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# Moving Past Franco's Art and Censorship: The Case of The Female Flamenco Dancer

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### Abstract

The Roma culture has always been a marginalised community within Spain yet revered for its performance artistry. This article explores flamenco and female flamenco dancers under the Francisco Franco dictatorship, 1939-1975. I discuss censorship under the political leader and its influence on flamenco as well as investigating the dynamics of women onstage within the flamenco sphere as seen through the documentary series *Rito y Geografía* (Rite and Geography) (1971-1974). Gender roles are examined through analysis of popular culture during Franco's Spain and the manner in which he portrayed and romanticised the female flamenco dancer. I argue that he used the flamenco series as the vessel to manipulate discourse. Franco exploited flamenco to promote tourism and capitalised on the female flamenco dancer and used the series to promote a national identity.

### Keywords

Flamenco, Dancer, Franco, Spain, Carmen, Tourism

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## Introduction

Flamenco singing, guitar playing and dancing are the three main pillars of the art form. Flamenco highlights the history of the *Gitano*<sup>1</sup> community and reveals sexist, classist, and racist ideas that revolve around the community, which I unpack below. The art form embodies the history of the *Gitano* community and underscores the contradictions of the Andalusian region. It is a form of oral history where behaviours, gestures, poetry, dances, music, and emotions all come together to document the past of a people, as well as a region. Flamenco was born from the interaction between the Roma and non-Roma or *Gitano* and non-*Gitano*s and the roots of flamenco stem from the everyday life of the *Gitano* community. It was their social reality and cultural traditions which lent itself to the corporal language now known as flamenco. *Gitano*s were a people that knew how to manoeuvre and adapt to situations (Chinoy and Lagunas Arias, 2022) and who continue to travel and settle in many countries throughout the world. The *Gitano*s have assembled and disassembled flamenco. Family structures are an integral aspect of the art form as flamenco often happens to mark religious and family celebrations, and is inter and intra-generational.

As an insider of the *Gitano* community who understands and honours certain traditions, my flamenco dance practice has oscillated between private and public spaces. In this article I write as a dance historian and dancer who was formally trained in the flamenco dance form and also experienced it in informal settings. My goal is not to oversimplify the discussion or to polarise debates, rather, I delve into the binaries that exist in flamenco and further expand on the “historical sexualisation of flamenco”(Cruces Roldán and Sabuci i Cantó 2005: 9). Education scholar Maria Cuellar-Moreno (2016) and dance scholar Paulina Ossona (1984) suggest that dance truthfully reflects culture and society and my discussion emphasises that art practices, countries and their local environments and art forms have a symbiotic relationship. Flamenco is a clear reflection of such a reality.

Andalusia, Spain is considered the birthplace of flamenco and the art form not only embodies but represents the complex, multifaceted Andalusian identity. The southern region is a land of contradictions which includes the flamenco art form. An amalgamation of the cultures which existed in Spain informed the genre, yet the *Gitano* community laid the foundation for what we now call flamenco. This artform expands a global stage via the economies of cultural heritage, tourism, performance and research, and the flamenco image circulating is a direct reflection of the Spanish

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<sup>1</sup> Gitano is the Spanish word for ‘Gypsy’ although Roma is the preferred term in English and the politically correct one as suggested by the Council of Europe. In this writing I will use the term when referring to the Spanish Roma community. It should be noted that term “Gitano” carries much less pejorative connotation than in other languages. (RomArchive, online <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/terms/gitano-gitana/>). I am using the term *Gitano* throughout the text partially to reclaim the word and, in Flamenco, *Gitano* is often used when discussing Roma in the art form.

dictator Francisco Franco's imperialist *Franquismo* values. The image of the female flamenco dancer and the *Gitana* woman have been fossilised, in part due to the *Rito y Geografía* flamenco television series (1971-1974). This article explores Franco's censorship laws and introduces the *Carmen-esque Beauty*, a term that I am using to reference the Carmen figure, who was of a lighter complexion and carried herself with an erotic disposition, and whose dancing could be described as sultry with gestures of sexual undertones. This accepted Carmen, often seen wearing red frilly dresses, was a romanticised version of a *Gitana* and developed into a product that was sold to the international community, becoming a national symbol of the female flamenco image. Examining the images that were constructed within the framework of stereotypes created by non-*Gitana* sheds light on the paradoxical relationship Franco had with the female *Gitana* flamenco dancer. Since flamenco is closely associated with the *Gitanos* from Spain, to better understand this relationship a brief historical reflection is needed on the Roma's arrival in Europe.

The Romani (plural Romanies or Roma), also known in other languages as 'Gypsy'<sup>2</sup> in English, 'Cingene' in Turkish, 'Tsigane' in French, 'Gitanos' in Spanish, are a group of people that are living dispersed in many countries. This explains the numerous other names the Roma have been labelled. The Romani people could best be known for their two identities -- "their own actual Romani identity and the one that is familiar to most non-Romanies and which is reflected by those many other names" (Hancock 2007: xvii). Romani is the politically correct term that is desired by most historians, but "the word 'Gypsy' continues to be used, and the transition to 'Roma(nies) is a slow one" (ibid, xviii). The complexity of terms and variety of adjectives used to describe the Romani culture represents the difficulty in recounting the origin of the people. Although, many Roma communities prefer to be called Roma, Spanish Roma often embrace the term *Gitano*. The image that is linked to the Roma community is one that is full of contrasting perspectives. A plethora of opinions arise when it comes to understanding who the Roma are and where they come from, in large part because of their customs of honouring oral traditions. They were an unlettered people who did not document their history and traditions in the western way that historians do today. They based their traditions, customs, culture, as well as their exchanges with others, on verbal accounts and the lack of information that exists in scholarly settings is due in part to the lack of interest in the field. The Roma have lived within the European nation for centuries (see Pusca 2010; Swoboda, Flašíková-Benová and Wiersma 2011).

