

Subversive Bodies: Anti-Aesthetic Gender Images in Contemporary Flamenco

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Abstract

From its inception as a type of folk art, flamenco has evolved as a gender-coded dance, displaying masculine and feminine bodies that reflected traditional gender roles and hierarchy in gypsy-Spanish society. The evolution of flamenco into a theatre art towards the beginning of the 20th century enhanced the importance attributed to the aesthetic features of the body and its movements. Female dancers represented an ideal of feminine glamour, and male performers succeeded in adjusting the concept of beauty to their own bodies, thus becoming the epitome of masculine strength.

Commenting on the central role that beauty still plays with respect to gender representations in contemporary flamenco, dancer and choreographer, Belén Maya, says that ‘We have to renounce beauty. You don’t have to be beautiful all the time.’ Maya’s approach reflects a withdrawal from existing images of masculinity and femininity, which is evident in the work of additional avant-garde artists, such as Israel Galván, Andrés Marín, **Juan Carlos Lérída** and Rocío Molina. This group of artists undermines the notion of aestheticism as a defining feature of the male/female body in flamenco by constructing a different type of flamenco body.

In this essay I will examine how these artists challenge traditional gender imagery by incorporating artistic strategies from contemporary European dance, namely the appropriation of an ‘anti-aesthetic’ aestheticism and the implementation of Brechtian techniques, directed at theatricalizing traditional gender images in flamenco and framing them as social performances. I will show that although the dancing bodies of these artists are technically proficient, they are perceived as strange, provocative, and from a traditional point of view - even ugly at times. These subversive bodies will be discussed as part of a cultural-artistic discourse aimed at exposing - and resisting - the aesthetic and social inscriptions of traditional flamenco on the masculine/feminine dancing body.

Key Words: Flamenco, tradition, innovation, masculinity, femininity, gender, flamenco body, anti-aesthetic.

1. Introduction

In this essay¹ I examine how avant-garde flamenco artists construct a new type of ‘flamenco body’² that challenges the gender images identified with this dance style, and undermines the notion of external aestheticism as the defining feature of the masculine/feminine dancing bodies. To fully understand the significance of this deconstruction process with respect to the defining visual canon and aesthetic values of flamenco, I will first present a brief overview of its gender imagery within key stages of its development as an art. For this purpose I have identified three distinct bodily models: the ‘sacred body’ of traditional flamenco, the ‘extravagant body’ of the first forms of theatrical flamenco and the commercialized form associated with the Franco regime, and the ‘dignified body’ of the post-dictatorship years and the decade of the 1980s. I argue here that although representations of masculinity and femininity in flamenco have changed over time, they have always remained aesthetically beautiful. As a result, the bodies displayed by contemporary avant-garde artists are perceived from a traditional point of view as essentially anti-aesthetic, and therefore represent subversive flamenco bodies.

2. Dignified Men, Chaste Women: Sacred Bodies in Traditional Flamenco

In its traditional form, flamenco has evolved as an artistic practice which included song (*cante*), dance (*baile*) and guitar (*toque*), and functioned as a means of preserving and representing the authentic heritage of the gypsies, rooted in their history in Andalusia (southern Spain) since their arrival in the 15th century.³ It was practiced at family gatherings (*juergas*), and perceived as a dialogue between music and dance, therefore the quality of the dancer was not evaluated according to stylistic formalism or virtuosic skills, but in the ability to present his individual expression within the existing musical rules. Moreover, a performer was acknowledged as beautiful, not because his physical features were pretty, but because his movements were an honest reflection of his emotions and soul.

These aesthetic features are the product of cultural values that define gypsy (and Spanish) society. It should be noted here, that because every dance functions as ‘a performance of cultural identity,’⁴ it is perceived as a stylization of the ‘bodily repertoire’ and *habitus*⁵ of a specific society.⁶ Therefore, the different styles displayed by male and female flamenco dancers are interpreted as representations of traditional gender roles and social hierarchy. The man’s style reflects the ideal of Spanish masculinity (*machismo*): the postures are angular, almost geometrical, and the movement is restrained, but sharp. The footwork (*zapateado*) is a dominant element in the dance, emphasizing the man’s authority and control of his space.⁷ This image of the male dancer, upright and firm, constructs a dignified masculine body that symbolizes the proud gypsy, who endures his fate with courage.

In contrast, the woman’s style is based on curved and fluid movements of the arms, hands and waist that form picturesque bodily postures. Although her bodily expression is extremely sensual, it is not perceived as vulgar or erotic, but as a celebration of her femininity in relation to her social role as wife and mother.

