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*Greetings from the Rural Paradise. Touristic Images of the Spanish Countryside
During the 1950es and 60es*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the touristic imagery of the Spanish countryside during the 1950s and 60s, linking the idealisation of the figure of the peasant both to the Western society's need for escapism and to the international view of the Franco regime during the post-war period.

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Introduction

In my in-progress PhD dissertation I propose to revisit the history of the 1950s and 60s tourist boom in Spain, through the visual paraphernalia it produced. I tried to gather, analyse, and classify the images that fell within the tourist phenomenon –such as sales brochures and tourist guidebooks, propaganda posters, postcards, etc. I wish to build a body of iconographic types and places that constitute as a contribution to the field of Visual Studies or Visual History. I am also interested in the process by which Spanish identity was conditioned by Franco's government's desire for the country to become a major tourist destination.

Specifically, in this paper I intend to discuss the idealization and commodification of the Spanish rural landscape. I will introduce some of the observations of foreign tourists who visited Spain after World War II, such as Cedric Salter, John Langdon-Davies or Churton Fairman. I will analyse the illustrations from their travel books in which an idealization of the peasant's life and work can be traced. I will argue that this illusion of a rural arcadia is strongly related to, in the first place, an almost complete unawareness of the political reality the country was enduring –a dictatorship and a severe economic scarcity; and, secondly, to a nostalgia both for pre-industrial times as well as for pre-war Europe. Finally, we will see that this idealization of the rural landscape also conceals a certain neo-colonialist gaze.

1. Unawareness of the political and economic reality

The first example that we will look at is a guidebook written by Cedric Salter (1953), who had been a war correspondent for several British newspapers during the Spanish Civil War and World War II. The books he published at that time, such as *Try-out in Spain* (1943) were politically charged –for instance he reproached the European powers for not intervening in support of the Republican government against the nationalist forces.

On the other hand, his guidebook of Spain had no ideological content. In fact, in the chapter about “Food and Wine” (1953, p.28) Cedric Salter explains that the poverty and hunger that afflicted Spain during World War II was due to a series of droughts and bad harvests, stating that General Franco had improved the situation among other things by building hydroelectric power stations in order to prevent general blackouts. There is no mention of the autarky or politics of self-sufficiency that characterized the first decade of the dictatorship and stagnated the country's economy. Nor does he mention the international ostracism put on Spain by the allies due to Franco's alliance with the Axis forces.

In fact, Cedric Salter shows quite a favourable opinion of Franco's regime. Among other things, he praises Franco's centralist ideology and his opposition to regionalism –a feeling that is probably based on the parallelism with the separatist movements in the author's own home country. According to Salter Franco's opposition to regionalism is a sign of political wisdom:

Franco is opposed to regionalism, and history would seem to justify his belief that Spain can only be an economic unit if separatist tendencies are suppressed. We in Britain adopted the same attitude towards Wales and

Scotland, and the American Civil War was fought, primarily, with the same motive. (Salter 1953, p.55)

In line with this favourable opinion of Franco's government, the images of the Spanish countryside that appear in Cedric Salter's guidebook don't show any signs of poverty or misery. We find for instance a picture of a group of elderly women picking grapes by hand, bending down towards the land –quite a hard and arduous task that the author nevertheless seems to ignore, since he just makes an enthusiastic commentary about sherry, foreigners' most beloved drink (fig.1).

Amongst the guidebooks written by foreign travellers in the 1950s and 60s there are many examples of this reluctance to portray the poverty of the Spanish rural world. This doesn't match with the fact that during this time the countryside was actually being depopulated due to a massive exodus towards major Spanish cities along with the emigration to the industrialised countries of Europe.