The Roma community is in constant flux and although there are many character traits that follow the Roma and their historical background, what makes them unique is that they are a people without a homeland. The fact that they are a landless community

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term Gypsy can be seen as derogatory. Outside the UK, the preferred term is Roma. I use the term Gypsy in this instance to honour the author's writing.

who live among host countries, creates a mystic yet unsettled demeanour, causing them to be perceived as a 'homeless' people living off the State. Roma migrated to Andalusia through Europe and their culture finds its roots in the Northwest region of India. Heinrich Grellmann, a Roma scholar, analysed the Roma language, *Romani*, and found that it was primarily composed of Sanskrit words, with "many words still in pure form, and the most closely resembled the dialects spoken in North Western India" (Grellmann, 1807: 12). Grellmann therefore concluded that Roma originated in India but began to appear in what is now Turkey, around 855 A.D. Since Grellmann's original research scholars have gone on to develop linguistic research into the 40+ Romani dialects (see Hancock and Mulcahy 1979; Halwachs 2003; Matras 2005). The Council of Europe's factsheets<sup>3</sup> address socio-linguistic aspects of the languages and offer insights into the individual linguistic structural levels: lexis, phonology, morphology and syntax. This is followed by a detailed discussion of dialectology with a final presentation of the socio-linguistic situation of the communities. The Roma families continued travelling and settling in different European countries and some literature (see Kenrick 2007, Pusca 2010) suggests that Roma entered northern Spain in 1447 to join with the colonies that had migrated earlier through the south, via North Africa. Although many historians debate this point today, there is no corpus of primary archival sources to facilitate this type of investigation (Cañadas Ortega, 2018). As Roma scholar Stanley Brandes has written:

In 1425, they were already residing in Barcelona. It is presumed that Iberian Gypsies entered the peninsula from both France and North Africa, but exactly in what sequence or proportions they came via the northern and southern routes is still open to question. (Brandes, 1980: 53)

Brandes' point highlights the complexity in identifying exact dates. As historian and philologist, Araceli Cañadas Ortega writes for the RomArchive Flamenco section, the absence in archival materials to help locate and document the Roma journey in Spain leaves the community vulnerable to misrepresentations. Specifically, Cañadas Ortega says that because their historical context is not understood, this "has made it possible to create and maintain an account of the stereotypical and manipulated reality that underpins the system of exclusion and domination within which the Roma unfortunately have to live, even now" (Cañadas Ortega, online, 2018).

The use of Roma woman serving as inspiration for writers, painters, performing artists and others is a historical reality that has informed collective imaginations across disciplines and countries. Historian Sarah Carmona (2018) focussed specifically on the Roma woman stereotypes in the paintings held by the Louvre Museum in Paris, France and the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain. She analysed thirteen works by the

<sup>3</sup> Council of Europe's Linguistic Factsheet: <https://rm.coe.int/roma-history-factsheets-eng/1680a2f2f8>

greatest masters of European painting and says “depictions of the Romani body and of Romani attributes, whether real or imagined, serve majority societies” (2018:146) and have done so since the fifteenth century. Capsulising the Roma figure as a sexualised object is a catalyst for cultural appropriation. Dance historian and performance theorist Ninotchka Bennahum has mapped what she coins a “Gypsy Geography” (2013) that specifically traces the genealogy of the female presence of Carmen, an imagined dancer who has existed in a mirage of publications, stages and historical archives. Bennahum’s *Gypsy Geography* excavates the Carmen figure throughout her iconic operatic role and suggests that from her genesis in the ancient Mediterranean world and her emergence as flamenco artist in the architectural spaces of Islamic Spain, her persistent manifestation in Picasso’s work were all interconnected. English writer George Burrow’s literary interest in the Roma community was well documented (see Bennahum 2013; Pusca 2014). His literature created a wave of popular interest in the Roma community with Burrows characterizing the *Gitanos* as exotic and far removed culturally and socially from Western European society (Hasdeau 2015). Burrows attempted to document his experiences with them by describing their ways, writing about the community’s language and customs, and thus romanticizing them as an Eastern people living in a Western land (Bennahum 2013).

This viewpoint was not unique to Burrows as others such as French composer Georges Bizet and French writer Prosper Mérimée also had a fascination with a Carmen figure. Specifically, there were several iterations of Carmen that overlapped each other: i) the French opéra comique, *Carmen* (1875) by Georges Bizet; ii) the libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, based on the novella of the same title Carmen; iii) Prosper Mérimée’s *Carmen*, first published in 1845 and was itself influenced by the narrative poem ‘The Gypsies’ (1824) by Alexander Pushkin. Mérimée read the poem in Russian by 1840 and translated it into French in 1852. Bennahum claims that Mérimée’s quest to develop the prototype for Carmen gestated throughout the 1830s and was fed by his research travels to study classical ruins in France and Spain. She further suggests that

A stream of French writers created, on the ballet and music stage at the Paris Opéra, a Romanticized, orientalist fantasy world that existed only in their imaginations. Gypsy identity — Carmen’s fictional and onstage identity — is contained in movement and sung verse. (2013:20)

The essentialism described above is linked to a form of cultural hegemony and is an aesthetic discrimination. The image of the *Carmen-esque Beauty* has locked the Roma into the box of Romantic stereotypical tropes, that started in the mid- 18<sup>th</sup> century but was fossilised by Franco in the mid-1960s. The tendency of many people to associate flamenco with Carmen, this wild and highly sexualized dancer, is distorted and dangerous and what this stereotypical image omits are the details of flamenco

history. Therefore, before I examine the relationship Franco had with flamenco, it is timely to deepen the understanding of the artform.

