From Picture to Narrative: Feminine Sexuality, the Masculine Gaze, and the Seduction of the Audience in Early Twentieth-Century Spain

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From Picture to Narrative
Feminine Sexuality, the Masculine Gaze, and the Seduction of the Audience in Early Twentieth-Century Spain

In 1902, a popular and "festive" writer who went by the pseudonym of Felix Limendoux published several collections of photoengravings titled Las mujeres glantes "the gallant women" (see Figure 1). These images of scantily clad women in "artistic" poses signal a break with the prior representation of women in Nineteenth-Century Spain; we might note the contrast between the images in Figure 1 and Figure 2, which appeared in La Ilustración Ibérica, a very popular journal, in 1897. Commonly known as the Angel of the House, the nineteenth-century woman was so ethereal and selfless that she hardly had a body. Normal bourgeois women were also seen as lacking all sexuality. Even as late as 1892, we find a seventh printing of Dr. Pedro Felipe Monlau's Higiene del matrimonio o el libro de casados "marital hygiene or the book for married men," where he states: "the role of women in copulation is almost entirely limited to suffering the mechanical intromission of the male copulative organ" (Aldaraca 60). As Bridget Aldaraca's research has shown, women's passion, sexual desire and pleasure were considered symptoms of an illness akin to nymphomania and dubbed furor uterino, "uterine furor."

It is significant that, as part of his marketing campaign for The Gallant Women, Limendoux coined a term, sicalipsis for an artistic mode for which there was no word in the Spanish of the time. Initially, our creator simply pointed to the engravings as a definition of his term. Eventually,
he "vigorous" writer who published under the pseudonym Felix Limendoux also participated in the market of photoengravings. In Mujeres galantes, "the gallant women" are presented as scantily clad women breaking with the Nineteenth-Century "Angel of the House." The contrast between the two women is evident in Figure 2, which appeared in the very popular journal La Ilustración Iberica in 1892, a very popular journal in Spain even at the turn of the century. The woman in Figure 2 is shown as the Angel of the House, a very popular and almost idealized model of the Nineteenth-Century woman as seen in many of the works of the romantic writers. She is shown as almost entirely without a body. As opposed to the model of the Angel, she is also seen as lacking in almost every way. By 1892, we find a new model of women in Felipe Monlau's de casados "marital men," where he portrays the family as almost entirely without emotion, the mechanical inhuman "propulsive organ." His research has pointed to the "artistic mode for women, Limendoux artistic mode for the Spanish of the nineteenth century. Eventually, the term. Eventually,
he explained that *sicalipsis* was any work "that occupies the intermediate point between the artistically moral and the artless sexually frank." What he seems to describe, then, is an erotic mode, somewhere between a prudish art and pornography. The adjective "sicaliptico" was readily adopted into the language to designate first this very popular series of photoengravings, and then a narrative mode that formed the center of a polemic between moralists and progressives. This debate occupied a great deal of critical attention during the first several decades of our century. If at the beginning, the sicaliptic mode, in image and verbal narrative, provoked the ire of moralists, it will not surprise us that during the Franco years these texts (along with the term, *sicalipsis*) were erased from literary history, and even the language—lately, 25 years after Franco's death, the term has seen renewed use. The literary manuals, with a few notable exceptions, continue to ignore these works, even though they played a very significant role in the formation of a broader readership, and in the development of a publishing market in Spain. I should point out that one of the weeklies that carried these novels, *La novela corta*, printed 300,000 copies of its first issues. Another one, *El cuento semanal*, printed 75,000 copies of each of its weekly issues in 1907 and 1909 (Sáinz de Robles 104). In contrast, the most popular novels of a canonical writer such as Galdós reached only 4 to 5,000 copies (Botrel 122). Nonetheless, even those scholars who propose to rectify the omission of these texts from literary history reveal their discomfort and repugnance when dealing with sicalipsis. And yet the eroticism of these narratives cannot today be considered obscene; the sexual act itself occupies little space in our texts, and it is often presented through metaphorical language. It is not solely the representation of sex that offends here, but rather its presentation in sensual, provocative, and positive terms, and the effects it might have on the reader, in particular the female reader of the time. Carol Clover's observation with respect to film is also valid for these Spanish novels: "Although our systems of censorship and our production codes concern themselves with the status of bodies 'up there' (on the photograph, on the canvas, on the screen), what is really at stake is the body 'down here,' the body of the viewer. Pornography's shame lies in the fact that it has [an] unequivocal intention: to excite the consumer" (3).
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cise, rub, lubricate.” Hence, woman as sexual

being constitutes the object of these texts; the

search for and exploitation of her desire and plea­

ure inform the sicaliptic plots, at the center of

which resides, as writer Ramón Pérez de Ayala

explained, a sistema cósmico ginocéntrico a

gynocentric cosmic system (Fernández Cifuentes

76). This feminine image lies directly opposed to

the nineteenth-century Angel of

the House—recall Monlau’s de­
piction of the act of copulation—which is presented

as the epitome of feminine per­

fection within bourgeois
discourse.

