

# Despotic Bodies and Transgressive Bodies

SPANISH CULTURE FROM FRANCISCO FRANCO TO JESÚS FRANCO



Tatjana Pavlović

DESPOTIC BODIES  
AND  
TRANSGRESSIVE BODIES

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TATJANA PAVLOVIĆ

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## INTRODUCTION

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La mujer de España, por española, es ya católica. Y hoy, cuando el mundo se estremece en un torbellino guerrero en el que se diluyen insensiblemente la moral y la prudencia, es un consuelo tener a la vista la imagen antigua y siempre nueva de esas mujeres españolas comedidas, hacendosas y discretas. No hay que dejarse engañar por ese otro tipo de mujer que florece en el clima propicio de nuestra polifacética sociedad, esa fémima ansiosa de ‘snobismo’ que adora lo extravagante y se perece por lo extranjero. Tal tipo nada tiene que ver con la mujer española y, todo lo más, es la traducción deplorable de un modelo nada digno de imitar. Donde la mujer se conserva más mujer es en España.

—Agustín Isern, in Carmen Martín Gaité, *Usos amorosos*

Para mí era como si estuviera en el extranjero. Además, iba de rubia platino, así que extranjera totalmente. Los demás eran españoles. Había también yuppies y modernas, como hay ahora. Pero nosotras éramos divinas, los que teníamos el puntazo.

—Fabio McNamara, in Luis Gallero, *Sólo se vive una vez*

The first of these texts is from 1943 and the second from the early 1980s. Both trace the intersection of femininity, sexuality, and national identity, but there is a radical difference between them. In the first text, gender and race unite to provide a deep center of subjectivity. In the second, on the contrary, there is no such center; both gender and nationality are performed, and their meaning is continually in flux. The first quote asserts the deep truth of the subject; the second celebrates the cult of the surface. The ideal of the Spanish

woman of the 1940s, deeply grounded within the “authenticity” of her culture, is replaced in the 1980s by a drag queen, playfully embracing all the “prohibited” traits of womanhood from four decades before, such as “adoring extravagance and dying for foreignness.”

This book attempts to trace the movement from the first of these images to the second. The radical change from the first quote to the second one is not smooth, linear, or unproblematic. However, my reading does not pretend to be “linear” either. In the time span that this book analyzes (1939 to the late 1980s), there are many unexpected configurations, anomalies, and conflictual moments tied to the notions of gender and nation. Its configurations are convoluted, rife with contradictions, and filled with gaps and unfamiliar patterns, making the notion of a seamless evolution from “authentic” woman to drag queen unsustainable.

Therefore, I incorporate unconventional and unsettling figures such as Jesús Franco, better known as Jess Franco, who has made low-budget horror, science fiction, thriller, muscle-man epic, and porno films since 1959. His presence among other, more canonical texts and figures complicates neat readings and problematizes notions of sexuality, gender, and the nation. While the regime was promoting the ideal of women based on the founder of the *Sección Femenina* of the Falange, Pilar Primo de Rivera<sup>1</sup> (described by Eugenio D’Ors as a votive candle: “tiene todo lo de una lámpara votiva, la consagración inacabable, el ardor silencioso, la docilidad obstinada, el recogimiento llameante, la caricia a las tinieblas, el suave aceite, la pacífica luz” [Primo de Rivera, *Recuerdos*, 9]),<sup>2</sup> Jesús Franco was creating fabulous and unusual heroines: women detectives, female vampires, lesbian guards, and women killers. Jess Franco plays with the gender conventions of the genres in which he worked and the times in which he lived. In his horror opus, he gave the audience Miss Muerte, a spider woman trapping and killing her victims in her web, and Melissa, a bloodthirsty, blind bird-woman, thus subverting the traditional horror film formula in which “the killer has over time been variously figured as shark, fog, gorilla, birds, and slime, [and] the victim is eternally and prototypically the damsel” (Clover, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” 234).<sup>3</sup> The killer in Jess Franco’s opus is precisely the damsel that could not be more diametrically opposite to the “sparing, discreet, assiduous, diligent” model women of the 1940s or to the “votive candle” used to describe the feminine “qualities” of Pilar Primo de Rivera.

