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## Review of Paul Julian Smith, *The Moderns: Time Space, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Spanish Culture*.

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**Paul Julian Smith, *The Moderns: Time Space, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Spanish Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 392 pp. ISBN 0198160001 (paper).**

**Reviewed by Marvin D'Lugo, Clark University**

Paul Julian Smith's *The Moderns: Time, Space, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Spanish Culture* is a sophisticated and thought-provoking account of the struggle for modernity in contemporary Spanish culture as that struggle is read in the works of writers, artists, filmmakers, photographers, theatrical and musical groups, and dancers. Eschewing a simplistic chronology of dates, authors and works, the book emphasizes an elaborate project of contextualization within which the cultural practices of Spanish artists are paired with the writings of those foreign writers, mostly French, who have formulated the discourse that for Smith defines Spain's approach to modernity.

As he indicates in his introduction, the selection of works chosen for examination is neither exhaustive nor even representative of post-Franco Spain. Rather, *The Moderns* is designed to shape the inquiry into and dialogue about the nature and direction of the project of Spanish cultural modernization. To that end, Smith structures his presentation into three chapter clusters, each focusing on what he calls a different "node" of modernity: time, space, and subjectivity. These sections are further subdivided into three chapters, devoted first to a writer who embodies the section's theme (Madrid columnist Francisco Umbral, Basque philosopher and journalist Fernando Savater, and Catalan gay activist Alberto Cardín), followed by a chapter devoted to a film that similarly embodies the concept; and finally, a chapter of what Smith calls "Cross-Cuts." The most imaginative and ambitious feature of the book, the Cross-Cuts are designed to broaden the discussion of contemporary culture beyond the traditional realm of narrative texts by focusing on artists and works from the visual and plastic arts, town planning and even dance and musical groups.

The figures in the first "Cross-Cut" section, all embodying Smith's theme of how contemporary artists replay the past, include photographer Cristina García Rodero, architect Rafael Moneo and the Catalan performance group La Cubana. The second section, devoted to a range of spatial themes, highlights a novel by Juan Goytisolo and the paintings of Antonio López, which are juxtaposed against the work of architect Santiago Calatrava and urban theorist Manuel Castells. This discussion underscores the importance of regional, public and social spaces, the more subjective "lived spaces of locality," the metaphoric space of Pierre Bourdieu's "intellectual field," and, finally, Henri Lefebvre's "third space" of "radically discontinuous subjectivity" (103-4). The final "Cross-Cut" details the emergence of new subjects within contemporary Spain, focusing on the position of Catalan gay activist Alberto Cardín; Basque filmmaker Julio Medem; and the hybrid subjectivities through which the figures of gypsy and flamenco culture are portrayed in popular media.

Beneath the external appearance of complexity posed by this intricate mosaic of parts lies a simple and unequivocal thesis that goes something like this: Despite the outward trappings of technology and consumer culture, post-Franco Spain still holds fast to a mindset resistant to the spirit of modernity. Where expressions of modernity do appear, they are tentative and ambivalent, often mixing within the same work traditional elements and those that express

innovation and newness. The elaborate structural division of chapter clusters notwithstanding, the trajectory of *The Moderns* actually seems guided by another, complementary agenda. Interwoven into the discussions of time, space and subjectivity, there are self-conscious restatements of the multiple objectives that shape Smith's overall inquiry. These might be broadly characterized as follows: 1) To foment, at least through writing, the intellectual dialogue between Spanish commentators of the arts and the European theorists of modernity whose ideas have in some ways shaped the Spanish experience of modernity; 2) to interrogate the concept of nationness as it inflects the very nature and location of Spanish cultural production; 3) finally, to posit a sense of modernity that derives from the centrality of locale as the essential grounding of the project of Spanish modernity.

As regards the transnational theoretic dialogue, one of the central features of Smith's approach is the pairing of his expanded range of objects of study with cultural theory as embodied in the writings of contemporary European thinkers such as Gianni Vattimo, Jean-François Lyotard, Henri Lefebvre, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau. To justify the foregrounding of these writers and their works in a discussion of Spanish modernity, Smith notes that ". . . within Spain itself commentators on postmodernism . . . rarely engage with the foreign philosophers who were most influential in theorizing the term and characteristically hold out for the continuing promise of modernity in their own country" (43).

Though they are always tightly argued, at times the very tightness of these sections reduces the Spanish artist or thinker to the status of mere illustration of European postmodern theory. This is certainly the case in the discussion of the sociologist and urban theorist, Manuel Castells, who is positioned in relation to the writings of Henri Lefebvre. Such an approach continually runs the risk of reducing the emergence of Spanish cultural modernity to the position of mere reflection of hegemonic European cultural thought.

