Flamenco Music and Documentary

WILLIAM WASHABAUGH UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MILWAUKEE

A critical appreciation of music documentaries requires a general understanding of the social history of the music being documented, and a specific knowledge of the context of the particular documentary’s production. These requirements certainly apply in the case of the flamenco music documentaries Duende y Misterio del Flamenco (1952) and Rito y Geografía del Cante (1971-3). In this article I will approach such a critical appreciation of these works, first by presenting some general observations about flamenco music and its history, and then by considering the background and political context in which these particular documentaries were produced.1

A Social History of Flamenco Music

Since 1870, when flamenco spectacles first began to attract international interest on a broad scale, every flamenco artist has sung, danced and played guitar with an eye to at least two traditional musical moments. First, they have aimed to recover something of the emotional fire of small semi-public gatherings where rhythm, poetry and passion unite men in southern Spain. Such precious occasions of public fraternity come about in this way. Men gather daily in local taverns to discuss the day’s events; these discussions frequently continue late into the night, turning into fests of wine and song. The longer they persist at their drinking and singing, the more intense their reunion becomes. The air, thick with smoke and the musky scent of wine, starts to resonate with their passion. Eventually, one or another of the singers produces a texture of sound that sets teeth on edge, induces chills, and raises goose bumps. This is a signal moment in the art of flamenco.

Most of the verses (coplas) that they sing have been sung before. The lyrics (letras) in these verses do not need to be honed fine in order to elicit

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fevered emotion: they can be fashioned in a simple poetic style that does little more than announce evocative terms such as love, hate, pain, death, mother, prison. Still, these coplas operate like psychic keys to open up floodgates of passion.

Por ti abandoné a mis niñas,
mi mare de penita murió;
abiera te vas y me abandonas,
no tienes perdón de Dios!

For you I abandoned my little girls,
my mother died of sorrow;
and now you abandon me . . .
may you be eternally damned!

The guitar, for its part, provides musical support for the copla. And, like the poetry, the sounds produced by the guitar are thoroughly familiar to the revelers. But in the electric moments that mark the high points of the evening, the monotonous chords snap together with the familiar lyrics in an unusually forceful manner. Moreover, between coplas, the guitarist plays melodic interludes (falsetas), which develop and extend the emotional atmosphere created by the poetry (Manuel 1988). Such simple moments of fraternity, marked by patience and endurance, centered around simple poetry and enriched by the heart-stabbing sounds of the guitar, undergird all of the splashier moments of flamenco, whether they are performed by dancers like Antonio Gades or Joaquin Cortes who can stop one’s heart with a single step, or by guitarists like Paco de Lucía or Vicente Amigo whose wondrous talents have redefined and advanced flamenco guitar playing.

A second defining moment in flamenco artistry is female-centered, and involves performances in the context of carnivals or fairs. For a few days out of the year, women take leave of the seclusions and disciplines of domestic life. 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 (Corbin and Corbin 1987:107). Understood in this way, a woman’s performance is a catharsis that plays out, momentarily at least, the contradictions of social life.

The very fabledness of these events, both the male-centered and the female-centered events, should alert critics to the possibility that flamenco artistry is ripe for historical reinvention. To be more specific, popular interest in preserving traditional moments often impels people to reconstruct realities in the name of authenticity, purity, honor, and culture. With imaginations hard at work, people inadvertently contribute to a sub rosa politics, the results of which have been amply illustrated for national and ethnic musics in the continental U.S. (Kaplan 1993), Hawaii (Buck 1993), and Spain (Brandes 1990; Johnston 1991). Flamenco performances have been similarly shot through with hidden transcripts and unspoken political interests. Flamenco words do not need to proclaim a political content. All that is necessary is a sound and a style that contrast with other musics and...
resonate with one or another political movement (see Blacking 1995:198-222; Keil and Feld 1994:202-217). The artists themselves may not intend any politics, and may not even be aware of political overtones in their performance. This is because flamenco’s political valence is constructed by inventive audiences through their styles of receiving and interpreting performances (cf. Johnson 1995).

