Review
Reviewed Work(s): Flamenco Deep Song by Timothy Mitchell; In Search of the Fire Dance by James Woodall
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Two recent books by James Woodall and Timothy Mitchell are giant leaps forward in the anglophone contribution to the literature on flamenco music. Flamenco music, as the term is used here, refers to a style of singing of short and bare verses, distinctive for having been tattooed with influences from the late Middle Ages. Among those influences are the musical modalities of Muslims, the lamentational chant style of Jews, and the lively performance style of Gitanos. Flamenco music also encompasses dance, with its distinctive movements that may well date back not just hundreds but thousands of years, and guitar work, which is said to have been set onto a distinctively Iberian path of development in the ninth century by Ziryab of Córdoba. All of these elements of flamenco music rose to public attention in southern Spain around 1850, and have been analysed and evaluated in scholarly writings ever since.

The Spanish literature on flamenco is voluminous and consists of negative criticisms, geneological and classificatory appreciations, and popularisations. In the late nineteenth century, the largely negative commentaries of Spanish writers reflected a combination of interests, including their anxious search for a folklore to support both regionalistic and nationalistic aspirations, and an equally anxious effort to weed out cultural vulgarities from the stock of Spanish culture. In the 1920s, artists like Manuel de Falla and Federico García Lorca fought valiantly, though rashly, to parry accusations that flamenco was unredeemably vulgar. Their objective was to celebrate a core of flamenco, to cull the riff-raff and to transform the carnivalesque events of flamenco into moments of high art. The waxing and waning of flamenco popularity in Spanish writings of this period is a sign of the ongoing struggle over class division within Spain and over the international standing of Spain vis-à-vis other countries. During the Franco years between 1939 and 1975, a number of Spanish scholars promoted flamenco as a promising symbol of national identity (nacionalflamenuismo). Other scholars undertook what they assumed was the essentially apolitical activity of charting the history, establishing the geneology, and refining the categories of cante. This labour was often portrayed as a furtherance of the objectives of the Concurso of 1922 to legitimate flamenco as a high art. Still other writers took advantage of the hints of liberalism in the 1960s to criticise the transformations of flamenco music under Franco and to retool the flamenco style for use as a weapon of opposition to the regime. In the 1990s, anglophone social theory began surfacing in flamenco scholarship. Throughout all of these phases, the impresarios of commercial flamenco took advantage of tourism to keep flamenco performances afloat, thereby providing material for a steady
stream of popular writings that include performance reviews and biographical sketches.

When considered in the light of this expansive Spanish literature, the books by Woodall and Mitchell stand out by reason of their distinctive concerns. Their books show little interest in the folkloric character of flamenco or in its aesthetic redemption, and are instead focused on matters that I will describe as populism and sentimentalism in flamenco phenomena.

The works of Woodall and Mitchell are opposites, like light and dark or day and night. Woodall's daylit book is a touristic and populist work that presents flamenco as a powerfully attractive haven for homeless souls in a heartless world. Mitchell's dark and brooding book is a demystification that seems bent on stripping away all the attractiveness which writers like Woodall might try to cultivate in flamenco. In the end, a close reading of Woodall and Mitchell pushes one to reflect on our own Anglo world - both light and dark - as much as it facilitates an appreciation of the world of Andalucía and flamenco music. These books are as important for what they reveal about the social forces in the English-speaking world as for their potential to enlighten one about Spain and flamenco.

Woodall's *In Search of the Firedance* is an emotionally charged presentation - as opposed to a detached representation - of flamenco. His is a historical account of the remote forces that influenced flamenco performances of the past and of the proximate forces that have shaped twentieth-century developments of this popular art form. Always, Woodall's writing betrays his love for and commitment to flamenco music and musicians.

No English-language discussion prior to Woodall's work compares to it in breath of coverage. The chapters on Muslim Spain and on flamenco performance in the first half of the twentieth century are particularly helpful. Woodall, however, is less convincing when he operates as an art critic assessing the relative merits of the early and late Paco de Lucía or the performances of dancers in the *tablao* of Madrid.