### **Flamenco: a Brief History**

This writing contends that flamenco, at a base level, was brought to Spain by the Roma. It evolved into what we now know as flamenco, but that history is in direct relation to the context and environment for which it existed and in which it continues to live. Flamenco as an artform, is linked to the romantic stereotype developed in the interface between Andalusian and *Gitano* traditions (Chinoy and Lagunas Arias 2022). The construction of Andalusian identity is tied to flamenco and *Gitanos* (see Casajus, 2000; Thède, 2000, Cisneros 2010). Flamenco is dance and an art form that evolves each time it is performed. Each moment that a person gets up to sing, play or dance, they become a different being, therefore bringing something fresh to the moment and honouring its specific environment. As flamenco historian Robin Totton says, “and so, unlike folk music, flamenco is constantly changing, not only with the times, but with each singer, and every time he opens his mouth to sing” (Totton, 2003: 18). Antiquity is interwoven with modernity, and the evolving character of flamenco creates a tension which nourishes the complex Andalusian character. The identity of a flamenco dancer is not only in relation to the *Gitano* image but also rooted in the nature of the Spanish context too. Flamenco was and is an outlet for *Gitanos* to share their sadness, happiness, sorrows, fears, insecurities and many studies when discussing Andalusian *Gitanos* focus on flamenco (Chinoy and Lagunas Arias 2022; Casajus 2000; Thède 2000). Flamenco historian Miguel Angel Vargas has criticised the field suggesting that *Gitanos* are of interest to researchers when the community is either marginal and problematic, or dancing and singing, stating “art matters, but not Roma lives” (Vargas Rubio, 2020: n.p.). Flamencologists Clara Chinoy and David Lagunas Arias (2022) have also attempted to refrain from reproducing this marginalised or exotic image and suggest that there were several *Gitano* families that were an integral part of Andalusia, thus positively influencing the Andalusian identity.

Roma, a socially excluded and “emotionally depressed ethnic group, characterised by nomadism and endogamy, was of vital importance for the emergence of flamenco as a way of expressing and transmitting emotions, particularly that of pain and suffering” (Lopera Auñónis et al., 2022: 247). While settling in the South, the *Gitanos* encountered Moorish, Jewish and Spanish communities which ultimately created what we now know as flamenco. This environment that included such diverse groups of people has led to much controversy. Many debates exist on which culture influenced flamenco more and therapists Sabine Koch et al., (2019) describe flamenco as a dance, music and performance form that is based on the expression of deep feelings. Cultural anthropologist Marta Wiczorek (2018) also suggests that there is a tension with the

art form and its debated past highlighting the ‘conundrums’ linked to the former ethnic conflicts. These entangled controversies are burdened with the notion of questioning if flamenco is both a national and/or local symbol.

Despite the varying schools of thought on flamenco’s roots, November 16 is considered the International Day of Flamenco<sup>4</sup> and is commemorated throughout the world. UNESCO declared this dance to be Spanish Intangible Heritage of Humanity in November, 2010, yet, its history has a complex and often debated past. This historical reality has polarised some Spanish elites and as Moreda Rodríguez (2020) suggests flamenco’s critics, particularly during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were comprised of three main groups: the Catholic Church and its conservative allies, left-leaning intellectuals and politicians, and leaders from revolutionary workers’ movements. During the period between the Restoration and the beginning of the Civil War, from 1875 to 1936, the three groups used flamenco to critique what they saw as Spain’s political, economic, and cultural ills. (Moreda Rodríguez, 2020: n.p.) This foundational information sets the scene for the period (1939-1975) that this paper explores.

### **Franco’s Focus on Art and Censorship**

Fascism existed in Spain from 1935-1975 and within a fascist regime there was no room for individual expression. Censorship was Franco’s way of controlling the arts (Merino 1994). The entire culture was living under his restrictive laws and people were not allowed to freely or artistically express themselves. As philologists Raquel Merino and Rosa Rabadán’s research suggests during post-Civil War Spain, “all culture was passed through the censoring filter” (2004:128). That filter was approved by Franco and he chose which art practices were upheld and dictated the manner in which they were shared nationally and globally (Vandaele 2015). Censorship was neither new nor particular to Franco’s regime as the Catholic Church was always censoring dance but was not as methodical as the dictator. Ivanova suggests that “the Church supervised and sheltered Spanish dancing and did not hesitate to forbid what they considered to be too sensual” (1970: 69). Much scholarly work has been done on Franco and his suppression of the arts. One organisation named “TRACE” (TRANslations CEnsored Project) was an undertaking by translation researchers at the University of Leon and the University of the Basque Country that researched databases exploring censored books, theatre and cinema translations and the broader censorship laws that were passed during *Franquismo* (Merino and Rabadán, 2004). Franco’s regime and its censorship laws could be divided into two distinct categories: one is post- Civil War through to the 1950s, the second, starting after Minister Fraga<sup>5</sup> took office and established a tourism cabinet, which was in place until Franco’s death in 1975. After Fraga’s inauguration,

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<sup>4</sup> International Day of Flamenco: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/flamenco-00363>

<sup>5</sup> Manuel Fraga Iribarne (23 November 1922 – 15 January 2012) was a Spanish professor and politician in Francoist Spain, who was also the founder of the People’s Party.



the tone of tourism had a specific goal and this included promoting a national identity to the rest of the world. The country had a new motive, one which consisted of broadcasting Spain on a global level.