Through flamenco’s history, resonating politics have been silent but pervasive. A collection of intensely contested Spanish pronouncements about flamenco can serve as a guide. In the late nineteenth century, Antonio Machado y Alvarez—also known as “Demófilo,” a reference to his “community-loving” political bent—celebrated Gitano (Gypsy) song by describing it as a vestige of the wondrously convivial culture of southern Spain that existed prior to 1492 (Steingress 1993:103-116). Blas Infante Pérez struck a complementary chord in emphasizing the contribution of Muslims to the Andalusian song style that then withered under Madrid’s heavy-handed centralism in the sixteenth century (Barrios 1989:44-54). In the 1920s, Federico García Lorca (1975) and Manuel de Falla (1947) opted for an alternative strategy for legitimating Andalusian and ultimately all of Spanish culture by projecting its music onto a higher stage of universalist aesthetics. As they saw it, flamenco “deep song” was a transcendent experience that could carry the aficionado beyond the shallowness of politics and ethnicity. Ironically, when reinvigorated by the writings of Anselmo González Climent in 1955 (1989), this Lorquean aestheticism complemented the political quietism of the most vocal flamenco buffs during the Franco years, 1936-1975; in these dark years, flamenco flourished as a frivolous diversionary art, always justified by the officially-approved claim that it rode a moral wave that crested well above the muddy puddles of everyday life. Be that as it may, the Franco years also spawned covert movements of resistance that availed themselves of the power of the flamenco imagination. For one, Antonio Mairena—roundly berated by Timothy Mitchell as a “one-man inventor of tradition” (1994:205)—advanced the interests of the Gitano ethnicity in a new way, reinterpretting Demófilo’s Gitano-Andalusian as Gitano-Andalusian, placing an emphasis on the Gitano community rather than on Andalucía (1976). Mairena’s Gitano-Power movement took advantage of the relative immunity of Gitanos from franquista reprisals to advance a political agenda that ran contrary to Franco’s own efforts that aimed to portray Spain as a single mystically unified culture. Yet another thrust of flamenco opposition to franquismo involved an imaginative revival of Demófilo’s and Blas Infante’s andalucismo, a renewal of appreciation for the regional importance of flamenco, an effort that billowed out in a mass movement for Andalusian independence in the late 1970s before fading from prominence (Moreno Navarro 1977; 1982; 1993). Finally, in the 1980s,
Spain’s cultural windows and doors were opened wide, facilitating fusions of flamenco with other styles of popular music and resulting in a *nuevo flamenco* fraught as much with the politics of the global community and of “world music” as with the politics of Spain (Calvo and Gamboa 1994). Filmic documentations of flamenco swim in this same multi-current stream. If song is unintentionally political, so too are documentations of song, even when—if not especially when—they pretend to be nothing more than impartial efforts to preserve and represent endangered musics.

**The Political Context of the Documentaries**

**Duende**

*Duende y Misterio del Arte Flamenco* is a case in point. While *Duende* was produced in 1952 as a celebratory survey of song forms and may well have been prompted by Edgar Neville’s antifranquista sentiments (Hopewell 1986:39), it also harbored a hidden political message which involves at least as much complicity with the regime as resistance. In advance of a discussion of *Duende*’s politics, it should be noted that this film has been both damned and praised as a documentary effort. On the downside: “Maligned for years within our borders, it now enjoys unmerited prestige” (Molina 1994:10). On the other hand, it has been called “the most important filmic work on this theme that has been produced to date” (Blas Vega y Ríos Ruiz 1990:542). (I purchased my copy of this film for ten dollars in a department store in Madrid, where it is currently a hot seller after having been ignored—virtually lost—for many years.) The politics of *Duende* peek through its surface at multiple sites and in many different ways; my discussion here will focus on its treatment of the humble aspects of everyday life in Andalucía and on its handling of women.

Neville’s film plays up the photogenic primitivity of Andalusians, celebrating them as rustics who have been spared the pains of civilization, a theme that is all too common in anglophone writing about Spain.3 The airbrushed depictions of humble settings in *Duende* advance and underscore Neville’s written observations: “Andalusians ought to know how to dance and sing and be flamenco, and if they are very flamenco, and very beautiful, and sometimes very bereft, so as to give a pathetic air to the thing, they strike us as perfect” (1969:718). Such a view is consistent, on the one hand, with González Climent’s observation that Andalucía’s illiteracy is one of its great cultural assets (1989:93), and, on the other hand, with Franco’s efforts to turn Andalucía into a living showcase of the “good old days” when the poor were ignorant and starving but happy.