Having acknowledged the fire in *Firedance*, I should note that this book stands betwixt-and-between two major Anglo audiences. The book has evidently soared above the heads of the popular audience of flamenco aficionados but it operates beneath and below the level of most Anglo scholars, a conclusion one can draw from the fact that few scholarly journals have reviewed it. Regarding its reception by popular readers, Salazar (1993) claims that *In Search of the Firedance* has too many chapters that exceed the popular reader's attention span, e.g., lengthy discussions of historical figures, and balanced and disciplined treatments of etiological controversies. In other words, Woodall's work is a serious effort to describe and appreciate flamenco music, and, as such, it has been received by popular aficionados about as well as a history of punning would be received by an audience at a local comedy club.

At the same time that Woodall's handling of flamenco history and aesthetics eludes popular readers, his approach to flamenco as a cultural phenomenon 'underwhelms' serious scholars and, in the end, alienates the very individuals with whom he might collaborate productively in the study of flamenco. The particular scholars I refer to are those who claim an interest in 'popular culture'. Their inter-
ests are altogether congruent with a major theme in Woodall’s treatment of flamenco, namely, that flamenco song is a creative and resistant voice of oppressed and marginalised people. However, beyond sharing an interest in the resilience of the downtrodden with popular culture scholars, Woodall operates with little or nothing of their style and purpose.

For one thing, ‘popular culture’ studies typically devote more space to debating the possibility of, and constraints on, creative resistances by marginalised people than to promoting such resistances, so much so that some have criticised these studies for ‘giving voice to intellectuals discussing the texts of other intellectuals’ rather than giving voice to the downtrodden (Handler 1993, p. 994). Woodall’s book avoids this elitist detachment insofar as it devotes all of its energies to the task of explicating and encouraging flamenco music. But while one could credit Woodall for eschewing elitist discussions, the downside of Woodall’s non-elitism is that he is often insensitive to theoretical issues and unable to stand outside of his own assumptions and presuppositions for a fresh take on flamenco.

For example, Woodall starts his book with the sentence ‘Modern Spain is a country of noise’. Naively, he brushes past the term ‘noise’ – a term of seismic theoretical significance – so that he can get to the substantive issues he has in mind, namely, the welter of Islamic, Jewish and Gitano influences that bear on flamenco music. In failing to weigh out the theoretical value of the term ‘noise’, Woodall has passed up the opportunity to discuss the most resistant and oppositional features of this music, or perhaps he has decided to avoid these matters as too abstract and high flown. But in either case, he has, by default, alienated students of popular culture. This is just one instance among many wherein Woodall, with hand to plough in the field of flamenco, turns over theoretical diamonds that he ignores in his eagerness to get his crop planted.

Woodall’s work is also distinct from studies of popular culture in style. Popular culture studies pursue a rational presentation, different from both journalistic writing and different too from the militant rhetoric of the downtrodden. Woodall, however, unlike popular culture scholars, writes a fresh and lively prose that is considerably lighter than the scholarly style of many popular culture studies. But, though his prose is creditably approachable, Woodall’s writing incurs its own set of problems. Consider, for example, one of Woodall’s highly recognisable manners of presentation, namely, touristic exposition. To put it simply, Woodall often goes about his work as if he were a travel writer. As such and in the long tradition of European travel writing, Woodall’s style sets the reader apart from flamenco, rendering flamenco an object of the touristic gaze. At the same time that this touristic style alienates, it also leaves the reader with a feeling of privileged intimacy, a reaction accomplished by the lavish use of unnecessarily detailed narration that gives the reader a sense of the immediate presence of flamenco experiences. In Woodall’s writing, the stylistic vacillation between detachment from and attachment to flamenco is hidden under the cloak of his own personal fascination with flamenco. As a result, Woodall’s words operate, not as the transparent windows onto the world of flamenco music that they seem to be, but as tools for constructing flamenco as an exotic object, part of the process of creating the ‘Other’.