The cabinet controlled local and global materials entering the country, and were stricter towards texts, films, and performances, particularly onstage live performances suggesting that “control of text production, both native and translated, was exalted by *juntas de censura*, committees composed of Church representatives, lower-rank officials and men of letters functioning under the supervision of the authorities” (Merino and Rabadán, 2004:125). Throughout *Franquísimo*, extreme laws had a strong hold on citizens. It was not simply the types of laws that were passed, but the manner which those rules were applied. Franco’s way of regulating and censoring the country was not only shrewd but quite methodical and inconsistent. Similar to other aspects of his administration, contradictions were present within the censorship assembly. Depending on what suited him and his regime, Franco would exercise his power and in some cases allow a more lenient approach, whereas in other situations, he adhered to a very strict code. His censorship cabinet was always supportive of religious propaganda and favoured Catholic religious slogans and images. Before plays, books and television shows made their way to an audience, they closely scrutinised by Franco’s workers. Censorship was a bureaucratic process and every individual involved in making, producing, or performing any aspect of a cultural product, was clearly aware of the censorship laws. “There was also a subtle form of covert self-censorship: authors were aware of unwritten rules and they knew what had to be done to comply with or subvert the values of the Establishment.” (Merino and Rabadán, 2004: 127) Apart from having to go through the bureaucratic filter, before an artist even began working, he/she was conscious of the laws which placed a social pressure on the cultural heritage sector of the times.

With such a broad discussion of censorship laws, the understanding as to why the arts were targeted, needs to be recalled. The arts could lead to social change and oftentimes artists explored ideas that might have been different from the political vogue of the time. TRACE suggests that films and performances (including dance, theatre, musical and any other live staged events) were the most regulated with cultural manifestations likely to be subjected to control. Essentially all forms of public entertainment, in particular theatre performances and films were highly scrutinised and censored (see Merino and Rabadán, 2004; Gonzalez de Garay and Alfeo, 2017; Leyva 2018). Franco re-engineered how he used culture and the arts. For example, the writer José María Pemán, was originally not allowed to show his play and struggled for nearly three years navigating the censoring committees. After many changes and edits, he was finally granted the right to showcase his play to an audience in 1968 and published it in 1969 (Merino and Rabadán, 2004:134). Films, books, and performances were



targets of the censorship bureau and while the country was socialized by mass media, it not only influenced individuals' behaviour but conditioned views and preferences. Moreover, every artistic medium has the potential to mirror some aspect of society. As I move into the discussion about the documentary series, I establish how the films reflect *Franquismo* and its beliefs towards women and *Gitanas*.

### **Flamenco and Gitanos Under Franco's Regime**

Flamenco became a symbol of national identity and during the regime the art form was coined an Andalusian phenomenon. There was a reason why Franco allowed flamenco onstage and it goes back to the hidden agenda that the pragmatic dictator was following. Flamenco was a form of propaganda within *Franquismo* and to understand this symbiotic relationship, I must highlight the *Roma* community and its role within the Franco regime. Roma throughout history have been a people that have been synonymous with terms such as beggar, scum, vagabond, problems, tension (ENAR 2022). The word *Roma (Gitano)* brought a sense of urgency to the surface and there was an immediate response to who these people were, oftentimes the reactions being negative. The *Gitano* community throughout history, has been forced to adopt and assimilate to the host countries' identity. During the Franco regime, this was clearly happening and the threatening undertone facing the *Gitano* community was overwhelmingly present within many areas of the Spanish government. Ethnographer Michael Stewart also researched the way States, countries and policies reflected on and reacted towards Roma living in Europe.

The very existence of autonomous Gypsy communities apparently quite beyond the influence of state organs was construed as a threat to political stability and ideological hegemony, a carnivalesque incitement to disorder. As such these communities were the object of a concerted campaign at all levels of the state. (Stewart, 1997: 87)

As Stewart suggests, the autonomy of the Roma families was seen to be in opposition to the order of the State. Franco understood the power that the *Gitanos* carried with their autonomous presence, which is why he tried to showcase them using the flamenco art form. His cultural appropriation could be viewed in the same way that his politics were used. Franco framed flamenco in a specific light pushing for it to become a part of the national identity. He invoked flamenco in a frame which made it seem as though he was supporting the *Gitano* community and their art form. In reality he was using the arts as a way to show his tolerance towards a people that throughout Spain's history was marginalised and ostracised. The quote below showcases the conflicting attitudes of Franco towards Roma.

Resistant Roma artists were treated as no more than benign irritations to the regime, and more docile Roma received positive and favorable treatment in the regime. Such tolerance for Gypsies, who were, and are- widely discriminated against in Europe and

the Americas, lent credibility to Franco's claim that Spain's government was neither fascist nor intolerant to cultural diversity. The cost of such tolerance was minimal, since Roma were politically unorganized, but its purchase was great insofar as the fledgling economic alliance between Spain and the U.S. hung in the balance of such matters as Franco's respect for human rights. (Christordifis, 2007: 236)

The paradox stemming from the political hypocrisy was an ongoing reality. As anthropologist Stanley Brandes researched, *Gitanos* under Franco were negatively branded yet systematically used. Franco's society routinely used both women and *Roma* as scapegoats.