The fear is, of course, that in

reading these texts and viewing

these images, women will inter­

nalize a model that is so

dangerous to the status quo that

it will reverse the established

roles; the end result might be

seen as Figure 4. In order to de­
fend the image of the domestic,

virtuous, selfless woman, spiri­
tual directors recommended the

works of Ricardo León and

other moral writers to young,
middle-class women; yet they,

according to Luis Fernandez

Cifuentes, secretly read the

And our sicaliptic texts clearly meant to titil­
late the public, as the cover illustration of La sed de amar, “thirst for love,” shows (see Figure 3).

Moreover, the lubricious intent marks the neolo­gism itself, which in its etymon denotes the excitation of women. “Sicaliptico” turns out to

be a compound formed from the Greek sykon, meaning “fig” or “vulva,” and aleiptikós, “to ex­
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works of Felipe Trigo, one of the most influential and popular of the sicaliptic novelists. Although Trigo laments that the young ladies to whom he dedicates his novel, Las ingenuas, will not be able to read it, their participation in the readership is evinced in the notes to the reader appearing in weeklies such as La novela semanal, whose presentation states: "I desire to be a pleasant pastime in the hands of the cultured reader, and a pleasant means of diversion between elegant feminine fingers" (Magnien 13). Upon announcing the inclusion of critical reviews of recently published works in El cuento semanal, the editor expresses his hopes that "perhaps they will be of some interest to the gentle woman reader" (Magnien 34). And it may not be a coincidence that this last weekly published sicaliptic novelas alongside "books of ideas" and works dealing with sexuality and feminism, Felipe Trigo himself contributed to this journal. In his essayistic work, Socialismo individualista, Trigo elaborates a critique of his present society, and develops a program for the "transformation of woman as a social entity." There he proposes the liberation of that "ideal, and idolized being [who works] in the houses of prostitution, ...in the factories or the river, knitting or washing the clothing of the poets, and [also the liberation of] the happiest of women [who] are angels of the house.... that is, angels with needles and mops who work as the domestic slaves of man" (89). We might contrast this description with the engraving in Figure 2. Women's transformation, Trigo tells us, can only be achieved through an educational reform—a reform that requires the participation and cooperation of man, and in particular, a change in the textual models, both pictoric and verbal, that are imposed on women.

As Felipe Trigo and Eduardo Zamacois' novels show, reading is one of the principal means by which women can acquire knowledge and develop their intellectual and emotional capabilities. In many of these works the protagonist is a reader; yet this is not an individual activity, as she almost always receives the impetus from a man who recommends specific readings or sends her letters, stories and articles as a means of seduction. In accord with what the moralists feared, the act of reading leads to the sexual act, but this is the important difference—consummation does not have the same tragic consequences now: it is rather an act of healthy emancipation. Even when, as in some novels, coitus is preceded by a brief hysterical attack, the seduced woman does not become ill, nor does she degenerate into a prostitute as a result of the awakening of her pleasure. In fact, in many of these texts, the woman is able to leave an oppressive domestic situation and even enter the public sphere (as a recognized author). Trigo takes development of the sicaliptic novel as the expression of the scene.

It was an ecstasy of sound, of stars, of lights, of scents and small moans that, passing her mouth with passion, came to a scream.

And then there began an hour—an hour swollen by the absolute absence of the temporal present, achieved through the marvelous divinity; any moment was lost, found within the long, immense, twining passage with which to give her entire being, with the love tremor, the ear trembling caress, the shudder as if it had been other...She was unabashed, honeyed agony of her loving flight of their inflamed nerve to the kiss of an entire life within their mouths forget the mortal.
in love with Flora, his wife’s sister. Although Flora enjoys a higher level of education than most of the young ladies of her time, she suffers from indolence, an inability to act. This condition is caused by a pampered upbringing, and an economic situation that allows her to enjoy an unending supply of luxuries and objects, but does not allow her freedom of will or action. Several times we will find her locked inside her home without even the possibility of talking to another being.