The second chapter cluster, ostensibly about cultural space, addresses the pivotal revision of the concept of the "nation" in the wake of Spain's multinational culture, composed as it is of seventeen autonomous regions. This is the most highly elaborated section of the book. Not only is it the longest in terms of number of pages, it is the richest in its insights about the conceptualization of space and modernity. Here Smith formulates a concept of contemporary cultural space around a series of apparently unrelated texts and artists: the journalistic and philosophical writings of the Basque philosopher, Fernando Savater; Bigas Luna's Catalan film, *La teta i la lluna*; and the complex evolution of Spanish urban space as it reflects the clichéd death and rebirth of the city. To that end, Smith contrasts the images of the dystopian "evacuated city" in Juan Goytisolo's novel, *Paisajes después de la batalla* (*Landscapes after the Battle*), and paintings by Antonio López with the work of the urban architect and engineer, Santiago Calatrava, and the urban theorist, Manuel Castells. Clearly, what is most compelling to Smith is the "localness" of the urban milieu as in, for example, the cultures of the Spanish periphery, particularly that of Catalunya. This is a theme first introduced in his earlier discussion of Fernando Savater's approach to the often violent politics of the Basque Country from which Smith underscores a related thesis: "the grand narrative of nationality . . . founded on the little narratives of locality and subjectivity" (82).

Smith reasons through the cultural logic that recognizes the emergence of new locations of identity in Spanish culture and new subjects whose presence challenges the old hegemony of the centralized Spanish state. In short, he seeks to find ways to conceptualize and legitimize the plurality of local subjectivities (“nations without states”) in a Spain that, as he sees it, is a “state without a nation” (91). The goal Smith emphasizes throughout this section is perhaps best crystallized in a quote he uses from the Catalan writer Agustí Colomines: “The reconstruction of the relations that join men and environment in a lived space which often does not correspond with economic or administrative boundaries” (97).

Accepting Smith’s eloquent argument for the importance of the local in maintaining a humanizing sense of the lived communities of Spaniards, we nonetheless come back to the question at the heart of *The Moderns*: Just how do the conceptions of “everyday living” that embody the local relate directly to the cultural production of Spanish modernity? To answer that question, we need to revisit the concept of modernity itself. As we do this we find that at the very center of *The Moderns* lies a fuzziness about what precisely constitutes the essence of Spanish modernity. Early in his discussion, Smith evokes the historical self-definition of those artists whom commentators later grouped as *La movida madrileña* (The Madrid Movement) but who preferred to describe themselves as the “Moderns.” Arguing that modernity has a historically specific meaning in contemporary Spain, Smith nevertheless gives no more than passing reference to the historical circumstances that gave rise to the contemporary struggle for Spanish modernity. That history is simply covered by the monolithic term, Francoism, the implications of which are left largely for the reader to surmise. The struggle for the modernization of Spanish culture is, to be sure, not a narrative restricted to the last quarter century, although only in passing does Smith make reference to the exceptional cultural effervescence of the pre-Civil War “Generation of '27” that saw the emergence of Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel, Federico García Lorca and Rafael Alberti.

Smith very appropriately insists on the multiple identities of Spain reflected in part in the diverse nationalities formalized in the seventeen autonomous regions (*las autonomías*) established in the Spanish constitution of 1978. As we speak of multiple identities, however, we also need to acknowledge that there is not just one but a series of modernities to take into account that are masked by the book's formulation of that tag phrase, “The Moderns.”

What at first appears to be the power of Smith’s argument for an expansion of the range of cultural production explored turns out to be a pitfall; there is a variety of nuance to the modernities of particular artistic expressions that Smith’s descriptions in no way take into account. What many of the artists and works he profiles have in common, as he shows, is that to greater or lesser degrees, they depend as much on international as on domestic audiences for their cultural authentication. In part, their very modernity is a function of seeing the experience of the local in contexts that transcend the cultural space of the old Francoist ideal of the Spanish nation. In other words, modernity has something essential to do with patterns of what cultural theorists have called “reterritorialization.”

In his introduction, Smith makes reference to one aspect of this process, “deterritorialization,” citing William Rowe and Vivian Schelling's definition of the concept as “the release of cultural signs from fixed locations in space and time” (*Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin*

*America* (London: Verso, 1991, 231). Smith dismisses this avenue of conjecture as rooted in “apocalyptic theories of postcolonialism and globalization” (4). This move enables him to get on with the application of an exclusively eurocentric conceptualization of Spanish modernity. It is this restrictive, eurocentric bent that effectively limits his and our understanding of the dynamics underlying Spanish modernity.

In *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), Néstor García Canclini poses a variation on the notion of reterritorialization. For the Argentine cultural theorist, reterritorialization involves “the loss of the 'natural' relation of culture to geographic and social territories and, at the same time, certain relative, partial territorial relocalizations of old and new symbolic production” (229). Although geographic borders and even populations may be static, the spaces of reception for cultural commodities are not. Although García Canclini's theory may seem narrowly tailored to explain the post-colonial experience of Latin America, it is more immediately relevant to the Spanish experience than Smith imagines, insofar as it addresses the experience of postmodernity for cultures of the periphery, one of his central concerns.