The most general problem presented by Woodall’s book is summarised by McGuigan’s (1992) term ‘uncritical populism’. Woodall’s treatment of flamenco may be initially attractive for its support for the cultural underdog and for celebrating the creative and resistant flamenco voice ‘singing of the ancient dispossession
of a race [and] for salvation from the conditions of poverty and abandonment, from the pain of prejudice and social oblivion' (Woodall 1991, p. 115). But his book founders for lack of an appreciation of the linkage between that flamenco voice and the economic and political conditions in which that voice has been produced (McGuigan 1992, p. 76). It stumbles because it assumes readers need not concern themselves with confronting the unjust and oppressive economic and political system which undergirds that flamenco voice. It assumes that marginalised flamencos will inevitably raise their own resistant voices with inscrutable effectiveness. In fairness to Woodall, however, his uncritical populism is far from being unique or isolated. Similarly quietistic positions are all too common in popular culture studies because of overemphasises – at least within the Birmingham tradition – on matters of pleasure and consumption in social theory and because of a failure to attend to the conditions in which subaltern voices, so eagerly consumed, are produced.

Besides encouraging quietism, Woodall’s book encourages sentimentalism. Uncritical populists like Woodall encourage ‘solidarity with ordinary people’s capacity to win space from below’ (McGuigan 1992, p. 171), despite the fact that often such a capacity for resistance is stymied or completely absent. Such encouragement verges on sentimentalism because it is so frequently selective. In encouraging resistant flamenco voices, Woodall selects these particular voices from among the many more numerous voices of oppressed people that do not – because they cannot – resist. Uncritical populists like Woodall take advantage of the confusions of our postmodern cultural life to encourage what Grossberg calls ‘inauthentic sentimentalism’. Woodall’s readers, living as they do in a world bereft of epistemological foundations, ‘celebrate the magical possibility of making a difference against impossible odds’ (Grossberg 1988, p. 45). Flamenco is held out as just such a magical object to which readers can attach themselves with all of the emotional intensity that, in other eras, was reserved for commitments to eternal verities: ‘It is the “intensity of life” that counts in flamenco’ (Woodall 1991, p. 331) ‘... a search for the most galvanising and most euphoric expression of happiness and despair’ (ibid., p. 329). That Woodall encourages such emotional attachment is an indication of the sentimentalist agenda behind his writing.

II

Mitchell’s *Flamenco Deep Song* stands a pole apart from Woodall’s uncritical populism. In contrast to Woodall’s tendency to encourage and promote enthusiasm for the flamenco style, Mitchell is consummately and explicitly detached. He is not an artist or even an aficionado, but a ‘hermit’ who stands apart from the flamenco scene hoping to produce an unbiased ‘revelation of the whole social picture of flamenco’ (Mitchell 1994, p. 26). Far from being a flamenco cheerleader, Mitchell is highly critical in every sense of the word. He writes without apparent hesitation of ‘the foul river of flamenco ... the hot, molten core of depraved folklore ... sinful flamenco ... the aesthetic result of the codependency syndrome that prevailed between power-abusing, substance-abusing libertines and their singing, dancing, guitar-strumming menials’ (ibid., pp. 47, 215). With such hyperbolic rhetoric, it is doubtful that Mitchell’s book can succeed as the impartial and bias-free account he intends it to be.
Mitchell’s analysis offers all that Woodall’s does not in the way of structural conditions that undergird the production of flamenco song. Flamenco song, according to Mitchell, arose and persists because it is a spectacle through which oppressed people voice their misery in such a way as to evoke expressions of guilt-driven pity from wealthy listeners. Cante, on this account, performs a double catharsis, relieving the plain of the poor and the guilt of the wealthy (Mitchell 1994, pp. 107, 137). The upshot is this: both the poor and the wealthy, having been unleashed from their psychological burdens, can walk away content with the world as it is. Hence, flamenco song is fundamentally a homeostatic device that knits together a bipolar society.