During a volume and a half, the relationship between Flora and Luciano progresses by means of daily letters, and then through articles and stories published by the lover under a pseudonym in the Madrid newspapers. The reading of these texts prepares Flora for the sexual encounter; it excites her. And during an “infinite” night of love Luciano initiates Flora into erotic pleasure. Trigo takes delight in the detailed presentation of the scene:

It was an ecstasy of sobs and tears, of shudders and small moans that he extinguished in her mouth with passionate kisses...There was a scream.

And then there began a lethal, unending hour—an hour swollen with stifling desire and the absolute absence of what was not that eternal present, achieved like the possession of a marvelous divinity; an hour in which she who was lost, found within a sublime ecstasy, that long, immense, twitching look of happiness with which to give her being to Luciano...her entire being, with the longing to penetrate more, to fuse with him [...] whispering in the ear trembling caresses that made the heart shudder as if it had been touched by the other...She was unable to discern if her infinite, honeyed agony was produced by the flight of her loving fantasies, or by the contact of their inflamed nerves, within that enormous kiss of an entire life which, in contrast, made their mouths forget their kisses for their triviality. (195)

This description, which goes on for several pages, is far from those contained in canonical writers like Galdós or Clarín, in whose works the sexual act is conspicuously absent. The narrator views both the sensations of the characters, and their bodies and movements. The language attempts in its rhythm and syntax, which confounds subject and object, to reproduce the act. And this is, as Fernando García Lara points out (235), the scandal of Trigo’s text. It is the scandal of the presentation of the sexual act, but even more so, it is the invitation to speak of sex in sensual, erotic terms, and not in the scientific terms used by writers like Monlau in his Marital hygiene. This act is forbidden to the point that there is a lack of vocabulary to express the pleasure, as the profusion of metaphors makes clear.

If Luciano guides the action, and occupies in the novel the role of teacher, of initiator, the narrator attempts several times to focalize the scene through Flora’s eyes. It continues to be, of course, the masculine gaze, but now it is the woman’s pleasure that occupies the narrator’s attention, and also therefore that of the reader. The other scandal, then, is the feminine erotic pleasure that the text transmits. We need to remember the “young ladies” to whom Trigo dedicated this particular novel.

A few pages later, our narrator focuses once again on the mystery of feminine pleasure...
The predominance of comparisons and ellipses signals the absence of a lexicon that can communicate the phenomenon. Flora can only speak of her sexuality through metaphors. The erotic discourse, in contrast with the scientific, is thus marked by absences, silences and approximation. Sexuality has a positive value in this work; as Lily Litvak states, sexual liberation is equivalent to social emancipation (227). When the relationship lasts between Flora and Luciano, both are happy; however, in the end, Flora's upbringing—her prejudices, her jealousies, in sum the oppressive learned morality—imposes itself, and along with this, does her situation as future inheritor of the family fortune. She will end up marrying a mediocre and traditional man; that is, a man who takes advantage of his maids, who lets an illegitimate daughter die, who can't be bothered with his wife, and spends most of his time in the casino drinking and chatting with his friends.

The unhappy ending is not here the result of breaking the moral norms, as it was in 19th-century narrative. It is, rather, the outcome of following those norms; conventional morality now has a negative value. And, we see, too, the hypocrisy of the official discourse, since adultery, even between a woman and her brother-in-law, has few social repercussions; no one cares that the characters have broken the matrimonial vows, nor do they care that they have committed, in a sense, incest. What matters to the society is maintaining appearances, and in particular, maintaining capital. The novel does indicate, however, that Flora would have saved herself had she affirmed her love and rejected the social pressures and requirements, as well as her family's power over her, a power rooted in the inheritance.

The environment in which the heroine of Incesto, by Eduardo Zamacois, grows up is quite different, as will also be the ending of the novel. Mercedes is the daughter of a liberal writer, a "pagan" writer, whose works propound the merits of free love. Mercedes has read a few of her father's books, in hiding since these are forbidden to her. She advances as he advances; she follows her father's teachings. Of course, the mer­ciles, taught her, has few social repercussions; no one cares that the characters have broken the matrimonial vows, nor do they care that they have committed, in a sense, incest. What matters to the society is maintaining appearances, and in particular, maintaining capital. The novel does indicate, however, that Flora would have saved herself had she affirmed her love and rejected the social pressures and requirements, as well as her family's power over her, a power rooted in the inheritance.