Moreover, because the women's arms and legs are completely covered by the dress, her physicality constructs an image of a chaste body that abides to the strict code of modesty in gypsy society.⁸

Despite the accentuated physicality and expressiveness of the male/female dancers, I argue that they represent sacred bodies that reflect 'the controlled, somewhat taboo relationship between the sexes'.⁹ This is especially evident in the interaction between men and women within the dance, which maintains the values of dignity and chastity: although their physical proximity creates a sense of emotional intimacy that is charged with sexual tension, they will refrain from actually touching each other.

3. Desired Women: Feminine Extravaganza in Theatrical Flamenco

A different type of flamenco body was constructed within public venues towards the end of the 19th century and throughout the first decades of the 20th century.¹⁰ This was the result of a fundamental transition in the social function of flamenco, which changed from a type of folk art, practiced by and for the people of its community, to a theatre art, performed by professional artists in a theatrical setting. The performances in public venues were aimed at conforming to public taste, and therefore placed the dance at the forefront, emphasizing the aesthetic features of the body, along with the technical virtuosity of the dancers.¹¹ Consequently, traditional gender images were transformed into extroverted versions of masculinity and femininity. This was especially evident with regard to the female dancer, whose external beauty and glamour became a fundamental feature of the performances, and was accentuated through distinctive props and accessories - the fan, shawl, combs, flowers and earrings. As a result, she was no longer chaste or modest, but the embodiment of a seductive 'Carmen',¹² the exotic image that characterized all Spanish women at the time.

This extravagant feminine image was furthermore exaggerated in flamenco nightclubs named *tablaos*, which were established during the years of the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975), and assisted in promoting Spain's image as an exotic country, in response to the tourist boom of the 1960s. The *tablaos* led the art of flamenco to its lowest point in history,¹³ as performances exemplified features of burlesque shows: the dance emphasized acrobatic displays of footwork and castanet playing, and the sexuality of the female dancers was provocatively accentuated, including among other things, the exposure of the legs and chest area and excessive hip movements.¹⁴ Moreover, as Hayes clearly states, in these clubs, 'flamenco and prostitution became synonymous',¹⁵ as female dancers were expected to entertain the male clients offstage as well.

4. Dignity Reclaimed: The 'Balletic' Flamenco Bodies in Post-Dictatorship Spain

The dignified flamenco body was once again reclaimed following the end of the Franco dictatorship and throughout the 1980s, as leading artists attempted to restore the true artistic essence of flamenco, and suppress its' commercialized forms, which were still being practiced in *tablaos* throughout Spain. This was obtained through the incorporation of aesthetic features from classical and neo-classical ballet into flamenco.¹⁶ As a result, the dancers displayed a unique integration between the controlled bodies of ballet and the highly passionate expressiveness of flamenco. The feminine dancing body achieved an eloquence that did not exist in traditional flamenco, but was highly inscribed with representations of female modesty, while male performers created a new masculine elegance that was still deeply rooted in the image of the proud gypsy.

Consequently, the beauty and sexuality of the dancers ceased to function as the objective of the artistic practice as a whole, but external aestheticism continued to be a dominant element in the works of the artists identified with this period. As such, the male/female bodies of this generation represented a stylized version of the traditional flamenco body, reflecting its cultural values and gender images through a refined bodily expression. Moreover, because these decades are considered a defining phase in the evolution of flamenco,¹⁷ I believe that the dancing bodies associated with this period are still considered today as the epitome of masculinity and femininity in flamenco, and therefore serve as an ideal model for its gender images.

5. Strange Men and ‘Anti-Guapas’: Introducing Anti-Aestheticism to the Flamenco Body

The beginning of the 1990s marked a new era for Spain, characterized by cultural pluralism, the globalization of the media, the blurring of fixed gender roles and the recognition of diverse sexual identities.¹⁸ It is my assertion, that these changes manifested themselves in flamenco dancing from the mid-1990s onwards, within a new stylistic tendency that utilizes an artistic strategy I term ‘fusion’. This tendency is characterized by various manifestations of stylistic hybridity and intercultural thematic concerns. It is realized in the works of many contemporary choreographers, who attempt to expand the musical composition and movement syntax of flamenco as a means of constructing a relevant paradigm for this art in contemporary Spain.

These stylistic innovations paved the way for a deeper inquiry into the codes of flamenco as a visual and theatrical language, aimed at exploring, and resisting, its defining aesthetic concepts. This artistic approach is identified with the work of several avant-garde artists, such as Israel Galván, Andrés Marín, Belén Maya, **Juan Carlos Lériða** and Rocío Molina. Despite their highly personal and distinct dance styles, I argue that all of them display subversive bodies, which are experienced by the spectator as relatively strange, very provocative and even ugly at times. This is extremely significant with respect to gender representations because ugliness never

existed in flamenco, and still does not. In fact, one of the most popular cheers that is cried out to a female dancer during a performance is ‘guapa’, meaning - beautiful. This shows, that regardless of her technical abilities, her quality as a performer is also validated by her physical appearance.