Cedric Salter's book could in fact be taken as a model of touristic escapism, insofar as it excludes the sombre aspects of the country and reinterprets others in an optimistic way. For example, while travelling through the deserted fields of Castile, he finds that the bad state of the roads is not something to be annoyed with, but an opportunity to escape the anxiety of the modern world:

But this is not the country for those who are bound to their own day and age by the iron fetters of physical custom and habit of thought. Their memory of it will be of a bare countryside, poverty-stricken ruins, and extremely bad roads. It is those bad roads, when you get off the beaten track in Spain, that make it still possible for a few escapists to slip away occasionally from the Brave New World of scientific mass murder, and temporarily join the Cid, who was barbarous enough to kill for God instead of for Oil Wells. (Salter 1953, p.86)

This positive interpretation of a sign of backwardness such as the bad state of the roads avoids any critical judgment of the reasons that have led to it –that is, the government's neglect of the countryside and the general scarcity that was affecting the country.

In addition, Cedric Salter's declared wish to "temporarily join the Cid, who was barbarous enough to kill for God instead of for Oil Wells" draws a parallelism with the idea of travelling to the past which we have already seen in the case of John Haycraft. Indeed, Salter's words demonstrate an evident rejection of technological progress. Science had recently aided in the destructiveness of war through the atomic bomb as well as serving in mass murder during the Holocaust. There is a general pessimist view of Western civilization as a consequence of this recent armed conflict and the Cold War, which causes the author to long for an escape from this "Brave New World [referring to Aldous Huxley's celebrated novel] of scientific mass murder." In opposition to the destruction that modern progress has brought to society, Cedric Salter evokes a return to the past that is embodied by the figure of El Cid, the mediaeval warrior that according to him incarnates the ideal values forgotten by the Western world.

2. Time travel

The novel *Babel in Spain* by John Haycraft (1958), which upon publication (originally in English) aroused quite a big controversy due to its assertions about Franco's Regime, proves very helpful in discovering what aspects of Spanish life attracted the attention of foreigners the most. The book, which has only recently been published in Spanish (2007), recounts the experiences and visions of Spain as seen by the Briton Haycraft and his Swedish wife Brita Langenfeldt, who settled in Cordoba in 1953 and founded an English School which is now known as the International House (IH) World Organisation. This is how Mr. Haycraft explained the reasons that guided him to the rather isolated Spain of the 1950s:

Spain fascinated me because it had been isolated from so much that Europe had experienced in the last two hundred years. Exploring it was like returning to a past which had virtues we have lost and vices we have eliminated. It made me feel like Virginia Woolf's Orlando, with a sense of wonder at living in two distinct epochs. (Haycraft 1958, p.12)

It could be said that among the things that appealed John Haycraft about Spain was the wish to return to "a past" that was somewhat more righteous, honest, and pure than the present time –an idea that he shares with Cedric Salter and many of the Western tourists who visited Spain during the post-war time.

It has been said that the idea of travelling to the past lies in the origin of tourism itself. In their seminal book *The Golden Hordes*, Louis Turner and John Ash (1975) showed that for the inhabitants of the urbanised world tourism consists in an escape from their alienating, daily lives in search of simplicity. This creates a dynamic in which the more urbanized and homogenized the modern style of life is, the more idealized will be the existence of those who live beyond the industrialised world.

Following this understanding of the touristic phenomenon, modern tourism wouldn't have started from the roots of the 19th century Grand Tour, as it is generally believed, but from the very formulation of the Roussonian idea of the Noble Savage in the 18th century Enlightenment. This process of sentimentalisation was later passed on to European intellectuals in the 19th century –as seen in the primitivist ideal that influenced the work of artists such as Gauguin–, and resurfaced in the bohemian style of the summertime lifestyle of those who visited the French Côte d'Azur in the 1920s. According to Turner and Ash, figures like Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Picasso, who used to visit Gerald and Sarah Murphy in their villa on the French Riviera, shared a certain idealised view of the peasants' and fisher folks' way of life:

As the Murphys and other American expatriates were in flight from bourgeois philistinism, an urge to idealise some social class other than the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy [began to be evident]. (...) The process of idealisation and conventionalisation was highly developed at the turn of the century but the Great War and the Russian Revolution gave it a new and powerful stimulus. In the eyes of a left-wing intelligentsia the idea of the peasant had acquired new lustre; (...) it seemed that the hope of the world lay not in the urban proletariat, as Marx had predicted, but with the oppressed, agrarian peoples. On a much simpler level the peasantry pleased aesthetically (with their

traditional dress) and morally (with their adherence to essential virtues).
(Turner & Ash 1975, p.77)

Similarly, for modern tourists after World War II, the inhabitants of the rural areas in marginal regions would represent the virtues of that noble savage, unspoilt by civilization and technological progress¹. Among these were the peasants of the Spanish countryside, one of the most underdeveloped areas on the continent.

