Public Icons and Bourgeois Novels
Cultural Expressions in Francoist Spain

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Introduction

This paper is based on research of a phenomenon of mass culture as it developed in Spain during the sixties and seventies. Throughout those decades, a group of graphic artists, photographers, and advertising executives, under the supervision of a core team of bureaucrats, published 320 tourist posters for the Dirección General de Promoción del Turismo (General Office of Tourist Promotion) of the Ministerio de Información y Turismo (Ministry of Information and Tourism). That collection of posters, together with other promotional programs, triggered one of the most successful tourist campaigns ever, making Spain the first tourist destination for European tourists. The number of tourists visiting Spain jumped from 6,100,000 in 1960, to 24,100,000 in 1970, and to 49,500,000 in 1980. Tourism became Spain’s largest industry, generating an income of $297 million in 1960, $1.6 billion in 1970, and $3.7 billion in 1980, precipitating the industrialization of the country and its modernization. To accomplish this a new image of Spain had to be articulated; one that would, first, neutralize decades of ill feelings harbored by the industrial masses throughout Europe, and then seize the imagination and fantasy of these masses.

Our contention is that those 320 posters are not only a collection of discrete pieces of information, unrelated and fragmentary, but a body of images and texts formed by a coherent system of verbal and visual codes. They were not intended primarily as an ideological outlet for the dissemination of political rhetoric nor as a carrier of official propaganda. They were brought about as a piece-meal production over the course of some 20 years, and were conceived and used strictly as tourism advertising materials. But, in spite of that primary promotional objective, they were inscribed with a stylistic unity and a conceptual coherence that makes them fertile soil from which to retrieve a symbolic universe and a world view of Spain. This collection of tourist posters appears as the
most consistent and embracing production of mass communication ever put forward by any official agency of the Francoist regime which ruled for 40 years.

We here try to reconstruct the image of Spain deposited in those posters; just as fingerprints supply evidence of one’s identity, those posters supply evidence of a political discourse. Our aim is to uncover a consistent language concealed behind those glossy advertisements.\(^1\)

The contours of this language are more apparent when seen in the context of a regime that tightly controlled the production and circulation of all forms of public language and discourse. The task of exercising rigorous, ruthless control over the production and dissemination of any form of public discourse was given to the same Ministry of Information and Tourism.

The state, through the Ministry of Information and Tourism, enforced a strict censorship over the press, radio, television and newspapers, while creating its own network of newspapers, radio and television stations, publishing concerns, and even motion picture studios. State movie production failed irreversibly by the early fifties, and the State press, radio and publishing agencies never really made an impact, since the public overwhelmingly favored privately controlled media. The state concentrated on promoting its own television system and in curbing freedom of other media.\(^2\) Comparatively speaking, among those involved with these media, writers and publishers of fiction got a somewhat freer hand. Somehow the Ministry of Information and Tourism considered books as a medium that implied private consumption, addressed to the cultured and more restricted segments of Spanish society. This would make possible an outpouring of novels, short stories, and travel books, as well as novelists. These new generations of novelists were considered to be bearers of a national critical consciousness and, as such, would be able to attain a significant status in the Spanish society of the fifties and sixties. Their books, clad and disguised in the techniques and resources of their own genres, would supply a counterpoint to official rhetoric.

We will examine some of those books because they provide the fertile soil from which to retrieve a functional counter-discourse, and counter-language, to the official rhetoric of the tourist posters. Since Spanish contemporaneous movies of the fifties and sixties, and early seventies are patterned after the same social, political, and aesthetic molds of the novels, we could have used a sample of them to build up the countermodel of the political discourse of