

Book Review: The culture of cursilería: bad taste, kitsch and class in modern Spain

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In this context, *Requiem for Communism* pays a particular attention to the gender aspects of the post-communist cultural turn in that it analyses in the respective works of art the relationship between gender and sexuality on the one hand, and the collective perceptions of labour and socialism on the other. Through the problematization of the different dimensions of gender, the author demonstrates the complexity and tensions between people's private and public identities in Eastern Europe which, with the demise of communism, are being continuously renegotiated and redefined. The female figures in many of the studied works epitomize the transformation from nostalgia, through bereavement into abjuration, which the author describes as central for the East-European post-communist remembrance. All in all, *Requiem for Communism* is an attention-grabbing and thought-provoking book, which indeed achieves what the author hopes for, namely 'open[ing] new lines of inquiry' into the collective history of post-communism.

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Noël Valis, *The Culture of Cursilería: Bad Taste, Kitsch and Class in Modern Spain*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. xvi + 406 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0-8223-3000-8 (hbk) \$74.95; 0-8223-2997-2 (pbk) \$24.95

Cursilería or *cursi*-ness is a close relative of kitsch, but Noël Valis stresses the need to distinguish between them. Although both connote imitativeness and inauthenticity, kitsch is a product of advanced industrialization and mass consumerism, and as such does not become a pertinent category for Spanish cultural life until the 1960s. *Cursi*, on the other hand, is associated with the perception of belatedness and insufficient modernization, and while it persists as a meaningful category up to the present, it is in the transitional phase to a more full modernity, from the mid-19th century to the Civil War, that it plays a more prominent role as cultural signifier.

Valis warns us in the introduction that 'any definition of *lo cursi* is bound to be inadequate or reductive' (p. 17), and by the end of the book the reader will be left with no doubt about the truth of her assertion. My dictionary gives as possible English equivalents of *cursi* 'pretentious', 'showy', 'affected', 'genteel' and 'snobbish'. As a form of bad taste associated with marginality or inadequateness, *cursilería* has been perceived variously as vulgar, obsolete, feminine, provincial or foreign. But a more full understanding of the term comes from the awareness of its origins in the social and cultural aspirations and anxieties of the middle class, and



particularly the more precarious lower-middle class and its fear of downward mobility. As a drive to overcome precariousness or marginality, *cursilería* is a form of 'disempowered desire'.

Valis explains that in the second half of the 19th century this anxiety progressively 'trickles upward' to the upper-middle classes, as *cursilería* intersects with a national sense of marginality, exacerbated by the 1898 colonial debacle. Spain in the 19th century is characterized by 'a perception of being modern despite insufficient modernization' (p. 11), and the pretentiousness of *lo cursi* stems more precisely from the desire to be modern without having the material or cultural means to be so. The dilemma of Spanish national distinctiveness is central to an understanding of the obsession with *cursi*-ness. If to be modern is to be inauthentic, and to be authentic is to be backward, then *cursi*-ness as the result of an inept attempt to be modern can be criticized from both a traditionalist and modernizing standpoint, *because* it attempts to be modern, or *because* the attempt betrays the persistence of outmoded tradition.

The Culture of Cursilería examines the historically morphing patterns of emotional investment in the perception of *cursi*-ness in persons, behaviours, objects, and texts, by concentrating on the ways in which *cursi*-ness is represented in a wide range of texts, from canonical realist novels to magazine chronicles of high society. Because these patterns are continuously morphing, and because *cursi*-ness in itself implies a temporal or spatial overlap, the coexistence of past and present, or centre and periphery, it is always a semantically overdetermined notion. This is why *lo cursi* may be aesthetically offensive but is symbolically, as Valis puts it, 'a veritable treasure trove' (p. 87).

After further elaboration on the semantic wealth of *cursi*, using as springboards the various hypotheses on the etymology of the word and its early appearances in print beginning in the 1840s, in Chapters 2 and 3 Valis concentrates on *cursilería* as a window to the shaping of middle-class identity, seen through a wide variety of objects and social practices: fans, albums, handwriting, dressing, literary salons and public outings, to name but a few. Romanticism, both modern but also dated by the 1860s, is seen as a trope of *cursi*-ness, through the practices of salon poets and the phenomenon of the middle-class craze for the poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. Here and elsewhere, Susan Stewart's *On Longing* (1984) provides some important hermeneutical insights: the function of supplementarity of belongings for the bourgeois subject, the miniature as a metaphor for bourgeois interiority, the souvenir and the collection as devices for the objectification of desire.

The next two chapters examine the convergence of identity formation and structuration of national feeling in the *Restauración* era, as middle-class anxieties of inadequateness are replicated at a wider level as feelings of national inadequateness. Valis offers a detailed analysis of the represen-



tation of *cursilería* in, among several other texts, two novels by novelist Benito Pérez Galdós, *La de Bringas* and *Cánovas*, the very last of the *Episodios Nacionales*. I found particularly illuminating the way in which Valis goes beyond Galdós' apparent critique of *cursi* society to highlight the striking parallels between the structure of feeling generating *cursilería* and the very narrative structure and figural qualities of Galdós' novels, thus adding complexity to their status as social critique and historical (and historiographical) commentary and, at the same time, pointing to the expansion of *cursi*-ness as a cultural signifier and a structuring feeling.

Galdós' *Cánovas* is pervaded by a sense of nostalgia, of feeling out of place in a fast-changing society now ripe with class tensions, political confrontation and regional demands. In Chapters 6 to 8 Valis examines several modernist nostalgia-filled texts by, among others, Benavente, Gómez de la Serna, Valle Inclán and García Lorca, written between the disaster of 1898 and the Civil War. They are viewed as expressions of mourning in reaction to an accelerated modernization perceived as 'a profound decentering of life'. Here, *cursi*-ness works as a bipolar critical concept, both as a negative trope of obsolescence and as a metaphor for all that has been marginalized by a modernization that then becomes the object of critique through ironic negation.

The final chapter jumps ahead to the postmodern *movida* experience in post-Franco Spain and its addiction to kitsch, viewed as debased utopia which both makes manifest the crisis of utopian master narratives (which it parodically subverts) and serves as a vehicle for their continuity in a displaced, metaphorized form. In this sense the *movida* 'functions as both sign and countersign of the culture producing it' (p. 283), in a way that seems to parallel the rehabilitation of *cursi*-ness through nostalgia elucidated in the preceding chapters.

Because of the semantic expansiveness of *cursilería*, its affective transformations prove to be an ideal focus point for the more wide-ranging undertaking that Valis wants to promote: a sustained study of the kaleidoscopic reconfigurations of the structures of feeling of Spanish society through the process of modernization during the last two centuries. Such a study must attempt to understand, as Valis endeavours to do in this dense and rewarding book, 'not only what structures feeling but what feelings structure' (p. 38). *The Culture of Cursilería* will be hailed within the budding field of Spanish cultural studies as a pioneering exploration of the relations between feelings and sociohistorical transformations.

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