The Spanish peasant was found to be fascinating not only because of his simple way of life, free from the preoccupations of an urban environment, but also because of his primitive way of working. It was common, for instance, that foreign travellers would observe that rural workers in Spain used incredibly old tools and techniques that were apparently directly inherited from the Moors and remained unaltered since the Middle Ages.

Another former war reporter, John Langdon-Davies, who founded the *Fosters Parents Plan for Children in Spain*² to assist orphans during the Spanish Civil War, published a book about his travels around the Catalan region (1953) which was surprisingly apolitical³ if we consider his political engagement in a work like *Behind the Spanish Barricades* (1937).

Langdon-Davies' book about the Catalan countryside contains numerous ethnological observations that speak of his author's anthropological sensitivity. However, this interest in the ethnographic aspects of the Catalan culture turns into touristic fascination when it comes to certain traditions that are seen as especially spectacular. For instance he seems quite impressed by the ancient custom of the pig slaughter. Having been invited to participate in this traditional festival, he describes his impressions thus:

(...) their guest, courteously served with tasty offal from a witches' cauldron, could not but be overawed by the eight centuries' continuity both of stone and mortar and of blood and flesh, in the scene about him. (Langdon-Davies 1953, p.46)

Langdon-Davies' remark about the overwhelming "eight centuries' continuity" of this tradition evidences his fascination about the fact that ancestral farming techniques and traditions have remained unaltered in the Spanish countryside. His description of the slaughter as a mysterious, ancestral ritual leaves no doubt: this kind of spectacle served as a sort of time travel machine for the foreign tourist.

¹ The location of the modern touristic paradise in rural or less developed areas of the world constitutes one of the *tourism studies'* current topics of interest (Salazar 2010; Picard 2011). In the case of Spain this has been mainly studied with regard to the Balearic (Rozenberg 1990; Valero 2004; Waldren 1996) and Canary Islands (Schick 2003; Vega 2004).

² Origin of the nowadays "Plan International" Charity. (<http://plan-international.org/>)

³ In fact, the author declares himself politically neutral from the very beginning of the book: "Though much could be said about Spanish politics, nothing will be said here. Some will attribute this to mere cowardice on my part, but others will applaud me. For nothing has so diminished our cosmopolitanism, our sympathy with the daily life of human beings beyond our own boundaries, as the fact that we scarcely think of foreign countries nowadays except to fit them into the chaos of international power politics." (Langdon-Davies 1953, p.v)

The ritual of the slaughter seems to have also impressed the multifaceted author Churton Fairman –who was an actor, a radio disc jockey (with the pseudonym of Mike Raven) and a sculptor, apart from writer. In the 1950s he travelled to Spain with his wife, a Spanish war refugee, so that she could visit her birthplace, a small village in the province of Burgos. In his book *Another Spain* (1952), Churton Fairman recalls his days in that village, getting to know his wife’s relatives. Amongst the photographs that Fairman captured with his camera, is a portrait of “Uncle Quico” that quite bluntly shows how the old man slit a goat’s throat (fig.2).

This kind of image underlines the physical proximity of people and animals in the Spanish countryside, which was another topic that usually shocked the imagination of the foreigner. In fact many village houses preserved the old custom where the human inhabitants lived upstairs, right above the stables, so that they could take advantage of the animals’ body heat.

This natural union of humans and animals contributes to the idea of the noble savage. Indeed, images such as the ones captured by the Swiss photographer Michael Wolgensinger (1956) (fig.3) could serve as an illustration of the theory where the human is purer the closer he is to nature.