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comparisons and ellipses in a lexicon that can communicate the value in this work; as it was in 19th-century, the outcome of conventional morality is not here the result of the scientific, is thus indifferent to its causes and approximation. And, we see, too, the discourse, since adultery, sedimentary, is a norm. Flora's upbringing—jealousies, in sum the social—imposes itself, and she sees in it her situation as future wife. She will end up like traditional man; that is, she will take advantage of his maids, who, she thinks, will not die, who can't be made to say everything she has read and desired; in sum, the irresistible lover who took Eva and Matilde over the edge of temptation, and whom Gómez Urquijo [her father], the prodigious novelist of sensual loves, taught her to love” (273). If the father promotes sexual emancipation in his written works, he does not do the same in “real” life with his daughter. When he learns of the relationship, not yet consummated, between Roberto and Mercedes, he locks her up in the house. As a result, she imitates the actions of the protagonists of the novels and, finally, succumbs to temptation in a private balcony of a theatre during a play—so we see the transgression of the boundary between private and the public spheres. In the end, after a brief nervous crisis caused by the struggle between family restrictions and her desire for freedom and love, Mercedes runs away from home with her lover. She leaves a letter in which she proclaims her independence: “Life—our life—you have said it is, a novel that each one of us must write; allow me, then, to compose mine” (289). Mercedes has changed from reader to writer, an act she has learned in books; and, in case the positive, emancipatory, value of this act is not clear for his readers, Zamacois, the author, explains in his epilogue to the edition of 1924: “In the conflict that is presented here, it is not don Pedro Gómez Urquijo, instinctively orthodox and regressive, who is right, but rather Mercedes, his daughter. Her revolt symbolizes Liberty, that is, the Truth: what one day will come to be” (5).

The last novel I shall comment on here, Alma en los labios “soul on the lips” by Felipe Trigo, can be read as the continuation of the interrupted story of Mercedes, since here we find precisely what one day will come to be. In this novel we watch the process of learning of Gabriela, a young bourgeois woman, who has spent her childhood reading and who will become a famous writer. If in our last novel, Mercedes “writes” her life in the metaphorical sense, here Gabriela literally writes and publishes novels. With the help of Dario, the ex-lover of her mother and now hers (again we find a kind of incest), the protagonist passes from the domestic to the public sphere—and from reading to writing. The erotic relations between the characters will develop in tandem, parallel to Gabriela's career. Dario guides her through the various phases identified by the titles of the four parts of the novel: Novia “girlfriend,” Amante, “lover,” Esposa “wife,” and MUJER, “WOMAN”—and this last title appears all in uppercase in the text. All the phases are presented, of course, as a function of the man; the character continues to see herself through the masculine gaze.

The GirlFriend phase ends at the moment of development in which the two novels I have discussed above end; that is, at the moment in which the protagonist must choose between her family and her lover. Like Mercedes, Gabriela leaves her parents to go with Dario, even though she believes him married. Their union is consummated after a lengthy seduction (when they run away...
together, they have not yet made love); and the sexual act is described in a similar way to the initiation of Flora which I quoted earlier. As a result of the loss of her virginity, Gabriela confesses to Dario the secret that she not only reads, but also writes; the “vice of reading,” she explains, has caused the “vice of writing” (117). Far from creativity. What Gabriela writes confesses to her feelings and sensations; with Dario, she begins to narrate erotic episodes. The text does not transcribe any of Gabriela’s writing, but the other characters speak of it, and the narrator describes its effects on the (male) readers—again, the masculine gaze. For Dario, Gabriela the writer was “a most seductive, sentimental and sensitive being” (119). Now it is Dario who is seduced by reading, and Gabriela is the “prodigious novelist of sensual love.” Her writing is presented as a liberatory act, an act of self-realization. Yet, Dario makes up the pseudonym that she uses, Dariela, a name that clearly alludes to his role as director in the identity and work of the protagonist. And he determines the course of action the couple will follow when she is presented to the world. Dario will remain separated from Gabriela, or rather, Dariela, when she enters the public sphere; he has decided to occupy with her only the domestic sphere where he will share the care of their children. Although we see here the possibility of an inversion of roles between men and women, or at least, an equitable distribution of rights and responsibilities, this is never fully achieved, since Dario maintains at all times the power in the relationship, he is ever the teacher and the guide.

The WOMAN of the last part is a perfect partner, free and aware, who does not admit jealousies or other social obstacles; she knows and appreciates herself—both physically and spiritually. From her reading, as from Dario, she learns to analyze her feelings; in her writing and lovemaking, she puts this knowledge to practice. That is, reading and seduction lead to creation and fulfillment. Once this development is achieved, the novel ends with the image of the couple who float on a hot-air balloon among the clouds, drinking champagne.