In addition to unsettling the social hierarchy with its clear gender relations and focusing on the female body, Jesús Franco, read against Francisco Franco, also problematizes readings of dictatorship and masculinity. In multiple ways, he appears as almost the inverted, ironic figure of his namesake, Generalísimo Francisco Franco. The dictator’s interest in filmmaking, to the point of even scripting an autobiographical movie (*Raza*),<sup>4</sup> is well known.

Jesús Franco's interest in horror, in pornography, and in the pulp imagery of superspies and musclemen can be seen as an effort to represent all that the Fascist government had officially repressed. His self-portrayals, in figures such as the crazed Catholic priest, might be regarded as an acting out of those aspects of Francisco Franco's life that the official, whitewashed, cinematic version had deliberately left out. Jesús Franco's films enact a return of Fascism's repressed, the playing out of the delirium that that political order drew its energy from, but had to disavow in the name of normality, Catholic morality, and political and familial order.

Besides the possibility of reading Jess Franco as the inverted, ironic figure of Francisco Franco, the dictator could also be read as a character in one of Jess Franco's films; his last years in power and painful death contain all the conventions of the horror film. Various corporeal alterations and bodily fluids marked Franco's end: marble skin, putrefying flesh, blood, saliva, sweat, and tears. Was not the dictator himself "the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion" (Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," 269)<sup>5</sup> with his uncontrollable bursting into tears,<sup>6</sup> excessive and unstoppable bleeding and with the ticks that accompany Parkinson's disease (endless trembling, shaking, involuntary movement of the eyelids, and so on)? Francisco Franco became monstrous, terrifying, horrific, and abject; a bloody dummy ("un pelele humano") carried in the carpet to one of his last operations:

La bajada de la cama de su cuarto, al no poder transportarlo en una camilla porque la escalera no permitía el giro, lo transportamos en una alfombra. . . . En el corto trayecto desde la puerta del palacio donde salimos, llevándolo en la alfombra, a la ambulancia me impresionó grandemente, era de noche. . . . Estábamos transportando en aquella ambulancia, atrévome a decirle, a un pelele humano, un señor envuelto en una alfombra, sangrando. Pero esa persona era el jefe del Estado . . . aquello que llevábamos era el generalísimo Franco. (Prego, *Así se hizo la Transición*, 294)<sup>7</sup>

The end of Francisco Franco's reign was marked by an abjection that was also anticipated by Franco's loss of *le trait unaire*, "the unary feature: a point of symbolic identification to which clings the real of the subject. As long as the subject is attached to this feature, we are faced with a charismatic, fascinating figure; as soon as this attachment is broken, all that remains is dreary remnants" (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 2).<sup>8</sup> Losing *le trait unaire* was also accompanied by Franco's inability to accommodate rapid changes in his regime; "he was presiding over a machine whose inner workings were becoming a mystery to him" (Preston, *Franco: A Biography*, 688).<sup>9</sup> In his 1961 end-of-the-year speech "he had described himself as the captain of the ship of Spain and the people as 'the crew and the beneficiaries' of his rectitude, virtues and skills as

a navigator." But as Preston points out "where the navigator was steering Spain was not clear" (*Franco*, 698).

At the end of his reign, Franco's despotic body was abject, cut off from Spanish reality, devoid of *le trait unaire*, and Jesús Franco was a marginalized body that constantly disrupted Spanish "official" culture, which disregarded him, creating his own horrific and extraordinary bodies. Francisco Franco and Jess Franco met through the body and through the abject, "the place where meaning collapses," pointing out that "the social reality is nothing but a fragile, symbolic cobweb" (Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 17).<sup>10</sup>

The fragility of the symbolic order that sustained the Franco dictatorship, the intricacies of Spanish society and culture, and the drastic changes occurring in less than forty years, as seen in the examples given above, are all imprinted on the body. Thus, this book follows Foucault's suggestion of shortening one's vision to "those things nearest to it—the body, the nervous system, nutrition, digestion" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 89).<sup>11</sup> History is written on the body, before it is realized in laws and ideologies. Foucault criticizes the traditional form of historical analysis that only contemplates "distances and heights: the noblest periods, the highest forms, the most abstract ideas, the purest individualities." The task of genealogy is instead "to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 83).