The abundance of images that transmit a notion of a peaceful coexistence of animals and people in the Spanish countryside is surprising if we bear in mind the accounts of other authors such as Honor Tracy (1958), who actually remarked on the unparalleled cruelty towards animals that she witnessed during his travels *off the beaten path* in Spain. Within the various violent episodes that Tracy describes in her book *Silk Hats and no Breakfast*, it is the unnecessary cruelty inflicted by children that shocks her the most –an infantile violence that she herself suffers in several occasions throughout her journey. Specifically when she visits the Andalusian town of Jerez she criticises the fact that nobody seems to care that a group of children are cruelly playing with a wounded swallow –an indifference which she contrasts with the disproportionate rejection provoked by her entrance into a church the evening before without a veil to cover her head⁴.

Another example of the rather constructed imagery of the cohabitation of animals and peasants is the book *Iberia* by James A. Michener (1968), with photos by Robert Vavra. Vavra’s portraits of young peasants emphasize the physical contact with nature and transmit a feeling of innocence and unspoilt humanity.

⁴ “All at once in the square three youths came bounding along, followed by a troop of little boys, all shouting and laughing and panting with excitement. One of them had a wounded swallow in his hand, and this he threw into the air like a paper dart, when it went a little, faltered and dropped to the earth. (...) Sometimes the youth would vary the entertainment by tossing it up and down and catching it like a ball, while it fluttered and cheeped in his hand. No one displayed anything but a sweet indifference (...). The horrid impression now was created less by the action of the youths, for there are cruel boys anywhere, than by the acquiescence of the public at large. Nothing was more illuminating; and there came into my mind, as contrast, a to-do of the evening before. Passing the lovely old Church of San Miguel I had dropped in for a moment, although my veil was at home and the usual notice was in the porch about the modesty expected of the Christian woman. (...) At the sight of my bare head a little wave of agitation swept over the worshippers, like a breeze passing over a field of corn. (...) The air was full of disapproval and hostility, the attention of the entire assembly switched from their devotions to me; and to avoid causing further distress I went away. A small infringement of custom was profoundly troubling to the popular mind: the torment of a helpless little bird left it unmoved.” (Tracy 1958, p.49)

Such images as the one of the nude boy leading the horse to the river in order to wash it (fig.4) show an evident wish to embellish and aestheticise the rural way of life. Although the American photographer specialised in equine photography and was at the time working in the project that would culminate in his book about fighting bulls (1972), the way he captured this image unveils a certain homoerotic aesthetic that could be related to the classical iconography of Pan or Faunus, god of the forests. Vavra's images of young peasants recall indeed the hedonistic scenes of nude fauns and nymphs in Arcadia, the mythical paradise portrayed by classicist artists such as Poussin. While a photographer like Michael Wolgensinger (1956) does portray elderly people and beggars –though in an idealised way–, in no case does Robert Vavra (1968) reflect any of the cruelty and ugliness that should be visible in the impoverished Spanish countryside: his camera exclusively captures the aesthetically agreeable scenes, the young faces and beautiful bodies.

This process of aesthetic making-up of the agrarian existences is another feature that shapes the touristic conception of the Spanish countryside during the 1950s and 60s. Although it is a common thing among these touristic writers to express a profound admiration towards the demonstrations of physical strength they observed in the fields, this fascination is often coupled with an idealisation of the manual work itself. It is as if the travellers would find it amazing that some tasks are developed in an archaic way, but wouldn't really want to acknowledge the elements of weariness, uncleanliness and underdevelopment that this implied.

Within the same book *Iberia*, for instance, the author James A. Michener (1968) seems shocked by the way in which a ship's cargo of oranges is uploaded from the beach of Burriana, in Valencia, with strong men pushing the boxes onto barges which were pulled by oxen. The amount of energy required for this task astonished the author, who describes the scene as follows:

I was appalled at the energy required. It was medieval or worse. It was an expenditure that I could not comprehend and it continued all day and all year, men and animals working themselves to death. But the men thus engaged were so handsome, their smiles so compelling that there was something different about them, something powerful and stoic. (Michener & Vavra 1968, pp. p.8-9)

In this testimony we find both the idea of travelling to the past –since the author finds this way of working “medieval or worse”– and the contraposition of physical effort and natural beauty, which Michener sees in the men's smiles and primitive attractiveness.