While obviously rooted in the specific historical realities of Madrid, the Basque Country, or Catalunya, many of the artists Smith profiles engage in a strategy of reterritorialization that was a part of contemporary culture long before it became fashionable to speak of globalization. That is the process whereby artists of the periphery, for cultural reasons generally, but in the case of the Franco dictatorship for specific political reasons, sought authentication for their works outside of Spain. In doing so they integrated textual elements that would make their work legible from positions of reception outside of the sites of the production of those works. This was certainly part of the intricate stylistics of filmmakers from the 1960s onward as an effort to circumvent the Spanish film censors. In his discussion of Víctor Erice's film, *Spirit of the Beehive*, Smith makes only a perfunctory reference to Elías Querejeta as the film's producer, failing to adequately identify Querejeta as the enterprising producer of other important films of the transition. In many ways, Querejeta was the artistic and commercial mentor for Erice, as he was for Carlos Saura and others. Throughout the last decade of the Francoist regime, Querejeta aggressively engaged with the censors in order to develop the kind of films that could work dialogically by pairing national and international audiences, with the goal of demarginalizing opposition discourse in Spanish film. Part of the modernity of Erice's film is precisely its way of shaping the local to engage the transnational audience of the film. Indeed, it might not be too much of an exaggeration to argue that institutionally, even before the Franco regime, the goal of Spanish filmmakers was to embrace the modernity of cinema that was always rooted in the transnational community.

Smith's examples of Cristina García Rodero's traveling exhibitions of photography outside of Spain, Fernando Savater's engagement with Jean-François Lyotard at the University of Vincennes, and Santiago Calatrava's Zurich-based enterprise working on architectural projects in Barcelona—all point to two essential aspects of the Spanish experience of modernity: Firstly, modernity does not operate in a vacuum, but cuts across geographic and cultural borders; secondly, the practical engagement of Spanish artists with European cultural institutions is at least as essential if not more so than the theoretic engagement of Spanish critics with European intellectual traditions.

While Smith speaks of historicity, he seldom means the actual history of the cultural institutions through which the various artists engage in their struggle for modernity. Indeed, a sense of the history of the uneven development of the discreet institutions involved in different forms of cultural production would clearly reveal a much more nuanced sense of the emergence of Spanish modernity. Here, for convenience, I would like to draw attention to cinema as one of those institutions that Smith describes obliquely through the creative experiences of three filmmakers: Víctor Erice, José Juan Bigas Luna, and Julio Medem. These are, to be sure, some of the most insightful and stimulating passages in the book. Smith deftly historicizes the textual construction of the local to provide rich and provocative readings of each of the three films. Yet inevitably, by evoking each of the films in terms of the development of the “grand narrative of the nation” founded on the “little narratives of locality and subjectivity” (82), Smith dislocates the individual work or the filmmaker from the complex processes within which cinema operates as a transnational cultural medium. As Andrew Higson reminds us, “The cinemas established in specific nation-states are rarely autonomous cultural industries and the film business has long operated on a regional, national and transnational basis” (Andrew Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema,” p. 67 in *Cinema and Nation*, edited by Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 63-74).

Thus, Smith is only partially correct in arguing that Bigas Luna's *La teta i la lluna* is a Catalan film by virtue of its local Catalan subject matter and its funding by the Catalan regional government. *La teta i la lluna* was, in fact, a French co-production, designed to circulate in cultural spaces far beyond Catalunya. The hybridity of the film's characters -- Catalan, Andalusian, French -- suggests the complex ongoing process of rewriting the old narratives of nationality in ways that engage in a form of modernity that is as intrinsic to the history of the cinematic medium as it is in opposition to the sense of a narrowly defined Catalan identity.

In the case of Basque filmmaker Julio Medem's film, *Tierra*, Smith comes to a more balanced sense of the dynamics of modernization through cinema. He points to Medem's disavowal of Basque nationalism, emphasizing instead the director's cultivation of his own authorial identity. It is, in fact, Medem's motivation as film author that has moved him to attempt to reterritorialize (and, in effect, demarginalize) elements of Basque culture through a cinematic form whose objective is, as Smith himself notes, to “reconcil[e] the subjective and the intersubjective” (161), that is, the local with the transnational. Here, as in his earlier discussion of Erice and Bigas Luna, Smith speaks disparagingly of the filmmaker's status as auteur. Yet, isn't the cult of the cinematic author one of the commercial and artistic strategies that help sustain the transnational flow of cinematic texts and thus indirectly advances the project of modernity that has been so intimately tied to cinema since its origins?

The plural modernities of Spain are indeed rooted in local culture as Smith persuasively argues, but the specificity of local history and place are not fixed locations in culture. In the context of modernity in large part shaped by mass media, the relative geographies of core and periphery are continually subject to change. The local is always mediated by transnational forces, an idea that the Spanish artists and thinkers Smith examines are well aware of and often use to their own creative advantage.

Despite any criticisms one may have with certain of Smith's formulations of issues, *The Moderns* is a book to be read and discussed. Its impressive range of treatments of important cultural texts and authors enriches our general understanding of Spanish culture as it challenges our thinking about the locations and practices of cultural modernization.