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Review of Oscar E. Vázquez, *The End Again: Degeneration and Visual Culture in Modern Spain*

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Vázquez, Oscar E. *The End Again: Degeneration and Visual Culture in Modern Spain*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016. xvi +252 pp. + 75 ill.

Degeneration and decadence were hotly debated topics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe and because of the lost Spanish-American War of 1898 – known as *El Desastre* – even more so in Spain. In the epilogue to his beautifully illustrated monograph, Oscar Vázquez explains the importance of these discussions. In his words, they created a “vocabulary that identified abnormalcy as degenerate” and thus prepared the way for the subsequent institutionalization of eugenics, which—especially under the Franco regime—became a “useful tool for the containment, or even elimination, of undesired or more costly populations” (194-195). Vázquez admits that his work is not the first to examine these debates as there are already a large number of studies on the concept of degeneration in medical and criminologist discourse, on the flirtations with decadence by novelists and poets, and on the political movements that wanted to ‘regenerate’ the country after 1898. Rather, as an art historian, he aims to assess the impact of theories of degeneration on the visual arts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus broadening a scholarship that, until recently, has focused primarily on the rise of various avant-garde movements.

Instead of providing an exhaustive analysis of pictorial and textual references to degeneration and decadence, Vázquez organizes each of his eight chapters around a specific work of art. Thus, Mariano Fortuny’s *Beach at Portici* (1874) and José Garnelo’s *La cultura española* (1894) serve to examine the characteristics and causes of the supposed decadence of Spanish nineteenth-century art. The sculpture *Els degenerats* (1891-1904) by Carles Maní forms the starting point for exploring debates on the nation’s structural weaknesses, social Darwinism and theories of degeneration. Segundo Cabello’s *Fin de siglo* (1899) exemplifies the critique of modernist art as being decadent or even degenerated, while Marceliano Santa María’s *The Triumph of the Holy Cross at the Battle of Navas de Tolosa* (1892) is used to examine debates on Spanish imperialism in Northern Africa and the internal and external causes of the country’s historical decadence. The book ends with a nuanced chapter on Dario de Regoyos’ illustrations for *España negra* (1899), the translation of Emile Verhaeren’s Spanish travel notes, which are used to reflect on primitivism, degeneration and artistic regeneration.

By focusing on a single and, in many cases, little known artwork—which is related to other paintings, illustrations in the press and even photographs and drawings in the medical literature—Vázquez situates his selected works within their wider social, cultural and scientific contexts. Thus, in another chapter that begins with Joaquín Sorolla’s *Sad inheritance* (1899), which depicts frail and rachitic bodies of naked boys playing at the beach, Vázquez analyzes contemporary medical discussions about the potential causes of various disabilities and deformations.

Overall, Vázquez makes a compelling case that turn of the century concerns with decadence, degeneration and decline encompassed the arts. However, there are some serious weaknesses in the author’s approach. First, as references are taken from a broad variety of disciplines over an extended period of time, chronology is not always given its due importance. For example, Vázquez discusses the parody of symbolist art by analyzing Cabello’s *Fin de siglo* (1899) vis-à-vis two later paintings by Hermen Anglada

Camarasa, which were clearly unknown to Cabello when he decided to mock artistic modernism. Moreover, Anglada Camara's works were painted in 1910 and 1913, after the shockwaves caused by fauvism, cubism, expressionism and futurism had completely transformed the face of modern art.

Second, Vazquez's references to politics are superficial and the intentions of artists and authors are overlooked. It is not clear whether these oversights are rooted in a 'death of the author' point of view – indeed French post-structuralists such as Derrida and Foucault are cited frequently – or our current post-ideological age, in which political differences between left and right do not seem to matter. Whatever its roots, these oversights lead the author to some surprising and even awkward conclusions. Thus, the abandoned gardens of Santiago Rusiñol, the favorite topics for his paintings from 1898 onwards, are interpreted as an indictment against the decadence of the Spanish aristocracy. However, apart from mildly mocking bourgeois conventions or showing vague sympathies for the rural lower classes as the repository of the authentic traditions of the Catalan *patria*, Rusiñol was not interested in issues of class. Nowhere in his numerous writings did he occupy himself with the aristocracy or the supposed decadence of Castile or Spain. Moreover, he turned to the gardens after abandoning – most likely due to health problems – his activities in favor of the modernization of Catalan cultural life. Thus, Rusiñol's decision to focus on abandoned gardens can be seen as deriving primarily from personal and aesthetic motivations. He preferred to paint in the open-air – which explains why there are so few symbolist paintings in his oeuvre – while the melancholic garden images most probably corresponded to his personal mood after he had sewn his wild oats as a bohemian in Paris and Barcelona.

To take another example, the chapter that starts with Sorolla's *Sad inheritance* completely ignores what was probably the most controversial part of the painting: the monk that takes care of the disabled boys on the Valencian beach. During the 1890s, Sorolla's good friend the novelist Vicente Blasco Ibáñez mounted a vigorous anticlerical campaign in Valencia, mobilizing the local lower classes behind his left-wing republican program. Thus, the fact that these poor creatures were left in the hands of the Church was most likely presented as an anomaly that needed to be corrected. Although this may be hard to prove, the reception of this painting depended heavily on the reviewer's attitude towards the Catholic Church. Thus, conservative authors, publishing for instance in *La Época*—the newspaper that was the unofficial mouthpiece of the Conservative Party of Cánovas del Castillo—took the painting as motive to praise the charity performed by representatives of the Church. Meanwhile more progressive reviewers, such as the painter Aureliano de Beruete—another good friend of Sorolla and close to the Institución Libre de Enseñanza—preferred the State to take a more active role in protecting these harmless beings. While both reviewers may have used the terms 'degeneration,' 'misery' and 'decadence,' they fundamentally disagreed about the causes and possible solutions. Although highly readable, this book is more an interesting mosaic of impressionistic vignettes than a thorough contextualized examination of the visual and textual discourse on degeneration in turn of the century Spain.

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