As a result of this dualism, peasants were usually portrayed while working but generally showing a happy face or a peaceful attitude, avoiding any sign of tiredness. This is the case for example in a guidebook written by the French historian specialised in Hispanic art Yves Bottineau, and illustrated with photographs by Jean Dieuzaide, also called Yan (1955). In Yan's pictures we find scenes of family groups or images of fraternal harmony in which rural workers help each other and often smile at the camera (fig.5). These agrarian lives appear to be free from any kind of social conflict

or economic scarcity, and the manual tasks they develop appear not to be a source of any suffering at all but of perfect, natural happiness.

The process of idealisation of the Spanish countryside is thus a complex one: on the one hand the physical dimension of the rural tasks seems to fascinate the tourists, who link this kind of work with past, pre-industrial ages. But on the other hand the visual representation of the farmers themselves distances them from the reality of hard work.

3. Neo-colonialist gaze

This view of the Spanish peasant as someone profoundly happy inside despite his hard working conditions brings us to the last idea I would like to highlight regarding the construction of the rural Spain's touristic imagery: that is, the colonialist lens that such view implies.

In the travel books we are dealing with there are plenty of commentaries that apparently maintain that poverty is actually a blessing, since it guarantees purity of mind and consequently happiness. The British journalist H. V. Morton (1955, p.120) for instance states that the village of Guadalupe, one of the poorest in the Extremadura region, "is a mediaeval community in working order" and that the people "appear cheerful and contented" due to the fact that nobody has ever told them "how much happier they would be with hot and cold water laid on, indoor sanitation, electricity and radio." Another example is the poetic account that the British novelist Laurie Lee (1952, p.6) makes of a summer stay in the Andalusian town of Écija. Lee mentions the large numbers of street urchins that one encounters on the street, but despite their general state of filth, decay and disease he nonetheless states that their smiles were "the roundest in the world".

By idealising the primitive way of life in the countryside tourists were, in a way, wishing to perpetuate its state of underdevelopment. In fact, if it was underdevelopment that made the farming folks so *charmingly primitive*, then these tourists' rural paradise would have vanished the moment economic progress made its appearance.

Furthermore, by reinterpreting the endemic poverty that affected Spanish rural workers as a sign of humbleness and dignity, foreign travellers were ignoring the political dimension of the country's social problems. This depoliticisation of the poverty problem acquires a tinge of neo-colonialism if we take into account that those same tourists usually profited from the bad state of the economy, through low prices.

Many of the travelers that idealized the traditional way of life of the Spanish countryside were indeed behaving as *de facto* colonizers, buying villas and properties, hiring servants and usually adopting a higher standard of living in Spain than in their home countries. An extreme case would be that of the Briton Dawson Gratrix (1956), who sums up the advantages of renting an apartment instead of staying at a hotel as follows:

There are several reasons. The first the modest price of the apartments. Another is the cheapness of food and drinks, particularly the latter, when bought at the stores. But the chief attraction is, that in Spain you can get servants. A bachelor can take a flat here and not lift a hand in the house. Man

and wife and family can have a perfect holiday without any washing up, bed-making, clothes-washing, cooking or cleaning. You can see what life was like in Grandma's day. All the fun and none of the chores. Even a nurse-maid to take over the children. And all at a cost well within the reach of anyone who can afford to get as far as Spain. (...) And when you have your own apartment with your own shady verandah or patio, what parties you can give, with gin at 5s. a bottle, «draught» brandy at 2s. a bottle, champagne at 5s., and vermouth at 1s. and everything else in proportion. (Gratrix 1956, pp.89-90)

A more interesting case is that of the British aristocrat Alastair Boyd, 7th Lord Kilmarnock, who moved to the Andalusian town of Ronda in 1957, tired of his busy life in the city of London. Acting as a kind of proto-hippie, the 30-year-old Alastair Boyd decided to give up modern comforts and thus adopted the horse as his only means of transport. For him this had a very symbolic significance since it made him feel connected not only with the local way of life but also to the tradition of the romantic travellers of the 19th century, such as the British writer Richard Ford or the French poet Théophile Gautier, who rode horses around the country as well.⁵

However, Alastair Boyd didn't fully stop being an aristocrat. Or so it would seem judging by the pictures of his splendid horses being looked after by servants; and of he himself proudly riding one of his horses, with a perfectly elegant attire that makes one think more of a British horseman than of an Andalusian farmer (fig.6).