Gypsies are considered a public nuisance and are said to drain society's wealth through parasitism. Since they embody potentially invisible power, Gypsies must be held under tight and vigilant control.... For whenever social or personal failures become manifest, women and Gypsies can be declared the guilty parties. (Brandes, 1980: 207)

The manner that the *Gitanos* were quickly blamed and considered deviant was embedded in the social and political aspects of the Spanish culture. This template of stereotypes sadly perpetuates the problems analysed here. The Fascist regime permeated several aspects of society and this was also visible within the documentary series *Rito y Geografía*. Dictator Franco was careful and strategic with the image he advertised and flamenco was an art form he felt was malleable and could fit his agenda.

### **The Documentary Series Historically Framing Flamenco Within Franco's Spain**

*Radio y Televisión Española* (RTVE) (*Spanish Television*) is the national state-owned public-service television broadcaster in Spain. RTVE's activities are financed by a combination of advertising revenue and subsidies from the national government and began broadcasting in October of 1956. It was on these stations that the *Rito y Geografía* series appeared. Flamenco is comprised of song, guitar and dance and the documentary series *Rito y Geografía* dedicated three mini-series for each aspect of flamenco. The first series was *Rito and Geografía del Toque*<sup>6</sup>, focusing on guitar playing and aired in 1964 and 1979. *Rito y Geografía del Cante* followed, covering different parts of Spain to show flamenco singing, its styles and the most representative artists. It was broadcast on RTVE between 1971 and 1973. The final theme was flamenco dance and this series, *Rito y Geografía del Baile Flamenco* consisted of fourteen programmes starting in April 1975. The thirty-minute broadcasts were diverse and filled with re-enactments of historical scenes, presentations of candid ethnographic film footage, and high-quality video recordings of performances coupled with interviews by Fernando Quiñones. The series is in Spanish and does not have subtitles. Copies of the programme are stored in the Spanish National Television archives, but are also sold in most flamenco specialty shops globally and several episodes are on open access

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/rito-y-geografia-del-cante/> [Accessed on 13 April 2023]

platforms like YouTube and Facebook. This is important because it highlights that these programmes are not only accessible to an international audience, but are used as a reference point for many scholars and open to the general public in a multitude of ways. I must stress that while each series had a focus on one aspect of flamenco, the three pillars (singing, guitar playing and dancing) are interconnected and appeared in each of the series.

The *Rito y Geografía* series had a nostalgic tone as the films offer historical overviews and rely on presenting old scenes. *Franquismo* relied on an evocative past to survive, yet capitalised on stereotypes of modern day society. Film was anchored in the political rhetoric of the times and during *Franquismo*, the film industry represented many things that were in line with the nationalist agenda, helping construct definitions of “Spanishness” and how it should be marketed. Cultural critic Barry Jordan claims that arguments used to support the idea of a national cinema tend to stress the value of a national film industry and to rely on an international projection of certain political and cultural values (2000: 69). In the case of Spain during the Franco dictatorship film directors and national TV channels were not independent, and Franco was an active agent which influenced the outcomes of what, when and where films and TV programmes were promoted. Films became political tools that functioned within Spain and influenced the global market. These visual artefacts became appropriated by other cultures, which then became part of the ‘New Spain’. *Rito y Geografía* series carried with it a symbolic power which resulted in a codified flamenco image that sexualised female flamenco dancers and manufactured a specific flamenco perception. Franco took the image of flamenco and capitalised on it, distorted the flamenco art form in the films and sold a local Andalusian identity which advertised women, *Gitanos* and flamenco in formulaic manner. Under Franco’s Spain women could aspire to very specific socially-prescribed roles: marriage or motherhood (Washabaugh, 1996; Reeser, 2019). The next section focusses on women and *Gitano*s as portrayed in the series and expands on the thinking that underpins such propaganda.

### **Women and Roma Portrayed in the Documentary Series *Rito y Geografía***

In scholarly works, Franco has been painted as a being who was a ruthless dictator who stopped at nothing to fulfil his messianic beliefs (Moradiellos, 2018). He is also seen as a politician who severely held Spain back and halted the march towards equality (Brandes, 1980). Women were often seen as tied to fertility in both the eyes of the nationalists as well as politicians. Adversely, Franco used propaganda to market the image of the Spanish woman while he allowed women to be icons. On one hand he was agreeing that women needed to be good, pure and virtuous objects, but then created a sex symbol of what a Spanish beauty is and how she should act. Historian Javier Tussell (2007) said that Franco was the only world leader who, in his political

discourses, did not just “refer generally to the divine but made specific mention of particular elements of devotional practice associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary” (2007: 30). Franco underhandedly reintroduced how the national Spanish woman should act and promoted it in the series. This icon, which was delivered through the documentary films, changed flamenco forever.

Simplistic contrastive portrayals of gender roles, of course, far wider and considerably deeper historically than Franquismo. ... the duality of Madonna, the private motherly woman, verses the whore, the public woman, as if it were a central contrast to Mediterranean culture. However, while simplistic dichotomous gender imagery has been conventional in circles that stretch far beyond Franco, nevertheless Franco’s use of such imagery was so dramatic, so rigid, and so highly charged with moral value. (Washabaugh, 1996: 105)

Flamenco historian William Washabaugh supports the idea that Franco’s Spain reinforced gender roles where a woman was seen in relation to a man and was classified as a domestic item that belonged to *him*. In Spain, the male was seen as a public figure, where the female was contained, virtuous, and honourable only if she abided to the patriarchal society norms.