On a second front, Neville’s representation of women resonates with Franco’s effort “to turn the clock back on the position of women” (Shubert
1990:214). 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. *Duende*, for example, includes multiple scenes centered around the alluring María Luz Galicia who captures admiring glances from all the local men, distracting even the local police from their duties. In a late scene of great power, a young Gitana sings *bulerías* while her man sits close by with his arm wrapped around their baby. Throughout the song, she remains thoroughly focused on her song and distant, with respect to her attentions, from her family. Neville’s written comments about Andalusian women correspond to his documentary presentations: “The woman’s life is not all annoyance, sadness and pain . . . to be an honest person does not absolutely require that one be an ill-humored person, sporting always a face of vinegar . . . The world is coming to know another side of the Andalusian woman, her joy. There is, after all, nothing more exuberant than the joy of an Andalusian in a bikini” (1969:723). Such an attitude toward women, evident enough in *Duende*, implicitly aligns itself with aspects of franquismo, Neville’s intentions to the contrary notwithstanding.

**Rito**

The one hundred half-hour black-and-white documentary films of the televised series *Rito y Geografía del Cante* (1971–73) are far less widely known than Neville’s documentary, but far more consistently praised. Angel Aguirre in the left-leaning *Cuadernos Para el Diálogo* (1972) compliments the series for presenting the music in its larger social context. On the radical left in *Triunfo* (1972), Pedro Altares lamented the small numbers of viewers who were able to tune into *Rito* despite its indubitable quality, compared to the millions of viewers who had been captivated by Lola Flores. And Josep Baget Herms has described it as one of the “ten best productions of the 1972–73 season” insofar as it offered “a coherent, clear and rigorous vision of the *cante* flamenco . . . untainted by the idyllic airbrushed images of country life” (1993:255).

Despite all this praise from the antifranquista left, the *Rito* films also display features consistent with franquismo at the same time that they harbor opposition (Washabaugh 1996:1–30). Curiously, the series, though billed as an impartial document, is riddled with countervailing partialities. Such complexity was perhaps inevitable, given that the authors were young liberal-minded intellectuals who, on the one hand, were strongly influenced by growing social movements that emphasized both Andalusian and Gitano pride and power, but who, on the other hand, were savvy enough to know that their serious treatment of the very sensitive topic of flamenco music—
without precedent on Spanish television—had to curry favor with Franco if it ever hoped to see the light of day on his heavily censored network.

One can detect something of the *Rito* documentarians’ compliance with franquismo in the frequent use of touristic rhetoric, tourism being one of the central ingredients in Franco’s recipe for economic revitalization. The master image of the sojourn is obvious. The first program filmed for the *Rito* series, *Cádiz y Los Puertos*, makes it clear that this series is a filmic tour of flamenco country. The voice-over refers specifically to “our journey” and “our survey of flamenco.” Almost every program in the series contains panoramic cinematography, a commonplace in travelogs. Viewers scan Cádiz, Jerez de la Frontera, Lebrija, and Utrera from rooftop. From trains, viewers see the landscape rushing by as they travel from Despeñaperros to La Unión and from Córdoba to Sevilla. Must-see sites are emphasized, such as La Giralda and the Torre del Oro in Seville and the decaying Moorish castles that tower above smaller cities. Intermittently throughout the series, the voice-over commentator refers to the *Rito* programs as if they were filmic tours: “In this region we find styles with features that distinguish these people from those of other provinces, for example Jérez. On our journey we have found, in the realm of *cantitñas*, such songs as *romeros, mirabras, rosas, caracoles*.” The program on Triana also mentions “our journey,” and the program on “Saetas” refers to “our sojourn” (*nuestro recorrido*). Such comments secure the claim that *Rito* operates, in part at least, as the travelog that Franco wished it to be.