Mitchell has given over an enormous amount of scholarly energy to the task of filling in the details of this argument. He has, for example, delved deeply into historical records for evidence of the contributions of blind balladeers, professional moaners and other disenfranchised non-Gitano Andalusians to the flamenco-song style (ibid., pp. 78ff). He has demonstrated the impact of Italian opera singers on lower-class Andalusian proto-flamenco singers who then attracted the interest of the upper classes who were trying to distance themselves from the middle classes in the early nineteenth century – classically structuralist hydraulics (ibid., p. 120f). He has offered evidence for the essential role of señoritos in the development of flamenco (ibid., pp. 178–96). They lavished wealth on impoverished artists, but simultaneously victimised those artists with the cruel style of humour that is characteristic of Andalusian elites. This whole perverse ensemble was redeemed in the twentieth century by what Mitchell calls the ‘deliberate regression’ of artistic expression, that is, art that appealed to the purifying zone of the unconscious (ibid., p. 163).

The role played by Gitanos in the development of this regressive flamenco music comes in for uniform derogation. Mitchell pays lip service to the idea that ethnicity is discursively constructed, but he persists in making an orthographic distinction between ‘Andalusians’ and ‘gitanos’ – some ethnicities are evidently constructed in uppercase and others in lower – and in using phrases like ‘catchall category of gitano’ (ibid., p. 53) and ‘quasi-ethnic group’ (ibid., p. 129). He relies on Manuel Barrios’ argument that seventeenth-century Moriscos escaped the very long arm of Spanish Inquisitorial law by passing as Gitanos, thereby confusing Gitano identity (ibid., p. 55). However, despite arguments by Barrios (Barrios 1989, p. 31), he builds a case against Gitano ethnicity by claiming that their supposed language, caló, was not so much Romany as Spanish and largely the product of romanticising writers (Mitchell 1994, p. 58).

The Gitanos who seemed so ill-defined in Mitchell’s history of the eighteenth century become well-defined as sycophantic professionals who exploited commercial flamenco in the nineteenth century. The very group which lacked sufficient identity to contribute to the early development of flamenco, suddenly, it seems, acquired enough of an identity in the late nineteenth century to be fingered for the degradation of this musical style. Mitchell does not actually say that Gitanos were primarily responsible for injecting cultural rottenness into the core of the tradition of Andalusian song (ibid., p. 147), but he does not resist the temptation to allow others to say it for him (ibid., p. 213). As Mitchell sees it, the gitanismo which García Lorca celebrated as the cure for febrile Spain in 1922, far from being a vaccine, was instead the virus. The Gitano contributions to flamenco music had aggravated, rather than obviated, the taudy commercialism that symbolised the moral emptiness of Spain at the end of the nineteenth century (ibid., p. 175f).
Finally, Mitchell contends that the significant developments in twentieth-century flamenco were made, not by Manuel Torre and Antonio Mairena with their promotion of an authentic Gitano musical heritage, but by Juan Breva, Antonio Chacón, and Pepe Marchena, who, responding to the redistribution of wealth in Spain, brought flamenco to Madrid, raised it out of the murk of 'deliberate regression', and tapped into 'a free-floating inter-class melancholy that effectively transcended the old traumas' (ibid., p. 223). Through these developments, according to Mitchell – the accounts of Ricardo Molina and other 'Gitanophiliacs' notwithstanding – flamenco escaped from its oppressive Spanish roots and entered into the larger circle of world music.

Mitchell’s writing encourages readers to regard flamenco as a theatre of guilt and victimisation, and not anything like Woodall’s spectacle of liberating passion. Nevertheless, a certain sentimentalism also marks the form of Mitchell’s work, a Marxist brand of sentimentalism that consists in a search for structural unities. Associated with this search for unity are, first, Mitchell’s over-emphasis on the role of ideas in the operation of a social system, second, his quest to explicate ideas and to render them transparent, and third, his assumption that systemic ideas are inevitably imposed on subjects rather than constructed by agents.