This book, then, is a Foucaultian genealogy of the last fifty years of Spanish culture and society, organized around a series of bodies and a series of dates. The dates are somewhat arbitrary, but they correspond to crucial moments of cultural transition, from Franco's consolidation of power to the late-capitalist present. The bodies are those represented in works in various media—novels, films, and comic books—but they are also bodies that serve, as Foucault puts it, as the target and support of multiple relations of political power. Human bodies are not merely natural, biological entities; they are penetrated by culture through and through. The actions and representations of bodies are regulated and controlled by dominant power structures, but these same bodies can also be appropriated by subcultures and put to divergent and oppositional uses. In this study, my aim is not to write a history of various artistic genres but to show how the conflicts expressive of Spanish culture are inscribed and contested first in various genres and bodies.

Besides centering on the body, the book also takes the postulate that "reality" must be constantly reinterpreted and thus juxtaposes such unlikely figures as Jess Franco and Francisco Franco. In Žižek's words, it "looks awry" at Spanish culture, society, politics, and literature of the last six decades. It does so via the gaze determined by the metaphor of anamorphosis in which "a detail of a picture that 'gaz'd rightly,' i.e., straightforwardly, appears as a blurred spot, assumes clear, distinguished shapes once we look

at it 'awry,' at an angle. . . . Precisely by 'looking awry,' i.e., at an angle, we see the thing in its clear and distinct form, in opposition to the 'straightforward' view that sees only an indistinct confusion" (*Looking Awry*, 11).<sup>12</sup> For this reason I do not consider certain "obvious" texts from the period but include some obscure texts normally left out of Spanish literary history. The study combines a strong theoretical background together with a detailed study of marginalized texts (*La fiel infantería*), genres (the Spanish comedy known as *comedia sexy celtibérica*, *la comedia desarrollista de los años 60*, or *cine de reprimidos*), and film directors (Jesús Franco), several of which have never before been studied systematically.

It also explores exemplary cases of contemporary mass culture together with texts that are considered "the highest spiritual product of a culture."<sup>13</sup> Thus Franco's obsession with hunting and fresh-water fishing is as valuable as his political decisions in understanding the complexities of the regime and the bikini and the fascination with blondes as important as the economic theories of the times to comprehend the economic boom of the late 60s. In this way, the book seeks to elucidate the intricacies and details of Spanish culture from the period covered as well as trace its inevitable ambivalences. I focus on movements, transitions, processes, identities in flux, encounters of one body with another, departures, and dislocations.

Theoretically, this study traverses different disciplinary frameworks: literature, film studies, cultural studies, feminist theory, and history. It is indebted to Deleuze, Foucault, and Žižek. However, there is always a movement of "misappropriations" of their theories as well as reading them in light of various interpretations, especially by feminist and queer discourse. I also draw on Paul Preston's research on Franco, Brian Massumi's reading of the body of the despot, and Cathy Caruth's reading of trauma and history.<sup>14</sup> This study also complements and dialogues with several recent indispensable texts in the field of Spanish cultural studies, emerges from concerns for abandoning "the worn out tool of *the generation* concept,"<sup>15</sup> and reframes theoretical approaches for understanding twentieth-century Spain.

It is also highly personal. I take as my own Žižek's assertion that "the theory serves as an excuse for indulging in the idiotic enjoyment of popular culture" (Žižek, *Looking Awry*, viii). The choice of texts bears traces of my own taste and investments while bearing in mind that they are neither exhaustive nor representative of Spanish culture of the last five decades. The pleasures encountered in writing this book were as intense as the struggles; pleasures tied to explorations and readings of culture through bodies, skin, surfaces, desires, and affects and the struggles emerging from concerns not to overlook "the roles of singularity and chance" and not to reduce "particulars to generals, bizarre exceptions to representative patterns, specific practices to the predictable regularities of genre" (Shavero, *The Cinematic Body*, viii).<sup>16</sup> Every time

