

Little New Under the Sun

a Few Notes on Leisure Branding

by Javier Hontoria

In 1985, songwriter Joan Manuel Serrat released *El Sur también existe*, a ten-track album in which the unswerving icon of Catalan and Spanish culture adapted poems from a good friend, Uruguayan author Mario Benedetti, who in the previous decade had been exiled from his country due to political upheaval following the 1973 coup d'état. *El sur también existe*, which may be translated as “South also exists”, reveals Benedetti’s critical position towards the tensions between North and South, or, rather, the former’s condescendence and the latter’s submission. When the record was published, however, no one in Spain was aware of that dichotomy. The reconstruction of democracy was a big enough task that required a concentrated effort. Dictator Franco had died only 10 years before and the country was stretching out from a bad dream that had lasted 40 years. First signs of modernity came with the aid of the European Union, whom Spain joined in 1986, and the real step was impelled by the 1992 Olympic Games held in Barcelona and Expo 92 in Seville. Before then, an exasperating void. Serrat’s record is also well known for its catchy cover, an inverted rainbow that ineluctably evoked a smile. The concept of smile in relation to the Southern mildness was thus put forward, a South almost always associated with indulgence and laxity, ideas that were to be emphasised by the North during the economic crisis that broke out in 2007.

Spain’s successive governments in democracy, that is, those that have ruled the country since 1975, have traditionally allowed the consolidation of a foreign cliché on Spain based on sun, beach, paella, tapas and flamenco. “Turismo de sol y playa”, we call it, one that produces the biggest income for our country. There has been little resistance on our part to avoid this. In fact, from the 1960’s, when this cliché started to spread amongst foreigners, the construction of hotels and resorts across Spain’s 4,000 km coastal line (including the Balearic and Canary islands) have squandered the enormous beauty of its landscape, a truly irreversible damage. Let’s now imagine a dystopian image: in the midst of a permanent heat wave, a plague of jelly fish settles in perpetuity in the warm waters across the Mediterranean coastline denying the possibility of a pleasant swim. Would not this be the end of it all? An interesting paradox is creeping up onto this whole system. In an alarmingly near future, with temperatures settling well over 40° C in the Southern half of Spain due to climate change, a new unexpected paradigm will arrive, as the tendency for tourism will be to head North, where the weather will be milder. Whoever sets up an air conditioning business in Bilbao can turn a millionaire, a growingly common joke says, such is the scary alteration of climate statistics.

Luís Lázaro Matos became attracted to Spain’s advertising phenomenon and the way these stereotypes function within shifting historical moments. In his first exhibition at Madragoa’s space in Lisbon’s eponymous traditional neighbourhood, he covered the tiled façade with a number of reinterpretations of Joan Miró’s famous 1983 *Sun*, “El sol de Miró”, one of the best “national” logos ever created, experts say. It was the first abstract sign ever to represent a country, the result of intense brainstorming about a possible national strategy over tourism, a

field that had great potential but that, at that time, fell well behind other countries like France or Italy. “Diversity over the Sun” was the motto that accompanied Miró’s drawing, a yellow, red and black gestural form that was unanimously acclaimed even though it also brought about criticism, like those who complained about it looking like a “fried egg”.

I like to think of Lázaro Matos’ take on Miró’s *Sun* precisely as a representation of an ever-shifting motto, one that, in animistic fashion, fictionally evolves in relation to its historical context, bringing forth a dynamic response to its times. It is the sort of ever-changing movement that was also performed by the transition from the smile invoked by Spain’s 1993 “Smile, you are in Spain” motto to the disheartening face of Edvard Munch’s *Scream*. Lázaro Matos recurs to the Munch image as the counterpart to the delightfulness of the sun. He decontextualised the image from the original context in which it appeared in 1893 and inserted it in a radically different setting: a beach. His stance may be seen as critique on the banalisation of the national identity supported by the Spanish governments and the “horror” provoked by the submission to a superficial perception of Spain’s singularities. This type of banalisation affects the image of the *Scream* itself, soiled to the extreme of becoming a popular emoji.

Another paradox soon emerged in Spain. The banalisation with which neoliberal politics contaminates every advertising action also affected an attempt to provide these strategies with a cultural aura, eschewing the motto of “tapas” and “siesta”. It is the case of Málaga, Picasso’s birthplace, at the very heart of Costa del Sol, a city that momentarily substituted the lure of the beach for a populist “picassization” of the city. A typical by-product of the global Guggenheim effect, by which a good number of Spanish cities sought to attract visitors through the promise of unique cultural experiences, Málaga started to construct a delirious narrative about Picasso’s early days in Málaga (he lived there until he was ten) longing for a flow of pilgrims wanting to taste the “scent of Picasso in every corner”. Eager to turn symbolic capital into a juicy economic return, Málaga’s authorities banalised the name of Picasso to the point of exhaustion. This is something Málaga’s artist Rogelio López Cuenca has impressively researched upon, poignantly indicating how Málaga seeks to exclusively own the merit of having “given birth” to Picasso. In the same way, La Coruña acknowledges its responsibility for being the place where Picasso turns an artist while Horta de Sant Joan, a small village in Cataluña where Picasso spent some months as a teenager, assumes the improbable fact that the young man became a genius there.

Luís Lázaro Matos’ *Smile! You Are in Spain Studio* successfully examines the realities that lay behind the obsession for promotion and visibility that governs national (i.e. neoliberal) advertising mechanisms. The branding of the most insignificant singularity turns cities and countries into easily consumable products. In most cases, it is a fragile fabric, like the motto “Smile” and its dubious *raison d’être* when a decade-long economic crisis is devastating the country and horror, as observed by Munch, is a much more solid reality.