

# A COMPANION TO CATALAN CULTURE

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## INTRODUCTION

### Catalan Culture: Once More unto the Breach?

Towards the end of the last century a sea-change occurred in British and Irish Hispanism as a previously held fixation with literature gave way to interest in a broader range of creative production. The pioneering volume in this respect was *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, compiled in 1995 by Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi; and the initiative prospered four years later with David Gies' *Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture* and a further major compendium in 2000, *Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies*, edited by Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas. All these publications offer comprehensive accounts of the nature of this discipline and the value of the broader sweep it offers to an understanding of that country and its peculiarities. And, as such, there is no need to rehearse the merits and relevance of such a perspective here.<sup>1</sup>

While all these volumes make a creditable effort not to exclude the contribution of Catalonia to major features of the cultural life of the state, this area of interest never quite manages to sit comfortably within the parameters established. On occasions, for example, the Catalan experience can find its way into mainstream deliberation only to disappear from view at other moments of equal significance. Elsewhere it tends to hang like an appendage which, despite the accuracy of the study, seems to be attached almost as an afterthought, vaguely confluent with the central thrust of the argument. Quite simply – and no specific reference to these helpful overviews is intended – the subject for consideration is simply too broad to fit compactly into the Spanish experience and, as a consequence, criteria for definition can often lack the necessary precision. Here and there, for example, movements that might reject the very epithet of Spanish (like the *Nova Cançó*) may find

<sup>1</sup> We have not referred here to the helpful *Companion to Hispanic Studies* (2002), edited by Professor C. Davies, as this tends to lend itself more specifically to the remit of that particular academic discipline than to the broader area of cultural studies.

themselves considered central to the state-wide chorus whereas the response of others (like the influential Barcelona School in cinema) may be surprisingly absent from consideration.

To our way of thinking – and there is little censure intended in this criticism: in a field as understudied as Catalan any consideration of its creativity is to be applauded – such editorial discomfort and hesitancy is only natural. For it is our contention that these various items may best be assimilated within the limits of their own tradition. And it is this impression – the promotion of a distinctive vision of Catalan national culture – that constitutes the principal motive for the confection of the present volume. In this way, with this attempt to offer some sort of coherence to various strands of the creative chorus of that nation we find ourselves, at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, very much at the same point of an inchoate exercise as Professors Graham and Labanyi, who remarked in 1995 that despite ‘the excellent work being done in individual areas, there has to date been little attempt at interdisciplinary co-ordination’.<sup>2</sup>

In the face of such divergent scholarship their syncretic aim was, of course, ‘the establishment of Spanish cultural studies as a discipline’, which was to bear real fruit not only in the numerous valuable publications and journals that have now consolidated the subject so successfully but also in the wider appreciation of that country’s contemporary experience now afforded students by university departments.<sup>3</sup> Our starting point – the desire to provide a more coherent appreciation of things Catalan – is considerably more modest. Devoid of any visionary zeal, we seek simply to offer the English reader a first port of call for information regarding the artistic personality of that nation across as broad a spectrum as is possible in a volume of this size.

Unfortunately, our endeavour is considerably more problematic than that of the more established discipline of Spanish Studies. One of the corollaries of the secular and repressive unitarianism in Spain of the modern period has been, of course, the international projection of the language and the state as total and homogeneous entities. To this effect, ignorance of that country’s distinct national cultures and their relevance to the creative art of Euskal Herria, Galicia and Catalonia has ensured that such fundamental elements have been left only partially appreciated, both at home and abroad, with the whole experience tending to be subsumed unhelpfully into the wider category of Spanish.

An established player on the world map, Spain has for long enjoyed the

<sup>2</sup> Graham & Labanyi, 1995, ‘Editors’ Preface’, v.

<sup>3</sup> Graham & Labanyi, 1995, p. 1.

glories of empire, historical solidity and international recognition. On the other hand, over the past three centuries, there have been little more than four decades when Catalonia was not actively 'disappeared' and its signs of difference proscribed or overlooked by a perennially repressive, centralist unit. As a result, the assimilation of its cultural voice has been severely compromised. And the fracturing and fragmentation occasioned by this oppression will be inevitably visited upon any exercise that is, like the present, geared towards an awareness of that culture as a whole.

To this extent, the disintegration experienced historically and politically by Catalonia has occasioned an identical imbalance in the sphere of cultural production and, by extension, its appreciation. Whereas, for example, a healthy presence may be appreciated in the music, literature, cinema and art of Spain, the Catalan side of the equation is riddled with voids and lacunae. And if, in their approach to the Spanish experience, Professors Graham and Labanyi identified a whole litany of areas they felt lacking from their study, in our case – that of a marginalized, repressed minority – the list could be extended by many a country mile.

However, it is hoped that this imbalance might be rectified to some extent by the attention we have attempted to show to both conventional academic subjects and also those areas more familiar to the popular experience. In this effort to bridge the divide between both elitist and vulgar poles of the creative spectrum – following the lead of our predecessors in their volumes devoted to Spain – our purpose has also been to consider how notions of high and low culture are evaluated and manipulated. As such, our spectrum encompasses the conventionally academic perspective offered by the fields of history (contemporary and medieval), linguistics and music to the more popular areas of experience that now form such a familiar part of the agenda of cultural studies: cinema, sport, festivals, the city of Barcelona and gastronomy.

To this effect, with this more panoramic view, we aspire to redress in some way the enormous fragmentation surrounding assimilation of the Catalan experience whose uneven reception may be illustrated by the fact that when international attention has focused on that nation it has generally been attracted by figures (often eccentrics) of unquestionable quality. Top of the list are, of course, the extraordinary Antoni Gaudí and Salvador Dalí, though we should in no way forget the respective geniuses of Pau Casals, Joan Miró, Roberto Gerhard, Bigas Luna, Josep Trueta, Ricard Bofill, Ferran Adrià, Montserrat Caballé, Josep Carreras and, last but not least, the institution that is FC Barcelona.

What emerges from this splintered roll is, of course, the impression of a series of isolated voices crying in the wilderness. It is our contention, however, that despite its many fissures Catalan culture is fuller and more