*Rito* also complied with franquista inclinations insofar as it placed stress on the transcendental aesthetics of flamenco. Flamenco here is portrayed as a deadly serious affair rooted entirely in another world, such that *aficionados* need to set aside the relatively trivial matters of politics and economics in order to devote themselves properly to their *afición*. One can detect such transcendental aestheticism in the writings of Caballero Bonald, an intellectual who both appeared in and exercised considerable influence on the *Rito* films. *Duende*, he wrote, functions as “a singer’s hidden faculty for introducing us to the ineffable so as to draw us close to the ultimate mystery” (1975:67). Such an introduction need not avail itself of the paltry powers of words. The power of *cante* is primal, elemental and immediate, as intimated in the writings of Luis Rosales.

At the beginning of a song, even when no word is uttered, we feel nevertheless that the flesh of our bodies is detached from us as if thought and expression had been suddenly made into one single sudden movement. In the *ayeo* (the moaned singing that introduces a song), the voice is distinctive and primary. This is its moment of nakedness, of pure expression. Each sound is born of itself but simultaneously erases itself. One finds oneself on the threshold of Creation, just as if language did not exist. (Rosales 1987:35)
One can discover tell-tale signs of transcendental aestheticism in the voice-overs of the documentary series. Written by José María Velázquez, these brief commentaries everywhere reiterate the themes of sincerity, purity, and authenticity. Cante in the Rito films is the song of the soul, and not just of the individual soul, but of the universal soul. Velázquez’s more recent writings reiterate this same theme and clarify its theoretical foundation: “In cante . . . we focus on and achieve . . . profound levels of communication, that is to say, something which does not even have a name, something which goes well beyond the meaning of the lyric.” Velázquez developed this theme of “profound levels” of flamenco communication by referring back to the notion of razón incorpórea introduced by Antonio Mairena (Velázquez 1982:54; 1989a:24). Praising the work of Luis Rosales, Velázquez writes, “In the system of communication between people, no one escapes from his isolation except by speaking to another person who is locked into his own isolation . . . In this situation there is born the need for poetry and song” (Velázquez 1989b:148). Here, then, is the basis for Velázquez’s commitment to cante throughout the Rito documentaries. Song is rooted in an inherited competence which was developed in isolation by Andalusians and especially Gitano Andalusians, and which redeems humans from the prison of language and the darkening isolation of social life.

With this high-flown aestheticism, coupled with inclinations toward the style of the travelog, the Rito series must have greased some wheels in Franco’s Ministry of Information and Tourism. Still, however—as José Blas Vega confided in an interview last summer—Franco himself found the series distasteful. He was evidently capable of seeing through its superficial compliance and of recognizing the hidden dissent that was built into the series. In reality, one need not credit Franco with any extraordinary powers of perception. His own ministerial organization of Channel Two was designed for airing oppositional messages and then controlling the political damage they might cause.

Channel Two

It is significant that the Rito series was aired on Channel Two (Segunda Cadena) of Spanish National Television (RTVE). This fact may seem unimportant to North Americans who have long been accustomed to multiple and independent channels on commercial television, but it is monumentally significant for Spaniards. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Spanish television viewers had access to only one channel of television programming, and it was strictly controlled by government censors and consistently responsive to government interests.

Spanish television was conceived and implemented in 1957 to serve the interests of the dictatorial regime (García Jimenez 1980; Baget Herms
1993:13-35). Programming in the early years was—and was intended to be—a mind-numbing diversion that would distract the populace from politics and sublimate their frustrations (Diaz-Plaja 1974:61-68). The Spanish, suspicious of newsprint, took to watching a great deal of television with an uncritical eye (Hooper 1986:137; Chislett 1979; Diaz-Plaja 1974:11). According to John Hooper, the credulity of the television viewership persisted despite the fact that television was censored more vigorously than other forms of mass communication (1986:138).

It was in this atmosphere that Manuel Fraga Iribarne, the Minister of Tourism and Information, initiated a somewhat liberalizing turn of events. In 1966, Fraga, himself a “quasi-Falangist” (Payne 1987:511; Miguel 1975:76), encouraged the passage of a more liberal press law—La Ley de Prensa is sometimes referred to as the ‘Fraga Law’ (Miguel 1975:77, 346)—and he initiated la Segunda Cadena, a title that means both “second channel” and “second chain,” a polysemy that was exploited in satirical criticisms of the day (Diaz Plaja 1974:20). Channel Two, a UHF channel, was initially broadcast only in Madrid and Barcelona. By 1970 eleven transmitters were carrying UHF signals to Bilbao, Navacerrada, Alicante, Zaragoza, San Sebastian, Mallorca, and Sevilla. However, in an RTVE report of 1971 it was recognized that four hundred new transmitters would be required before the entire country could be supplied with a UHF signal. In other words, the service of Channel Two was expanding very slowly, and was unavailable in many parts of the country, especially in isolated provinces and rural areas, at the time of the broadcast of the Rito series. The Andalusian populations of Jerez, Cádiz, and Granada, for example, did not receive the series.

