**Flamenco and Modernism**

**Summary**

Today flamenco is taught and performed in cities around the world though practitioners perceive Andalusia as the form’s spiritual and artistic home. Modern flamenco evolved from the ‘café cantante’ period or ‘Golden Age’ of flamenco in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with its widespread introduction outside of Spain occurring as a result of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Flamenco was absorbed into and transmitted by popular culture through its inclusion as an exotic divertissement in Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s, and the films of director Carlos Saura in the 1980s. These films and their associated imagery created an impression of flamenco as exotic, virtuosic and gendered with overt connections to bull-fighting, toreadors and Romani culture.

**History and Relationship to Modernism**

A European dance and musical genre, flamenco is commonly performed by a solo dancer with guitar accompaniment. The form includes dancing (*baile*) singing (*haleo*) and percussive use of the body, especially clapping (*palmas*) and footwork (*zapateado*). Other rhythmic accompaniment may include castanets and/or a box-shaped drum (*cajon*). Dancing by men and women involves a regal and imposing comportment of the upper body, expressive use of arms (*braseo*) and hands (*flores*) and staccato footwork. Dances may be choreographed and/or improvised invoking a call and response dialogue between dancer and musician(s) around established *palos* or musical forms that share the same time signature and rhythmic pattern (*compas*). Flamenco may be regarded as a concert dance form, but traditionalists argue that its rightful home is intimate cabaret-style bars called *tablaos*.

Flamenco is of Andalusian origin but the degree to which the Rom (derogatorily known as *gitano* or “gypsies”) originated the form is part of an ongoing debate among “flamencologists” (flamenco historians). Flamenco is also acknowledged to have absorbed elements of regional folk dances and to have influenced classical Spanish dance.

Modern flamenco evolved from the ‘café cantante’ period or ‘Golden Age’ of flamenco in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which fostered the greater exposure and professionalization of the form. There followed the theatricalization of flamenco during the ‘Opera Flamenca’ period; the *nacional* *flamenquismo* period during General Francisco Franco’s regime, which saw flamenco nationalized while Romani culture was actively suppressed; and the current *tablao* period which emulates a more informal *juerga* (“spree”)-style performance.

The widespread introduction of flamenco outside of Spain came as a result of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), when many artists left Spain due to the unstable political climate. A few years earlier in 1928, La Argentina made her debut in the United States opening the door for the numerous artists who immigrated and toured the country during the 1930s and 1940s. La Argentina assiduously researched and documented the folk heritage of flamenco, conserving and revitalizing the form. Romani dancer Carmen Amaya immigrated to the United States in 1936 and subsequently toured with her company throughout North and South America. Flamenco guitarist Carlos Montoya relocated to New York with his dance company and enjoyed a long and prosperous concert and recording career. Other artists followed, including Vincente Escudero, Argentinita, Pilar Lopez, Rosario and Antonio, Roberto Ximenez and Manolo Vargas. The new Spanish influence could be seen in the modernist choreography of the Ballets Russes, particularly in Léonide Massine’s *Le Tricorne* (1917). The influence was also detectable in the Denishawn company’s production of *Cuadro Flamenco* (1924) and Hollywood’s ‘exotic’ flamenco-inspired scenes in films of the era, including *The Torrent* (1927), *Gipsy Dance* (1941) and *Fiesta* (1947). Eventually, first generation Spanish-American flamenco artists such as José Greco emerged to form their own companies, which toured throughout the United States, Canada and Europe.

The ‘Flamenco Trilogy’ of Spanish film director Carlos Saura was particularly influential in the reception and popularized aesthetics of the form. Saura’s earliest work was influenced by the Italian Neorealist movement and the sense of immediacy and lack of artifice are retained in these later films. The films *Boda de Sangres* (*Blood Wedding*, 1981), based on the play by Andalusian avant garde poet Federico Garcia Lorca; *Carmen* (1984); and *El amor brujo* (*Love the magician*, 1986) contributed to international recognition of flamenco as a distinct art form characterized by gendered bravado, brooding passion and tortured melancholy. Furthermore the films cemented recognition of flamenco as Spain’s soulful national dance form.

Saura’s key collaborator, Antonio Gades, is considered one of the most significant innovators of flamenco in the twentieth century. Gades’ emergence as a flamenco celebrity in the 1980s paved the way for flamenco ‘superstars’ such as Joaquín Cortez and Jose Porcél whose acclaim spread during the ‘Latino boom’ of the 1990s and 2000s. The focus on a profoundly self-focussed, lone dancer on stage, and the commercialization of a hyper-masculine, stylized image, has made flamenco a showy, virtuosic form regardless of gender. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries “anti-guapa” (“against beauty”) and flamenco *puro* (“pure”) movements have emerged to deconstruct the superstar image and to refocus flamenco towards its earlier and more humble roots.

Diasporically, flamenco is taught and performed in major cities throughout the world. In recent years questions about flamenco’s evolution have led to cross-cultural collaborations and artistic experimentations that juxtapose flamenco with other dance forms such as North Indian *kathak* and Middle Eastern belly dancing as well as comparisons to other percussive forms such as Celtic step dancing. Many flamenco dancers and teachers travel to Spain to flamenco centres such as Seville to study with respected interpreters to enrich their own and by extension their community’s knowledge of the form. This transnational trend and interest in flamenco fusion impacts Spanish and/or Andalusian claims to performing ‘authentic’ flamenco as flamenco communities abroad become increasingly independent and self-referential. Meanwhile Andalusia’s push for regional autonomy within the Spanish state has created tension around the notion of flamenco as a national dance form which has significant tourist appeal.

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**Moving Image Material**

*Latcho Drom* (1993) Dir. Tony Gatlif. Contact Film.

**Paratextual Information**

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Antonia Mercé, 'La Argentina," in a posed studio shot in costume for Danse

Ibérienne, music by Joaquin Nin, premiered at the Paris Opéra. Photograph, Madame d'Ora, 1930.

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Carmen Amaya

This image from the archives of LIFE magazine first appeared on August 28,

1944.

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Vicente Escudero. May 1928. Photographer: Man Ray. Copyright: The May Ray

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Joaquin Cortes

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<http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1665692_1665693_1672126,00.html>

From left: Antonio Jimenez, Cristina Hoyos and Carlos Saura in a scene from

Blood Wedding from his Flamenco Triology

Eclipse/Criterion Pictures

http://www.oscars.org/events-exhibitions/features/images/latin/part1/03-fiesta.jpg

" Mexican actor Ricardo Montalban and MGM contract player Cyd Charisse

electrified audiences with their version of a flamenco dance in "Fiesta"

(1947). The film marked Montalban's American screen debut."