I was tempted to succumb to that reductive analysis, I tried to follow Carlos Arias Navarro's<sup>17</sup> suggestion: "Yo diría que el demonio, que tampoco perdona al presidente del Gobierno, pues de vez en cuando me visita con sus tentaciones, como a todos los mortales, y me pretende fascinar con un panorama de molicie, de descanso, de bienestar. Pero el tema de España es . . . ¡tan fascinante!, el compromiso es . . . ¡tan trascendente! Que basta un papirotazo para que el diablo desaparezca" (Prego, *Así se hizo la Transición*, 212). Thus my fascination with the culture explored was always stronger than the struggles its analysis entailed.

Below, rather than summarizing chapters in detail, I will point out what I consider the crucial issues and moments of the periods and texts that they cover.

The first chapter, "The Despotic Body: *Raza: Espíritu de Franco*," analyzes texts from 1939 through 1952.<sup>18</sup> This is the period of autarky, Spain's economic, cultural, and ideological isolation under Franco's regime, which ended with Spain's integration into several international organizations. It centers on the political struggles between the most powerful factions of the post-war era, the Falange and the military, as well as on the intricacies of foreign politics, the need to negotiate between the Allied and Axis powers.

The chapter discusses how the dictator is disseminated as the despotic body in political discourse, film, and literature. The boundary between Franco's body and that of the entire country is unclear: "quién se ha metido en las entrañas de España como Franco hasta el punto de no saber ya si Franco es España o España es Franco?" (Martín Gaité, *Usos amorosos*, 19).<sup>19</sup> The despotic body of the dictator looms over everything: politics, culture, art, film production, and so on. Indeed, Franco was known as Caudillo de la Cultura. This insistence on "cultural production" is accompanied by profound anti-intellectualism. Intellectuals were often described as "gente que ha fracasado en la vida; literatos sin lectores, filósofos sin discípulos, arquitectos sin obras, sin medio de vida y movidos por un rencor" (Rodríguez-Puértolas, *Literatura fascista española I*, 51).<sup>20</sup> In this climate of fear, isolation, and oppression, the intellectual is replaced by the warrior/writer, who becomes an incisive figure for understanding the decade. Franco himself was exalted by critics of the period precisely because he "reunía en su persona los atributos de tres grandes figuras de la literatura española: la espada del Cid, la vara del alcalde de Zalamea y la lanza de Don Quijote" (Rodríguez-Puértolas, *Literatura fascista española I*, 612).

This chapter also looks at Franco's despotic body as the "body-as-motion, rather than the body-as-object," that is, "defined by what and how many potential gestures/trajectories it incarnates" (Massumi and Dean, *First & Last Emperors*, 137). It also conceives nation as an infinity of irreducibly different component parts where "the unification drive leads only to disappearance and

fragmentation: the physicality of the unifying body disappears, leaving only its image, which is then relayed to infinity, composed, decomposed, re-membered, and dismembered" (Massumi and Dean, *First & Last Emperors*, 95). Thus, in the second part, the chapter focuses on uncontrollable, transgressive, and alternative bodies (such as mutilated war bodies, bodies of defeated Republicans, hungry bodies, excessive bodies of *estraperlo*, abject homosexual bodies, women's bodies, and transsexual bodies) that were obstinate elements threatening to pierce the imagined national body's protective shield and unity.

The second chapter, "The Traumatized Body: *Tormenta de verano*," examines texts from 1952 through 1962.<sup>21</sup> Spain's acceptance into the UN led to hopes of a cultural opening that unfortunately never occurred. The metaphor for this decade is a character from Juan García Hortelano's novel *Tormenta de verano*. It is a woman's dead, naked body found on the beach. Her stark nakedness is much more shocking than her death. García Hortelano's text is structured around this encounter with a dead body, the site of trauma that can find neither expression nor articulation. Written in 1961, *Tormenta de verano* seizes something essential of the previous decade: the 50s inability to articulate its traumatic awakening from years of fascist rhetoric, insistence on false optimism,<sup>22</sup> and countless films "de gola y levita" that were "la mejor metáfora de envaramiento de régimen" (González Requena, "Entre el cartón piedra y los coros y danzas," 52).<sup>23</sup>

The displayed, virile body that saturated the previous decade is painfully outdated, and the national body as fighting machine belongs to the past. Themes and obsessions of the 1940s were fading away, and Falangist vocabulary was becoming increasingly anachronistic. Even sporadic Falangist violence, as Preston emphasizes, "was a symptom of a death agony rather than of youthful vitality" (*Franco*, 651).