Channel Two was slow to expand not only because of the delay in implementing the technology, but also because of the complexity of its function in the Franco regime: Jesús García Jimenez has characterized that function with powerfully critical rhetoric: “The Segunda Cadena, whose evolution has been the slowest, has aired culturally limited, restricted, and elite material that is too refined for the masses and too narrow for the cultivated sectors” (1980:380). The assumption in the Franco government and in the Fraga ministry was that the rural areas would not be able to handle serious television content. The urban intellectuals who could handle it were too few and too powerless to do much with it. Consequently, amongst television professionals of the day, Channel Two was described with the critical and diminutive term la segunda cadenilla (“little-channel two”) (ibid.:411).

Channel Two may have played a weak role in Spanish television broadcasting, but it was staffed by young, bold, and eager individuals. The Channel Two staff drew heavily from “the generation of ’39,” that is, people who
were born at roughly the time of the Civil War and who grew up studying logical positivism and Marxism, cultivating a critical spirit despite the repressions of the era (ibid.:485). In the late 1960s these young professionals, though meagerly supported, turned out high-quality programs (Baget Herms 1993:174). This surge of creativity was also the result of the fact that Salvador Pons, the director of Channel Two from its inception in 1966, had recruited a number of young Sevillian intellectuals for Channel Two. These young sevillanos, including Carlos Gortari, Claudio Guérín, Romualdo Molina, and José Manuel Fernández along with Alfonso Eduardo Pérez Orozco and Josefina Molina, had all worked together in Sevilla on “Radio Vida” which was begun in the early 1950s. On “Radio Vida,” according to Eduardo Pérez Orozco (personal communication), presentations and discussions were tailored in such a way as to emphasize free and open lines of communication. The overarching agenda was one of secular humanism. According to Romualdo Molina, “Radio Vida” was positioned under the wing of the archbishop in such a way as to benefit from ecclesiastical protection from franquista reprisals for its broadcasts (personal communication). Thus protected, it was able to air recordings of flamenco music that were otherwise banned from the airways. With Channel Two, Romualdo Molina and his sevillano associates from “Radio Vida”—“the Seville school” (la escuela sevillana)—helped advance the “liberalization of the press” in the late 1960s by giant steps (Garcia Jimenez 1980:418).

One such giant step was their documentary project of Rito y Geografía del Cante, a radical departure from Spanish National Television’s propagandistic treatments of music in the 1960s (Espín 1994). The idea for the series was developed by Mario Gómez and Pedro Turbica, both natives of Madrid and professionals in television production with Channel Two. Pedro Turbica had been cultivating an appreciation of this music as a result of his associations with José María Velázquez who, having been raised in Arcos de la Frontera in the province of Cádiz, was already at work preserving the waning styles of Andalusian song. They drew Velázquez into the planning, and the project began to take shape as a serious film documentary series about the concrete circumstances of song and about the unknown singers of cante who lived undramatic lives in the towns of Andalucía. The series was to follow the format developed by José Caballero Bonald who, in his then-recent production of an audio anthology of flamenco song, had recorded unknown and largely Gitano singers. Rito y Geografía del Cante would operate similarly, but would record on film the humble versions of flamenco song by unknown artists rather than the widely known and highly acclaimed versions of the professional artists who sang in the tablaos and spectacles of Madrid.