First, and regarding the over-emphasis on ideas, Mitchell says that the flamenco world is held together by a vicious ideology, that is, by a set of victimising ideas and immobilising emotions. The workings of this vicious ideology are apparent in the spectacles of flamenco music, and in other cultural displays such as bullfighting (Mitchell 1991), Holy Week religiosity (Mitchell 1990), and popular rites such as moros y cristianos (Mitchell 1988, pp. 51ff). In other words, the vicious ideology of Andalusian social life is a ‘pervasive ideology’ that orders, however oppressively, the full gamut of Andalusian cultural activities (Mitchell 1994, p. 21). This characterisation of ideology as a unified set of organising ideas flies in the face of recent Marxist self-criticisms that take to task the over-emphasis of ideas and the under-emphasis of daily practices. Idea-centered analysis, according to Eagleton, encourages a distinctive kind of Marxist sentimentalism which wants to find unities, however dark, at the centre of social life (see Eagleton 1991, p. 36f).

Second, Mitchell seems to pursue the explication of the Andalusian ideology on the Rousseauan assumption that all hiddenness is, by nature, vicious and that all transparency is, by nature, benevolent. He seems not to countenance the possibility that ‘there may be positive kinds of unconscious motivation and positive forms of functionalism . . . The fact that a motivation is concealed, in other words, is not enough in itself to suggest falsity’ (ibid., p. 25). And he seems not to allow for the possibility that downtrodden Andalusians can and do themselves recognise the injustices in their lives, even as ‘the majority of people have a fairly sharp eye to their own rights and interests’ (ibid., p. 27).

Finally, Mitchell often treats Andalusians as if they were dupes and patsies of their pervasive and despicable cultural ideology, a treatment which prompts one to wonder how he understands the agency of ‘subjects’. While Mitchell has, in the past, criticised sociological automaticity which portrays individual as pawns of a system (Mitchell 1991, p. 44), and while he acknowledges here, somewhat facetiously, that figures like Antonio Mairena have played an active role in inventing the tradition of flamenco (Mitchell 1994, p. 205), still he often returns to conventional treatments of subjects as benighted, as for example, when he explains the willingness of non-Gitano scholars to adopt Mairena’s cultural invention: 'The
reduced role of nongitanos to that of mere bit players [was] enthusiastically seconded by so many nongitano intellectuals . . . because racial mystification was compatible with their tardo-romantic art religion' (ibid., p. 216). Is it not possible that non-Gitano intellectuals such as Caballero Bonald, were not so much benighted tardo-romantics as inventive political tacticians whose 'gitanofilia' enabled them to mount resistances to franquismo?

III

The books by Mitchell and Woodall both contain marks of anglophone sentimentalism. Mitchell advances what Featherstone would describe as a 'male' sentimentalism of a modernist sort (Featherstone 1992), a sentimentalism that assumes that ideological unities are always hidden in human social life, and that one must shoulder the 'heroic' responsibility of exposing and ultimately intervening in the injustices spawned by those hidden unities. Woodall, for his part, promotes a 'female' sentimentalism of a populist persuasion. He assumes that native agency, creativity, and resistance operate somehow beyond the constraints of political and economic institutions, and that one would do well to simply stand in awe before the rich and creative resistances of marginalised people.

It goes without saying that these anglophone writings contrast with Spanish writings about flamenco. Whereas the Spanish literature is frequently driven by elitist desires to sequester the high art of flamenco from the noisy rabble, Woodall's book is bent on reasserting the links between flamenco and the noisy rabble. Mitchell's work, for its part, aims to indict the social system that holds both the rabble and the elites in its grip.

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Endnote

1. 'The Juderia is today famous for its small white houses fronted by abundant overspills of flowers. Most famous of all is the callejón de las Flores, a delightful cul-de-sac speckled with pinks, purples, reds and blues in flowerpots hanging from the windows, and from where you have a startlingly close view of the Mezquita tower. Thread your way from here on the north side of the Mezquita and you will come to the remains of the tiny synagogue, the only mark left in Córdoba of its once thriving community of Jews' (p. 34).

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