These novels cannot truly be considered revolutionary in their representation of society, or the characterization of the female protagonists. These embody images produced by masculine fantasy: they are beautiful, sensitive, understanding, intelligent, always dependent on a man for their happiness and personal development. In the end, the novels perpetuate a patriarchal system—they say little about economic liberation, for example. Yet, if we read these texts from the perspective of the role assigned to the bourgeois woman at the time, we can see that they open an emancipatory space for women by proposing a different model from the Angel of the House. The female characters can find freedom when they reject the tyranny of the family. They find fulfillment when they enter the public sphere. They are presented as sexual beings whose desires and pleasures are healthy.

Thus, the danger of the sicaliptic novel lies in its reading, which could awaken the sexuality of the reader, or rather, may incite her to reevaluate her sexuality. From this perspective, it is not so much the plots of the novels that matter (and of them are poor in plot, but reflecting the other texts construct. To conclude, in the twentieth century, not even in the biomedical field, as in the Dado, literature attests to the medicalized sexual discourse. Sicaliptic novels preceded them, and were based on erotic pleasure, imagining, and in their important way, may still incite in the audience. These novels construct a sensual and subjective “scientific” analysis of the sexual act, even if it is not the act itself. They do not correspond to a sensual sphere, that many may still associate with the turn of the century. And, hence, they uncover the sicaliptic novel—carried with them the dangers, the social order when they entered the public and dominated the private erotic in the place of the public sphere, and the modernity of the prior century. 

Notes

1. Just this past April (“Sicalipsis,” by Ramón Escribano) and in the charts in Granada, “De sicalipsis y apocalipsis,” by Moliner, a post-punk, underground songwriter, and released a song under the title “De sicalipsis.” And recently, the post-punk, Spanish, and dance artist Iury Lech published “De sicalipsis y apocalipsis,” and explained “De sicalipsis y apocalipsis” as a clear example of the enjoyment of the pleasure of dealing with these themes.

2. The term “sicalipsis” from the Diccionario del Español, defined as “apocalyptic,” and explained “sybaritic” or “apocaliptic.”

3. The etymology of the word has been attributed to the Greek Συκέλθος, meaning “apocalyptic” or “apocaliptic.”
sicaliptic novels, and the engravings which preceded them, are subversive in their insistence on erotic pleasure, on the physicality of women, and in their intention to provoke sexual desire in the audience. To do this, the novels use a sensual and subjective language; they reject the cold "scientific" analysis, and pretend to reproduce the sexual act, even in their syntax. And it is, perhaps, because of this private discourse, which does not correspond to the public, academic sphere, that many critics were scandalized at the turn of the century (many are still scandalized). And, hence, they condemned to silence or whispers the sicaliptic novels and images, which carried with them the danger of altering the moral order when they transgressed the borders between the public and the private, substituting an ars erotica in the place of the scientia sexualis of the prior century.3

Notes
1 Just this past April (of 1999), a record titled "Sicalipsis," by Ramón el Oso, reached number 8 in the charts in Granada, Spain. Prior to this, Sor Obscena, a post-punk, underground Peruvian group, also released a song under the title of sicalipsis in the mid-80s. And recently, poet, musician, and performance artist Iury Lech published a collection of verse entitled "De sicalipsis y peces mudos" (1994).

2 A clear example of the embarrassment felt by scholars when dealing with sicalipsis is that of Joan Corominas, who, in his standard etymological dictionary of Spanish, defines "sicaliptico" as "obsene, pornographic," and explains that the word is "an arbitrary creation" modeled after terms such as "sybaritic" or "apocalyptic." It is only in Maria Moliner's Diccionario del uso del español that we find the real etymology of the word.
Foucault distinguishes among the various sexual discourses of the Western bourgeois world and identifies the systematized discourse of the nineteenth century as a *scientia sexualis*. The public discussion of sexuality is informed by a scientific, objective vocabulary that pretends to expound the Truth about sexuality and distinguishes what is normal from what is aberrant. In opposition to the *ars erotica*, which deals with the sexual initiation of the individual, carried out by a master who imparts his/her knowledge to a pupil who puts these to practice, *scientia sexualis*, through medicine, psychiatry, and pedagogy, occupies itself with the obsessions, fantasies and desires of the individual, all of which are presented as the causes of a series of nervous illnesses and of the degeneration of that individual. Pleasure, the object of the *ars erotica*, is thus placed within the category of an illness, of a dangerous abnormality in the nineteenth-century sexual discourse.

**Works Cited**