Velázquez, Gómez, and Turbica drew up the plan and submitted it to Romualdo Molina. Molina acted quickly on the project proposal, getting
approval back to the three authors within a week. The initial contract called for thirteen programs. Velázquez wrote the commentaries and interview questions, and appeared in the series as the on-screen interviewer. Turbica was the pivotal technician involved in the filming process. Gómez administered the project and edited the films. After its initially contracted run of thirteen programs, the series was renewed a number of times, finally tallying up to a hundred programs. The first forty programs concentrated on geographical regions and the flamenco forms that were favored in those regions. The next fifty programs profiled individual artists, and the final ten programs developed miscellaneous topics. The series was consistently praised by left-leaning reviewers, but increasingly disdained and ignored in official circles. During the second year of its run, the weekly television guide Tele-Radio promoted it with less print and more typographical errors. More significantly, the program budget was cut by almost a third.

**Rescripting Flamenco**

The *Rito* authors, in characterizing their project, consistently used the term “liberalization.” For these men at this time, ‘liberalization’ meant the unleashing of thought and the freeing of expression from constraint and oppression. The *Rito* programs advanced this liberalization by taking advantage of the opportunities opened up by the populist inclinations (*aperturismo*) in the government in the early 1970s (Miguel 1975:343ff.). Flamenco performances were apt vehicles for advancing such liberalization. They were popular and they were approved, if not compulsory (it was said in Franco’s Spain that “If it isn’t prohibited, it is compulsory” [Harding 1984:178]). Most importantly, flamenco performances could be rescripted: they could inconspicuously be fitted out with a new agenda.

The prevailing agenda behind flamenco performances at the time was *nacionalflamenquismo*. Flamenco music under Franco was carefully cultivated, cosmetically retouched, and strategically orchestrated in such a way as to present an image of flamenco as a component of Spanish national identity (Almazán 1972; Burgos 1972). In this guise, flamenco grew robust, particularly in Madrid. There *tablao* (flamenco clubs), the first of which opened in 1954, made substantial contributions to the tourist boom of the 1960s. Tablao events were orchestrated in such a way as to give tourists the experience of sampling different facets of Spain’s one diamond, different instances of the one body of Spain, all united in the same mystical way that the body of the Church is united (Payne 1980:23; Melloni and Peña Marin 1980:16; Maddox 1993:175). As such, tablao flamenco was consistent with the official policies on tourism and with the government slogan “Spain is Different,” a slogan “intended to convey the message that all of
Spain had bullfights, endless beaches, and glorious festivals” (Kaplan 1992:193).

Complementing this nationalization of flamenco music was the franquista de-regionalization of flamenco (see Hansen 1977). The singlemost significant sign of this de-regionalization was the enactment of laws in 1959 that required bars in Andalusian cities to close by 12:30 AM, an hour when flamenco events would have been just beginning (Pohren 1980:17). Such laws were thinly veiled attempts to silence musical events that would normally have bred local loyalty and stimulated political debate (Hansen 1977:118; Gilmore 1985:263). Signs went up in urban taverns, *Se Prohibe Cante*, ostensibly to control noise but realistically to control local political activity. The franquista agenda that underwrote these maneuvers was one of co-opting every aspect of regional life that could be used to bolster the centralization of power, while simultaneously discouraging every aspect of regional life that seemed to compete with or challenge that power. In consequence, regional life became almost as bland as the portrayal of it in the widely broadcast but notoriously slanted documentary series *Crónicas de un Pueblo* (Diaz-Plaja 1974:61–68). Local voices were systematically encouraged to attend to personal development (Hansen 1977:135), or family (Collier 1987:216), or art (Yglesias 1977:150), or anything else—except politics (Harding 1984:181). “No one anywhere in the nation dared to articulate what the Left had struggled for. The Falangists not only did away with the revolutionaries; they also reasserted the class relations of the old order, and they won control of people’s minds… familiar discourses revived and thrived in a seemingly depoliticized guise” (Collier 1987:216f.). Nacionalflamenquismo was a double-edged weapon in Franco’s armory for statism, a weapon that encouraged attention to the centers of power while discouraging politics at the margins.

Flamenco imagery in the *Rito* films implicitly but effectively opposed nacionalflamenquismo by exploiting the multilayered complexity of flamenco events. If a *Rito* image were a piece of paper, its recto would be compliant and its verso, resistant. In one and the same musical performance, opposition was laminated between expressions of complicity. Like a carnival that simultaneously dominates and resists domination (Scott 1990:178), flamenco performances were rescripted to accommodate nacionalflamenquismo while simultaneously advancing oppositional gitanismo and andalucismo.

