the figure of the dress is fitted through the upper thigh at which point it takes on a certain liveliness as shown through the three flounces, or *volantes*, that cascade to the ground. These flounces are meant to draw the attention to the legs as they move vibrantly through flamenco dance and adhere to every curve of the body. While this dress can clearly be connected to more traditional flamenco dresses, such as the one shown in

Lunares, it still maintains a contemporary feel, as evidenced in its satin finish and eye-popping cerise shade. This newly inventive style still required the same level of confidence that a traditional flamenco dress does and the unconventional nature of the design within the context of French high fashion meant that the wearer of this dress would need to know how to command a room, just as her traditional Spanish counterpart would at Feria.

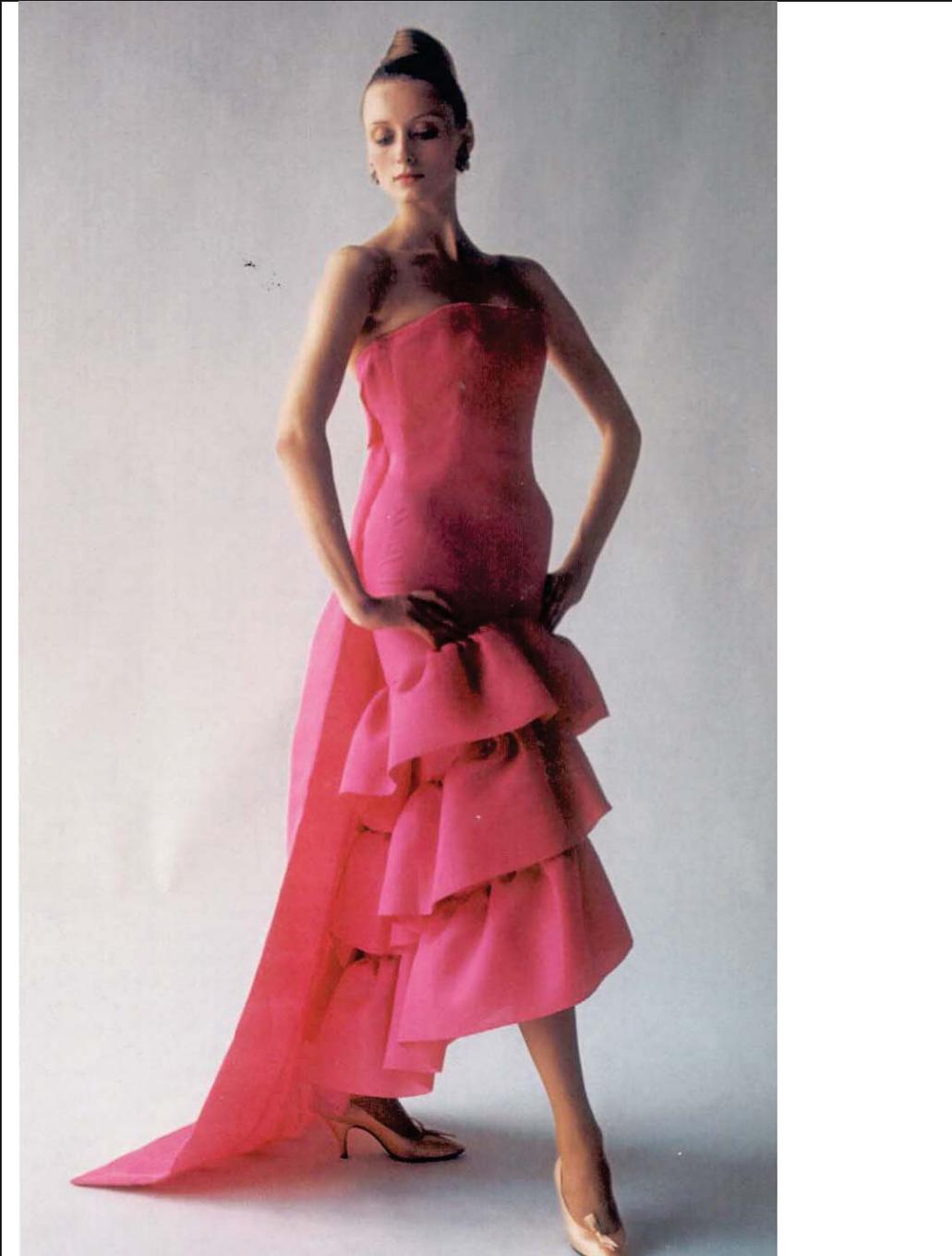


Figure 7. Cecil Beaton. *Photograph of cerise flamenco-style evening dress.*

1971³⁵

³⁵ Lesley Ellis Miller, *Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972): The Couturiers' Couturier* (London : New York: V&A Pub. ; Distributed in North America by Harry N. Abrams Inc, 2007), 15.

Returning to the distinguishing feature of Balenciaga as a Spaniard in Paris, it is important to highlight the second manner of reading that takes place when interpreting Balenciaga's use of the flamenco dress outside of a Spanish context. As with Albarracín's reinventions through the dress, Balenciaga's usage is distinctly modern and forward thinking in its execution and implications. Social anthropologist Isidoro Moreno, however, does not interpret this modernization as having a positive outcome for the authenticity and purity of the Spanish image. He states, "Modernization, the synonym for progress, and its final derivative, globalization, involves a process of homogenization that erases cultural differences, except those which may be reduced to clichés and integrated into the market once they have been deactivated and exoticized."³⁶ The reduction of the flamenco dress into an "exoticized" fashion brings us back to our initial conversation by showing that despite the perceived progress that modernization brings, we are still faced with a dichotomy between the native and the foreigner, one which allows for the native to become an object open for consumption.

It seems, therefore, that in many ways, inherited and reduced models can be found trapped inside of their own vicious cycle of commoditization, simplification, and disunity. What has allowed me to attempt to make sense of this cycle however is the notion that Cuauhtémoc Medina, a Mexican art critic, defines in his explanation of stereotypes. He states, "Stereotypes are cultural forms whose prestige (like the museum itself) lies partly in the fact that they are not completely alive, but reside instead between

³⁶ Martínez, "Pilar Albarracín," 2.

a remote past and a nebulous present.”³⁷ Accepting this fact, we must find a way in which the globalization and modernization of the contemporary times no longer poses a threat to our notions of authenticity but instead allows us to grow from an acceptance of who we are and what we have the potential to transform into our own identity, collective or individual.

³⁷ Cuauhtémoc Medina, “La Perversión De La Spanish Doll,” in *Pilar Albarracín: Del 16 De Septiembre Al 31 De Octubre De 2004, Reales Atarazanas De Sevilla* (Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía, Consejería de Cultura : Caja San Fernando, 2004), 2.

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