The discussion above started with an overview of Roma (*Gitano*) history that called attention to the social complexities of the community, where their identity that revolved around them moved from being a problem and to being ostracised, to romanticised and othered. Such binary language also enters the flamenco history conversation as Washabaugh (1996) discusses the difference between “low-brow” and “high-brow” music of Europe. He suggested that low-brow music is believed to be of the streets or in boisterous atmospheres that were alcohol-induced spaces where marginalised and economically deprived classes came to socialise. High-brow was the cultured art that reflected a more privileged group of people. While both Washabaugh (1996) and Moreda Rodriguez (2020) maintain that flamenco in the late nineteenth century was seen as low-brow music in relation to Italian Operas and French aristocracy, this language infers hierarchies of value. Indeed there is an element of division and traditionally the language used in relation to the art form was limiting. Flamenco was connected to *Gitanos* and associated with the streets, bars, alcohol, and included an environment where women were not seen as ‘honorable’. This inference that women were ‘whores’ because they engaged in such activities, was common discourse and Washabaugh writes

Proper women were said to be out of place in a *juerga*- an all-night binge of song and drink. A woman’s presence in the flamenco bars was not only demeaning for her, it made everyone involved uncomfortable and it interfered with the fluidity of the proceedings. Women were, therefore, fated to be left out of much of the flamenco life of Andalusia. Or if included they were treated as if they were men, in accordance with general practice in Andalucía. A woman stripped of her honor becomes a man. (Washabaugh 1996: 109)

Society shamed women who were associated with the flamenco circle and *penas*, those intimate and private settings where *juergas* and festive songs and dances took place. In a *peña*, everyone participated in some way and the separation between stage and audience did not exist. Flamenco historian Timothy Malefyt (1997) has described the *peña* as a space where “at times people clap hands, palm in synchronicity, sing along, and move their bodies in unison; sometimes they get up and dance. Indeed, this high level of involvement is expected from all present in the *peña*” (Malefyt, 1997:69). Furthermore, there are descriptions of the *Gitana* flamenco dance style as spontaneous, radical, and chaotic with a strong ability to improvise (see Goldberg 1995:200, 221-222; Miles 2019). The paradox lies in that women connected to the flamenco arena were shamed, while men engaging in the same activities were considered a component of the underworld, but far from dishonourable. This mentality lingered for years and the Franco administration was aware that flamenco was seen as a form from the streets and related to a marginalised community.

Franco, in an effort to promote *his* flamenco product, revamped the artform and made it suitable to market. We see this with the *peña* in the *Rito y Geografía* series. Rather than capture, on camera, *peñas* that were wild and full of alcohol he showcased women as being deeply involved in the flamenco process but in a ‘cleaner’ manner.

These fraternities or *peñas* were formed in the 1950s, formalized, licensed, and one must suppose, subjected to surveillance as were so many similar associations in Spain. ...On the other hand, *franquista* policies encouraged the development of flamenco spectacles that presented women as examples of detached femininity and untouchable beauty, and in these respects, women became powerful magnets for tourist dollars. (Washabaugh, 1996: 111)

This femininity that Washabaugh speaks of reflects the pragmatic yet paradoxical behaviour of the regime. When a woman was showcased in the *Rito y Geografía* series, she primarily fits one of four specific roles: i) The domesticated woman; ii) the woman as an upper-class consumer of flamenco; iii) the woman as nurturer; iv) the sensual and sexual woman. For the first category, the female physically not present in the scene alludes to the male being the public figure and the female being the domesticated item, that honours and is an extension of him. Washabaugh notes that “The series predictably devoted a considerable amount of space displaying “traditional” flamenco circumstances, that is, ...in many of these representations women are decidedly absent or subordinate” (Washabaugh, 1996: 112) The second position of the female image clearly connects her to the upper-class: a woman with extravagant and expensive clothing wearing pearls and furs and detached from the flamenco scene. In the series, this camera shot implies to the viewer that the female is a spectator not an active participant in the performance. This representation of an upper-class woman, displaying her wealth through articles of clothing highlights the family-friendly flamenco that

Franco was trying to portray (Cisneros 2010). The third image often associated with the female body in the series, is the woman as nurturer. In one of the episodes, a child is nursed while the mother sings, as Washabaugh describes

The child dozes at her breast throughout the performance. The camera zooms in on the sleeping child's face at the conclusion of her song. Thereby underscoring the significance of the mother-child relationship and securing a significant place for that relationship at the center of flamenco experiences present and past. (Washabaugh, 1996:114)

*Rito y Geografía del Baile* tried to make flamenco a household name and it achieved such a status because it reinforced the traditional mentality of the times. The final portrayal is the female body as a seductive “sultry lady with a carnation between her teeth and stiletto tucked into her garter” (Ivanova, 1970: 165). Franco sold a sensualised female dancer changing the negative association of flamenco to fit an honourable image. This connection to George Bizet's opera *Carmen* (1875) has become a stereotype of flamenco (Cisneros, 2018; Cisneros, 2022; Puche-Ruíz, 2021) and this figure is depicted on many objects linked with the art form and souvenirs in the country. The images below reflect those stereotypes discussed above in relation to the *Carmen-esque Beauty*. The tourist items date back to the 1960s and are tangible artefacts of this misrepresentation (see Figs.1 and 2 below). In both images, there is a female flamenco dancer performing in a long flowy dress, and the representation of this internationalized and historical exotification of flamenco and Andalusia is on display. In image 1 is the caravan in the background and flamenco dancer, who the onlooker can deduce is a *Gitana*, freely dancing. The positioning of the body gives a sense of carefree dancing in a green space.