The double-voiced rescriptings in the *Rito* series often play on the liberalism of the late 1960s. For example, tourism and aestheticism that abound in the series complied with Franco’s interests, yet, in contrast to those interests, some of the stars most favored in Franco’s Spain came in for belittling treatments: Pepe Marchena seemed to be a pompous dandy,
and Manolo Caracol appeared to be an artist with extraordinary wealth but shallow principles. Gitano songs were consistently celebrated in this series—a maneuver favored by franquistas—but never without reference to their Andalusian life-style, and therein lay their political twist. Andalusian commoners like the Gitanos Los Perrate came off as the salt of the earth, honest and pure in contrast to the high-flying professionals of Madrid. Often the authors used these salt-of-the-earth Gitanos to push the hot buttons of antifranquista resisters, as for example in their display of the sharply contrastive images of Manuel Soto Sordera, now soberly and even sadly reflecting on his life as a tablao singer in Madrid, now joyful, exuberant, even ecstatic, as he sings Christmas songs (villancicos) with his family (a scene shot near Madrid but edited to seem like Jerez). Similarly, in one of the last programs of the series, Lole Montoya was shown in the midst of her Gitano family singing tangos in Arabic. Her image here emphasized both the radical cultural heterogeneity of Andalucía and the public dimension of female roles in everyday life that had been suppressed in Franco’s Spain.

Family gatherings such as that of Los Montoya were common fare in the Rito series. While this family-centeredness meshed well with official promotion of family values, it also provided occasions for re-inventing traditional flamenco imagery. Instead of focusing on a small group of men gathered together in a bar to sing while drinking themselves into oblivion, the Rito programs emphasized flamenco music as a family rite—hence the titular “Rito”—complete with wine to signify its sacramental character. The epitome of the flamenco experience is resituated from the tavern to the home where the humble but pure family of Los Perrate, for example, gathers round a table to partake of wine and sing the songs that bind them close together.

It is noteworthy that women in these flamenco family gatherings show little of the untouchable allure that was so much a part of the woman’s role in nationalflamenquista imagery. Lole, for example, displays a tentative, bashful, innocent beauty as she sings tangos with the Montoya family, an altogether fresh take on flamenco womanhood. Not only are Rito women presented as approachable contributors to flamenco song, they are often portrayed as matriarchs, like María La Perrata, and as pivots around which all musical activity turns. The most startling depiction of this revised role for women is found in the program on Cristobalina de Suarez, wife of Miguel Funi. She is shown with family gathered round, all participating with hand-clapping, feet stamping and jaleos (chatter and calls), and with cousin Pedro Bacán playing a furious bulerja. Through all this din, she cradles her sleeping child at her breast. The contrast to the analogous scene in Neville’s Duende is striking, for here the female sings, not in detachment from family bonds, but from the very center of those bonds.
Conclusion

Both Duende and the later, less illustrious, but more widely applauded Rito y Geografía del Cante are documentary film projects. They both reflect their times, but still, they avoid the propagandistic treatments of social life that were so common worldwide in newsreel documentaries of the 1940s and 1950s. Instead they aimed at empowering viewers with information by representing reality objectively and impartially. To this degree, they share a common ground with the “representational film” style that has been advocated and operationalized by cinematographers and musicologists (Baily 1989: 1; Feld 1976: 298; Titon 1992a: 92; Titon 1992b: 53; Zemp 1988: 402).

A “representational film”, it is said, should subordinate persuasion to ‘reality’ by using lengthy footage of integrated events shot on location and screened with minimal editing, and by acknowledging, rather than hiding, the presence of the documentarians through a sparing use of voice-over narration and, on the positive side, through open-ended interviews that enable subjects to express themselves freely. The objective of a ‘representational film’ is to supply facts and information to viewers while avoiding as much as possible the temptation to hit them over head with pre-assembled arguments that the films uniformly confirm.