Commenting on the role that beauty still plays in contemporary flamenco, Belén Maya states: ‘We have to renounce beauty. You don’t have to be beautiful or marvelous all the time. There are many other things to think, feel and create. We are the anti-guapas.’¹⁹ Like her experimental colleagues, Maya is completely proficient in traditional flamenco, but is ambivalent towards it, as evident in the following statement: ‘At times, “I put on the flower” and dance in a very classical way. But it’s like a costume I put on. I can do it, or not.’²⁰ In my opinion, Maya’s concept of the ‘anti-guapa’ expresses the essence of the artistic practice realized by avant-garde flamenco artists today. In the following section I will analyze the bodily images displayed in the works of Rocío Molina and Juan Carlos Lériða in order to exemplify several aesthetic manifestations of this new anti-aesthetic body, and demonstrate how it undermines traditional gender images and their still-undisputed connection with beauty.

6. Athleticism and the Exposed Body: Exceeding the Image of the *Flamenca*

In the opening scene of *Cuando las Piedras Vuelen (When Stones Will Fly, 2009)*, Rocío Molina enters the stage wearing black sporty undergarments, and does not display any of the distinguishing attributes associated with the female costume, apart from red flamenco shoes. This image of Molina, maintained more or less throughout the entire piece, is immediately marked by the spectator as a sign of difference, because it challenges the feminine image traditionally presented in a flamenco show. This is furthermore enhanced when Molina starts to dance, as her erratic arm movements alternately change from stiff and sharp to broken down and weak.

From a traditional point of view, Molina’s physical features are aesthetically incompatible with the iconic image of the *flamenca*, i.e. the traditional (if not ideal) female dancer. Her body is almost completely exposed, and therefore defies the value of feminine chastity in traditional flamenco, but also the refined female body of ‘balletic’ flamenco. Moreover, although Molina performs recognizable elements from the language of flamenco, her movements do not exemplify the elegance which characterizes the feminine style, but express the intensity and accentuated physicality usually displayed in contemporary dance. Because this type of athleticism is not part of the defining features of masculinity or femininity in flamenco, Molina is therefore appreciated as a proficient dancer, but her body is decoded as anti-aesthetic.

Interestingly, in several parts of the piece Molina does display highly stylized flamenco movements, but they are detached from their traditional context. In one such scene, she performs a sequence of graceful arm movements and a footwork

combination, but does so sitting on a chair, wearing simple daily clothes and no shoes at all. Moreover, the stamping sound of her feet is produced from an external source: two singers continuously tap a musical rhythm on a pile of stones, using little stone-made flamenco shoes. Despite the fact that Molina's movements in this scene are aesthetically beautiful, she does not seem to transform into a traditional *flamenca*, but remains a contemporary flamenco dancer. Moreover, within the context of her avant-garde approach to flamenco, these visual glimpses of traditional femininity function as an artistic (and even historical) point of reference, which Molina's acknowledges, but chooses to explore beyond its limitations. Therefore, while traditional flamenco constructs one fixed image of femininity, Molina presents tradition as only one facet out of the many femininities she displays throughout this piece.

7. De-Familiarizing Traditional Masculinity: The Uncanny Male Body

In his piece, *Al Toque (Towards the Guitar)*, 2010, Juan Carlos Lérica chooses the guitar as a starting point for his introspection of flamenco as a visual language, breaking it down into fragmented movements, gestures and postures. The most intriguing aspect of this conceptual work is, without a doubt, Lérica's personal dance style, which pushes the body to a physical and aesthetic extreme. His movements are strange, if not disturbing: 'broken' and edgy postures, haunting moments of stillness and seemingly manic twists and turns. Very similar to contemporary dance, there is a deep sense of honesty in this highly exposed and unrestrained bodily expression, as it clearly evokes images of human solitude and the search for companionship. However, within the context of flamenco, Lérica's uncanny style completely defies the elegance and refinement identified with the dignified male body.

This bodily language functions as part of a wider artistic strategy, which utilizes Brechtian techniques²¹ in order to de-familiarize the visual canon of flamenco. In many scenes Lérica performs recognizable flamenco movements, some of which are typical gestures and postures associated with the male dancer. However, he does not display them in their traditional form, but distorts them through exaggerated theatricality, repetition or slow motion. As a result, they function as a form of *gestus*,²² simultaneously pointing to the original bodily gesture, while highlighting its incompatibility with the contemporary male body. Moreover, because these visual references to traditional masculinity are perceived as an external manifestation of the physical memory inscribed in the dancing body, they attest to the body's conflict with its past.