**Figure 1:** Tambourine – Tin Plate Gypsy Tambourine toy (1960-1969). Courtesy of RomArchive dan\_00311. Rights Daniel Baker



**Figure 2:** Castanets – Tourist souvenir (2000-2018). Courtesy of RomArchive dan\_00455.  
Rights Rosa Cisneros

This image of the ‘Gypsy’ woman features in the works of many great composers and writers through the ages, thus reproducing a false image of the Roma female body and dancer. While the association of flamenco and Roma women with the *Carmen-esque Beauty*, the *Carmen-esque* figure may seem rather harmless, yet it actually reflects a deeply rooted misinformed and romanticised image of the community. Film studies historian Marshall Leicester (1994) looks at the stereotypical image of a Roma woman and claims that it is similar to the image of which Mérimée based his novella *Carmen* in the 1860s. Mérimée’s story was about a Spanish soldier who was seduced by a “fiery Gypsy” woman named Carmen. Soon after, the French composer Bizet wrote an opera based on the novella and presented it to a French audience in 1875 (Leicester, 1994). The female body, in *Rito y Geografía*, was on display for the male gaze and was seen as an object that could be consumed by the audience. Volume one, entitled *Baile del Candil*<sup>7</sup> (Dance of lamp-oil) was devoted to the first steps taken by flamenco dancers and focused on its historical roots. Isabel de Madrid dances *el Vito*<sup>8</sup>. In this scene a *Carmen-esque Beauty* is dancing on a table in a bar where only men are present. The female dancer is of a lighter complexion and carries herself with an erotic disposition where her dancing is characteristic of a *Vito*, but the sultry looks and gestures have a sexual undertone. This episode which is part of the fourteen video collection, represents how women, even in a documentary series about flamenco, were typecast as either mother or whore, upper-class or lower-class, or sex symbol or emblem of society.

The *Gitano* community is featured in the film. In volume one, the *Gitanos* from the *Gitano* neighbourhood of Sacromonte, Granada, dance a *fandango*<sup>9</sup>. In this scene a brief history of flamenco and its roots is discussed. The women are dancing outside

<sup>7</sup> *Baile del Candil*- Spanish for “Dance of the Lampoil”. This is the name of the first volume in the series, *Rito y Geografía del Baile*.

<sup>8</sup> *Vito*- Andalusian folk song and dance (non-flamenco), which is usually performed on a table. The goal is for the performer to dance without spilling any drinks. If the dancer can accomplish this, s/he is considered a talented dancer.

<sup>9</sup> *Fandangos*- is a lively folk and flamenco couple-dance usually in triple meter, traditionally accompanied by guitars and castanets or hand-clapping.



in a camp-like setting and the setting suggests a more economically deprived community. The trees have no leaves, torn clothes are hanging on a drying-line, and the elder dancers are drinking and carrying on, reminiscent of the 'chaotic' and 'spontaneous' dancer as previously mentioned (see Goldberg 1995:200, 221-222; Miles 2019). This *Gitano* group engaging in flamenco is extremely aged and their behaviour appears carefree. Highlighting this point illustrates that Franco was associating poverty with the *Gitanos*. Although it is accurate to say that many were financially marginalised, the series juxtaposes that image of the *Gitano* community, with the one of the *Car-men-esque* figure.

Not all *Gitanos* that were associated with flamenco, lived in such a situation, nor is it fair to conclude that *Roma* did not cultivate more of flamenco's history than was shown in that short historical analysis. The *Roma* contributed much to the art form. When a series titled *Rito y Geografía* is discussing the historical importance of flamenco, an art form that was born from the *Gitano* community, a five-minute historical overview which pays tribute to a stereotypical community, is not only unjust, but a sad 'product' which was marketed to the international community.

The series was a tool used to show the world that the *Gitanos* in Spain were coexisting in a healthy manner. The series is not an inconsequential product. One hundred programs of the series were shown on heavily censored Spanish television and the programs are full of irony and complexity (Chuse, 2003: 107). Flamenco became a family-friendly art form, yet the series still perpetuated many stereotypes. The films were a way for the dictatorship to make money and to jumpstart Spain's tourist industry. After World War II, Spain used dance and folk culture with tourism as propaganda (Goldbach 2014:40). Gender studies scholar Sandie Holguín (2019) carried out a comprehensive study of how flamenco was inscribed into Spanish national identity and became one of the central cultural tropes associated with Spain. She argues that the flamenco image being embedded into society influenced tourists, cultural heritage institutions and citizens alike as the Franco regime

pandered to tourists' love of flamenco, increasing the number of clubs that specialized in it, advertising female flamenco dancers on tourism and airline brochures, encouraging professional flamenco performers to star in Hollywood films, and featuring performers in traveling exhibitions like the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair. These strategies worked; the regime was able to bring in millions of tourists and their money to help fund Spain's economic boom of the 1960s. (Holguín, 2019: n.p.)

There was a desire to showcase Spain as a modern country and so flamenco was used in promotional images to help convince Europe and the world of its values. In the images below (Figures 3 and 4) are two posters that were airline adverts in the 1960s and 1970s. The posters reproduce the romanticised representations of the female *Gitana* dancer in the flounced and frilly dress, thus reflecting Franco's blueprint for his

cultural and political discourse of modernity and propaganda. Franco's image of the female flamenco dancer reflects the ethnographic travesty in the touristic and visual artefacts emerging during his reign.



