
REVIEWS

Lou Charnon-Deutsch. *Fictions of the Feminine in the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Press* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. 307p.

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Fictions of the Feminine in the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Press, by Lou Charnon-Deutsch, is a book that definitely “*entra por los ojos*” [delights the eye]. Containing 192 reproductions of illustrations taken from nineteenth-century Spanish weekly illustrated magazines, especially *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, *La Ilustración Artística*, *La Ilustración Ibérica*, *Madrid Cómico*, and *Blanco y Negro*, *Fictions of the Feminine* is a book that any student of nineteenth-century Spanish culture, and indeed, of twentieth-century Spanish culture, would want to have in his or her personal library. At the same time, *Fictions of the Feminine* is an in-depth analysis of the production of the feminine ideal in the Spanish magazine industry of the nineteenth century.

Divided into six chapters, “The Naturalization of Feminine Nature,” “Family Values,” “The Queen’s Body,” “The Economy of the Image, The Imaging of the Economy,” “Exoticism and the Sexual Politics of Difference,” and “Death Becomes Her,” Charnon-Deutsch’s work explores a wide range of types of images to illustrate her thesis: that image making as a concrete social practice was used to confirm sexual, racial, and ethnic differences fostered by the emerging bourgeois ideology. Terming the overall ideological field of the illustrated magazines as “masculinist,” the text explores the dynamics of visual response and its possible role in gender ideology and relationships in the high-quality graphic images contained in them.

It would be difficult to contest the general interpretations and conclusions of this study. Charnon-Deutsch uses textual quotations from the captions and text related to the images to clarify and problematize what otherwise might appear to be innocent images, showing the chauvinistic nature of their use. Her analyses also take into account the manner in which the images were displayed within the magazine, and the juxtaposition of images on the same page.

Nevertheless, and as Charnon-Deutsch recognizes, interpretation of images is subjective and often arbitrary, and at times her reading of certain images is con-

troversial. One might wonder if specific interpretations were superimposed on images instead of emerging from them. For example, in the interpretation of F. Eisenhut, "Botín de Guerra" [War Booty], which depicts a captive woman being examined by a sultan with all his entourage looking at her, the position of the woman's body is seen by Charnon-Deutsch to be determined by a desire to give "a better perspective (for the male reader) from which to judge ... [her] charms..." (203). I find the interpretation surprising, because the defiance and strength of the woman depicted are what most impress me.

In the section on family values, one might question specific interpretations of some of the images, even as the general theory being put forward holds. Her observation that "to a casual eye, it may seem that there was no such thing as a desirable mother," in reference to the illustration for M. Fernández y González's novel *Buenas y malas madres*, is surprising. One might wonder why Charnon-Deutsch would equate primping and artifice with desirability in the first place, in spite of our twentieth-century barrage of make-over products. The image of the supposed "good mother" is vastly more sensual than that of the coquette, or "bad mother," and the obvious moral lesson of the illustration is clear. Charnon-Deutsch's reading seems to superimpose a theory onto an image and distorts or ignores the illustration itself.

One of the most interesting yet controversial sections of *Fictions of the Feminine* is the presentation and discussion of *The Bourbons in the Raw*, watercolors painted by Valeriano and Gustavo Bécquer, mocking the sexual excesses of Queen Isabel II. Charnon-Deutsch maintains that the *Sem* watercolors are pornographic, basing her views on the arguments of Susan Griffin, Susanne Kappeler, Lynn Hunt, and Andrea Dworkin. Charnon-Deutsch proposes to use the watercolors to reveal "a fuller, more accurate vision of the artists who imagined her [Isabel II's] sexual excesses." Recognizing that pornography and obscenity have been used for centuries (or millennia) to satirize political regimes, Charnon-Deutsch maintains that the frequent use of obscene imagery in political satire does not preclude an analysis of its misogynist nature. Her evident disgust with the poet of the elusive and ephemeral, embodied in the diaphanous woman, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, and her delight that he be unmasked as a misogynist, weaken her arguments, however. Charnon-Deutsch's analyses of the images make assumptions about their "power to arouse" that are most surprising, and her denunciation of the "sexual hypocrisy of Spanish society" tends to forget the humor and historical-political referents of the watercolors.

Indeed, one of the most surprising aspects of Charnon-Deutsch's text, for me, is her assumption that the images depicted in the illustrations of the nineteenth-

century journals were for male consumption. In her conclusion, however, she brings up the issue of reception, and risky nature of assuming that the images were directed to a male audience. Again, it would be difficult to disagree with her overall conclusions, but one might wish that she had taken this problematic question into account from the beginning.

In as exhaustive a study as that which Lou Charnon-Deutsch has carried out, it would be difficult not to have some disagreements with interpretation. In general, Charnon-Deutsch has foreseen possible alternative explanations, even as she may have rejected them. Her book is a useful tool that helps us to examine the beginnings of the media culture in which we now find ourselves immersed. ✿