Lérica's anti-aestheticism goes even further and challenges one of the most fundamental features of the traditional sacred body, which is still maintained in flamenco today. In one scene, he extracts the guitar from its familiar function as the defining musical instrument of flamenco and places it between his legs. As the scene progresses, Lérica performs continuous movements with his pelvis and

seems to become aroused from his physical interaction with the guitar. This provocative display of sexual impulses is highly unusual in flamenco, and is therefore considered extremely subversive. It is especially significant because although male/female flamenco bodies are sensually extroverted and very expressive, sexual tension and bodily desires will never be physically realized in flamenco.

8. Conclusion

The bodily images displayed in the works of Rocío Molina and Juan Carlos Lérica exemplify, in my opinion, a conceptual rejection of aesthetic beauty as the defining feature of gender representations in flamenco. As I have shown, the appropriation of the accentuated and unrestrained physicality of contemporary dance into the traditional language of flamenco, constructs a male/female body that challenges the notion of bodily refinement and masculine/feminine elegance. Moreover, the utilization of theatrical techniques identified with contemporary dance serves as a critical strategy aimed at de-familiarizing the visual canon of flamenco and estranging its traditional gender imagery. Within this process of deconstruction, ‘the performed-body declares its re-inscriptive potential,’²³ and resists the aesthetic and social inscriptions of traditional flamenco on the contemporary masculine/feminine dancing bodies. I therefore believe that the subversive bodies constructed by avant-garde artists function as part of an artistic-cultural discourse, that questions the validity of traditional gender images as the unifying aesthetic model for representations of masculinity and femininity in flamenco today.

Notes

- ¹ The following chapter is based on a PhD research in process, entitled - *Flamenco and Fusion: Strategies of 'Reaction' and 'Resistance' to Traditional Movement Syntax*.
- ² I apply this term from Washabaugh, who discusses the central role of the body in flamenco song (*cante*). See William Washabaugh, 'The Flamenco Body', *Popular Music* 13, no. 1 (January, 1994): 75-90
- ³ Claus Schreiner, ed., 'Andalusia: *Pena* and *Alegria*', in *Flamenco: Gypsy Dance and Music from Andalusia* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990), 24-25.
- ⁴ Jane C. Desmond, ed. 'Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies', in *Meaning in Motion* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1994), 31.
- ⁵ According to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, bodily patterns stem from a person's social and cultural environment, and in turn reflect his position or status in the social *field*. See: Pierre Bourdieu, 'Structures, *Habitus*, Practices', in *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990 [1980]), 53-54.
- ⁶ Ted Polhemus, 'Dance, Gender and Culture', in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter (London: Routledge, 1998), 174.
- ⁷ Marion Papenbrok, 'The Spiritual World of Flamenco', *Flamenco: Gypsy Dance and Music from Andalusia*, ed. Claus Schreiner (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990), 55.
- ⁸ Madeleine Claus, 'Baile Flamenco', in *Flamenco: Gypsy Dance and Music from Andalusia*, ed. Claus Schreiner (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990), 94
- ⁹ Marion Papenbrok, 'The Spiritual World of Flamenco', 54-55.
- ¹⁰ This form of theatrical flamenco was established in two subsequent stages: the first occurred between the years 1860-1910 and is associated with the formation of public cafés, named *cafés cantantes*; the second took place between the years 1920-1950 within large-scale theatre performances named *ópera flamenca*. See Christof Jung, 'Cante Flamenco', in *Flamenco: Gypsy Dance and Music from Andalusia*, ed. Claus Schreiner (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990), 61.
- ¹¹ José Blas Vega, 'Hacia la Historia del baile Flamenco', *La Caña* 12 (Otoño, 1995), 20.
- ¹² Michelle Hefner Hayes, *Flamenco: Conflicting Histories of the Dance* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2009), 167.
- ¹³ The *tablaos* still function in various parts of Spain (especially in Madrid, Barcelona and Seville), and although some remain tourist-oriented, others display performances and performers of high quality.
- ¹⁴ Michelle Hefner Hayes, *Flamenco: Conflicting Histories of the Dance*, 154.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ The central artistic format of this period was characterised as 'ballet-flamenco', and consisted of narrative-based dance works that combined flamenco with western dance traditions. See José Blas Vega, 'Hacia la Historia del baile Flamenco', 21.
- ¹⁷ Laura Kumin, 'To Live is to Dance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture*, ed. David T. Gies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 300-301.
- ¹⁸ Jo Labanyi, 'Postmodernism and the Problem of Cultural Identity', in *Spanish Cultural Studies*, eds. Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (New-York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 397.
- ¹⁹ Michelle Hefner Hayes, *Flamenco: Conflicting Histories of the Dance*, 171.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.
- ²¹ Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (London & New-York: Routledge, 1989), 2.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 20.
- ²³ Michael Bowman and Della Pollock, "'This Spectacular Visible Body": Politics and Postmodernism in Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater*', *Text and Performance* 2 (1989), 113.

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