Edgar Neville’s Duende merits lower scores as a representational film than the films of the Rito series. Having been tightly organized with little room for the improvisations that generate excitement in flamenco events, Duende’s representation of flamenco is somewhat contrived; it is analogous to a museum exhibit that represents a culture by cataloguing, classifying, labeling, and illustrating it in a stilted and distant fashion. The Rito series, by contrast, is remarkably precocious as a “representation film.” It presents long uninterrupted musical sequences in naturalistic settings usually with only the briefest voice-over introductions. It is produced with a tenor of sensitivity and sympathy on the part of the commentators and interviewers that counters the normal documentary ‘power relations’ of viewers vis-à-vis filmed subjects. It samples a broad range of opinions, many of which are highly controversial, and in this way, it enables viewers to reflect on the larger social context of the films. Amazingly—given the notoriously staunch regionalism of Andalusián—the films operate impartially, offering a balanced presentation of the art of the different provinces of Andalucía and beyond. In summary, the Rito series is exemplary both as an objective document about, and as a sensitive supporter for, flamenco music.

Ironically, however, the exemplary objectivity and, if you will, the representativity of the Rito films should not be taken to mean that this film project has escaped all taint of ideology and has avoided the intrusions of
politics. Far from it and despite the ambitions and intentions of the filmmakers, this film project is shot through with politics. In the same way that John Blacking recognized the fact that the hymns he was studying "were not protest songs, but nevertheless they protested" (1995: 218), so we can see that Rito y Geografía del Cante was not a political film project, but nevertheless it accomplished politics—*a fortiori* Duende y Misterio del Arte Flamenco. I argue here that these documentary films about flamenco music during the Franco era were unavoidably political.

Some skeptics might argue that this politicization of Duende and Rito dilutes of the term politics to a point where it becomes useless. Such skeptics should consider the advice of Greg Urban who claims that discourses are socially effective in ways that are often independent of their semantic content (Urban 1991: 106). They should heed the words of Ulrich Beck (1993: 17) who contends that "People expect to find politics in the arenas prescribed for it, and performed by the duly authorized agents: parliaments, political parties, trade unions and so on. If the clocks of politics stop here, the political as a whole has stopped ticking." They should attend to the account of Mark Franko (1995: 28) who locates "the rehearsal of revolution" beneath the apparently apolitical surface of modern dance. All these arguments provide a rationale and defense for the claim that in Franco’s Spain, despite the seemingly apolitical character of public life, and despite Franco’s attempts to silence resistance, the political clock never stopped ticking. The flamenco films produced during the Franco years could not help but be moments of compliance and resistance; they could not void being multi-valent, heteroglossic, and thoroughly political representations.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Catherine Washabaugh for editorial advice and to the Program for Cultural Cooperation between Spain’s Cultural Ministry and United States’ Universities for financial support. All translations from Spanish sources are my own.
3. Anglophone writers, since the time of George Borrow and Richard Ford, in the first half of the nineteenth century, have rarely been reluctant to offer their comments on Spain, Andalucia, and flamenco music. Much of this literature is embarrassingly primitivist and Orientalist. For example, Havelock Ellis contended that “The Spanish character is fundamentally . . . savage . . . childlike” (1908:36f.), a theme that is echoed by Somerset Maugham (1920:27). Irving Brown wrote about Andalusian Gypsies with words that were not much less alienating: “Deep in our hearts we should envy this untamed, passionate race that has never grown up” (1929:18). And as recently as 1955, V.S. Pritchett argued that “Although Spain often looks like a modern country, it is not. The life of Spanish cities runs much closer to what life was like in England in the seventeenth century” (1955:180).
4. Some film critics have argued that representational film cannot help but be political in this larger sense of the term. Documentary representation, according to Bill Nichols, is never the impartial exposition it may seem to be, but is always argumentative (1991: 15–22). And when the representation is embedded in an institutional framework, as for example when it
is associated with journalism, with academic activity, or with the publication industry, one can be sure that the argument is shot through with ideological interests relevant to those institutions. At the very least, the political impact of representation can be felt in this emphasis on the “real” such that “the Real becomes the one basic referent—pure, concrete, fixed, visible, all-too-visible” (T. Min-ha 1990: 80). In studies of culture and music, this emphasis is apparent in pursuits of realistic representations in words and in films that treat human lives as if they were univocal, monologic, and internally consistent, or, in folkloristic parlance, pure, authentic, hidden, and primordial (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 50, see Niranjana 1992: 39). Such treatments assume that the reality of social life is comparable to the reality of rocks, and no less susceptible to control.

References


Filmography

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