The awakening from the traumatic 40s is accompanied by the desire to question and dismantle every aspect of the fascist discourse and get closer to the reality "hidden" behind it. Articulating the truth of Spanish reality was a project common to most filmmakers, writers, and artists of the period regardless of their ideological positions and political backgrounds. However, despite their relentless call for realism, the "truth" of the decade is paradoxically articulated in a different space, one that posits an intricate relation between knowing and not knowing. Thus the truth, "in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4). Paradoxically this generation, in spite of itself and its insistence on reality, articulates the truth of the decade precisely through indirect expressions and displaced obsessions that characterize most of its texts.

The chapter also explores the tumultuous passage to capitalism under the technocrats. The dismantling of Franco's cherished autarky was closely



connected with the entry of the Catalan monarchist and professor of administrative law Laurano López Rodó into an economic scheme that “had meant the abandonment of every economic idea that the Caudillo had ever held dear and the uninhibited embrace of modern capitalism” (Preston, *Franco*, 666). Thus autarkic Spain was becoming technocratic, led by López Rodó, “a deeply religious member of Opus Dei,” and the very model of its values: “militant, quietly confident, hard-working and efficient” (Preston, *Franco*, 657). However, López Rodó’s and the technocrats’ entry into the new cabinet was not altogether smooth and was ridden by significant crisis, summed up in the telling name for the period, “disorientation,” “during which public debt, inflation and balance of payments problems continued . . . being largely the legacy of autarky” (Preston, *Franco*, 670). As in the previous decade, there were many contradictions and complexities in all the realms of culture, politics, and economics.

The third chapter, “The Authoritarian Body in Agony: *El extraño viaje*” considers texts from 1962 to the death of Franco in 1975.<sup>24</sup> Juan Bosch’s film *Bahía de Palma*, starring the ravishing German actress Elke Sommer, was shown in Spain in 1962. It was the first time in Spanish postwar history that a bikini was shown on the screen, and the lines formed to see the movie were endless, causing a notable uproar. The Seiscientos (Fiat 600), introduced in the mid-50s, became a mass phenomena by this time.<sup>25</sup> Waldo de Mier, the author of *España cambia de piel*, wrote that “una población con automóviles sin rasponazos ni abolladuras es una población subdesarrollada” (Sánchez Vidal, *Sol y sombra*, 158).<sup>26</sup>

The bikini’s first appearance on screen and the introduction of the car correspond to the opening up of Spanish borders and coincide with the First Plan de Desarrollo (Development Plan) elaborated by technocrats in collaboration with the World Bank. They are also simultaneous with Manuel Fraga Iribarne replacing Gabriel Arias Salgado as minister of information and tourism, who “with his short-cropped hair and natty suits, the can-do style and appearance of a busy American entrepreneur, was seen as someone capable of resolving the intractable problems . . . in a vertiginously changing society.”<sup>27</sup> Thus *apertura* was tied to the change in both domestic and foreign politics, articulated in a complex motto, Spain is different,<sup>28</sup> and tied to tourism and foreign investment. Bikinis and cars, symptomatic of the sexual liberation that went hand in hand with new consumer habits, reflect the time of economic boom, consumerism, and culture marked by a new (economic) vocabulary, such as “televisor, lavadora, financiación,” that was just then admitted to the *Dictionary of Spanish Real Academy* (Sánchez Vidal, *Sol y sombra*, 156).

Besides the Seiscientos, and its centrality to cultural and economic changes, another car marked the epoch profoundly: a black Dodge Dart (registration number PMM-161416) flying thirty-five meters through the air and