**Figure 3.4:** Iberia Air Lines, Spain. Flamenco Dancers. Vintage Airline Travel Poster (sourced online and freely available)

Other scholars (see Aoyama, 2007; Vidal, 2008; Cruces Roladán, 2014; Thimm, 2014) have argued that flamenco has an appeal to the cultural tourist industry and Millán Vázquez de la Torre et al., (2019) argues that flamenco serves as a gateway to tourism. In summary, *Rito y Geografía* could have had a much more balanced discussion of its flamenco roots. The juxtaposition of the *Carmen-esque Beauty* after the historical reference to the *Gitano* community was intentional.

## Discussion

The contradiction of *Franquismo* fed into the global representation and tension that anchors flamenco in the binary that is the *Carmen-esque Beauty* or the impoverished *Gitana*. This divisive portrayal was reflected in the flamenco of the regime and it was this image which reached an international audience and was a powerful consumerist advertising machine. Franco's systematic approach to promoting a 'New Spain' was based on an imperial history, yet he was a dictator who did not allow the pluralism he promoted to the rest of the world. The arts were a reflection of the paradoxical nature of Spain, particularly Andalusia. He supported the documentary series because he could profit from it as well as market a Spanish Roma and flamenco icon that served his agenda. On one hand he was against the performing arts and any intellectuals with provocative thoughts, yet he was certainly investing in selling flamenco, as a staged art. Franco censored every art form entering the country yet was exploiting others. His ultraconservative agenda was lenient when it was benefiting his ideology, especially that one that made him money. As an example, this Bates bedding advert from 1964 depicts the bedspread in a flamenco-type dress. The textile company's use of the artform reflects the standardised representation linked to femininity and beauty of *Franquismo*. The image below of a woman looking seductively at the camera with a tilted head and a red rose in her mouth, draped by a sheet that hangs like a flamenco dress is dangerous. In image 5 the advert oozes sexual energy and there is nothing ambivalent about its connotations.



**Figure 5:** A model wears a Bates bedspread like a flamenco dress, in a 1964-1965 advertisement for the Bates textile company. Image courtesy of the Bates Mill Store (Smithsonian, online)

In Franco's Spain, geography was considered a reflection of culture. Certain elements that were characteristic of a region were seen as parts of the province's identity. These regional attributes were publicised and under the regime, Franco made Madrid the centre of attention. He isolated other regions in a manner that "Franco's elevation of Madrid to the status of social hub of the nation in such a way as to marginalize Andalusia." (Washabaugh, 1994: 79) Within the tourism division, Franco promoted the regional cultures of the country, yet in other instances he attempted to eradicate those differences. For example, Franco was against the Andalusian melting pot idea:

The *franquista* wedge was begun with an active suppression of *andalucismo*: Garcia Lorca, a pro Roma *andalucista*, was murdered, and so too Blas Infante, a pro-Muslim *andalucista*. Curiously, *gitanismo* itself was tolerated. Resistant Roma artists were treated as no more than benign irritations of the regime, and more docile Roma's received positive and favourable treatment in the regime. (Washabaugh, 1994:80)

As Washabaugh points out, *Franquismo* was a contradiction moulding the ever-changing Spanish identity. Flamenco and its Andalusian roots were part of this cultural and historical shift and caught in the crossfire. As Washabaugh (1996) argues, the problem and danger with the *Rito y Geografia* series is that it canonises this version of flamenco and fixes it as a standard for assaying contemporary performances. Female flamenco dancers were forced to fit certain moulds and dance was turned into a spectacle. The series encouraged female flamenco artists to subscribe to certain ways of dancing and as Belen Maya (2022) suggests what is seen as natural becomes the accepted ways. Maya believes that these flamenco norms lack critical reflections and merely repeat themselves and these pre-established codes become recycled tropes. She calls for a break in these standard representations linked to femininity and beauty and encourages rebellious actions that allow for gender roles and norms to be challenged.

## Conclusion

*Gitanos* were not guest workers in the flamenco field. They brought the intangible characteristics of their community, emotions, and way of relating and moulded them into a tangible circle that can be seen in flamenco singing, dancing, and guitar playing. Today, flamenco lives within a space where *Gitanos* and Spaniards co-exist, create and make a living from the art form. The commercial flamenco that has developed out of combining traditional *Gitanos* characteristics with the modern day frameworks of a globalized world, exists and continues to push flamenco to new limits. Performances can be a threshold between two worlds where the acts of the past, in the form of the present can stand in place of historical references. Franco took flamenco to a global stage but colonised it in the process. He made it available to a public but at the cost of fixing it to a dangerous symbol.

At the time of writing, flamenco is a captivating form which archives the history of a people and still reflects the messy and complicated past. The art form draws on its social, political, and economic realities and the current flamenco stereotypes are born out of the *café cantantes* period<sup>10</sup> and Franco's regime. Flamenco and the commodification of the art form has lasted but not as an accident and individuals, artists, politicians, as well as tourists have all assisted in the appropriation of the genre. Although flamenco performances allows a diverse audience to enjoy and share the Spanish *Roma* traditions, the transition from *peñas* to stage and later films, has caused a shift to occur. This reality has located the art form in a canonical loop and also made it difficult for binaries to be broken. Yet, with academic literature, artists and cultural heritage initiatives unpacking the tension and breaking down binaries through a modern and intersectional lens, tiny shifts are taking place.

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<sup>10</sup> Café Cantantes were singing cafés that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, as private premises open to the public for their leisure and entertainment, in which singing, guitar playing and flamenco dancing shows were performed.

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