In this sense it is important to stress that the search for a rural paradise and the imagined journey to times past very rarely causes a complete transformation in the tourist's mind. In his *ritual theory of tourism* the anthropologist Nelson Graburn (2001, pp.42-47) explained the touristic experience is a kind of rite of passage that involved a "stream of alternating contrasts" between "the ordinary" –that is, the "compulsory work state spent «at home»"– and "the extraordinary" –the "voluntary experience away from home" that Graburn considers "metaphorically «sacred»." However, Graburn specifies that with "the temporary reversal" of ordinary life the tourist desires not to be turned "into an entirely different kind of person", but internally seeks a "further enhancement" of his values.⁶

To conclude, we could say that these touristic glimpses of the past consist more in a journey of the soul rather than one of the flesh. Through the admiration of the

⁵ "This means of transport may sound archaic, but there is no doubt that it was far and away the best for the terrain. Very few of the villages I reached were totally without a motor road, but often an immense detour would have been necessary to get from one place to another just over the shoulder of a hill. Then there was the physical pleasure of riding through the last country in Europe where it is still possible to find almost nightly stabling, where rights of way are so ancient and universal that it is practically impossible to trespass even if you try, and where the scenery is seldom less than staggering. Another factor was the horse's value as a passport to people's conversation and company. The business of arriving by horse at nightfall in a small town or village, of finding stabling and fodder for the animal and a bed and supper for himself involves the traveler in a whole network of people from amongst whom will materialise his companions for the evening, most of them valuable informants on local life. A car will perhaps interest a greater number of small boys but it will not achieve so effective a foothold in the community's door. Finally, some, if not all, of the romantic aspects dwelt on by Théophile Gautier, the French author who did the same sort of thing more than one hundred years ago, are almost unchanged." (Boyd 1969, pp.36-37)

⁶ This has also been noted in the German (Spode 1994) and French (Urbain 1991) theoretical frameworks.

preservation of ancient ways of life in the Spanish countryside, the foreign traveller is able to redeem himself from the collective traumas and generalized tension of the post-war period. At the same time, the rural paradise of Franco's Spain works as a sophisticated time machine through which the tourist can glimpse the past, while still preserving a safe place back in the modern, civilized world once his primitivist adventure ends. Just as John Haycraft (1958) said, in Spain the traveler could feel as Virginia Woolf's Orlando, "with a sense of wonder at living in two distinct epochs."

The logo for the International Association for Arts and Humanities (iafor) is centered on the page. It consists of the lowercase letters "iafor" in a light blue, serif font. The text is enclosed within a large, stylized circular graphic composed of two overlapping, thick, curved lines. The upper-left portion of the circle is a light red color, while the rest of the circle is a light blue color, matching the text. The lines are slightly irregular, giving the logo a hand-drawn or artistic feel.

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Illustrations:



Fig. 1: "The vintage". Salter, C. 1953. *Introducing Spain*.
Photo: Exclusive News Agency, Ltd.



Fig. 2: "Uncle Quico". Fairman, Ch. 1952. *Another Spain*.
Photo: the author



Fig.3: “Burgos: Peasant woman of the region”. Wolgensinger, M. 1956. *Spanien*
Photo: the author



No. 608, whose deep horn wound on the right flank proves he is a horse that works the bulls at Concha y Sierra, comes out of the Guadalquivir after his bath in the late afternoon.

Fig.4: Michener, J. A. 1968. *Iberia. Spanish Travels and Reflections*.
Photo: Robert Vavra



Fig.5: “Baeza. Sorting of the corn”. Bottineau, Y. 1955. *L’Espagne*.
Photo: Yan (Jean Dieuzaide)



Fig.6: Boyd, A. 1969. *The road from Ronda*
Photo: the author

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