



SUSAN LARSON (ED.)

**Comfort and Domestic Space
in Modern Spain**

University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 392 pp.
Tapa dura. 100.00 \$

Idioma: inglés

ISBN-10: 1487529104

ISBN-13: 978-1487529109

MAITE ZUBIAURRE

Universidad de California, Los Ángeles
zubiaurre@humnet.ucla.edu

Comfort and Domestic Space in Modern Spain is a necessary book, one of those (rare) international and interdisciplinary contributions to Iberian cultural studies (and cultural studies at large) that brilliantly succeed at both agglutinating knowledge and at opening new venues for it. The volume showcases four distinct sections. The two chapters of the introductory section (Susan Larson and Carlos Sambricio respectively) aim at responding to 'key questions' and at suggesting 'possible approaches.' The second section introduces the reader to a cultural history of four domestic spaces, namely, and in the order that follows, the living room (chapter 3, Davide Borrelli); the (modern) kitchen (chapter 4, Anna Giannetti); the (cinematic) bathroom (chapter 5, Francesca Castano); and the bedroom in cinema and architecture (chapter 6, Christine Fontaine). It is worthwhile to note that this section does not concentrate on examples or realities extracted from the Iberian Peninsula, but, rather, and as the introductory chapter reads, "provide historical groundwork for [...] globally circulating ideas about domesticity and comfort. They discuss what is going on outside of Spain in order to set the stage for the volume's subsequent chapters, which are

focused more squarely on Spanish social and cultural constructs of modern domesticity and comfort" (11).

Sure enough, Sections III and IV do precisely that: they center on Spain and do so chronologically. Section III looks at "Comfort and Domestic Space in Spanish Popular Culture" from 1896 to 1960, while Section IV sheds light on "Comfort and Domestic Space in Spanish Popular Culture since 1960." The four different domestic spaces whose Western cultural histories we read in Section II reappear in Sections III and IV: only here, we move from 'international' living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms, to (in Section III) a brief history of domestic space in early Spanish cinema (chapter 7, Jorge Gorostiza); the modernization and mechanization of the kitchen in Spanish cinema in the forties and sixties (chapter 8, Alba Zarza-Arribas); the bathroom in Spanish Cinema and the Press during the Franco Regime (chapter 9, Josefina González Cubero); the cinematic living room in 1950s Spain (chapter 10, Adam L. Winkel); and exposed intimacies and bedrooms in Spanish cinema, from 1939 to 1960 (chapter 11, Ana Fernández-Cebrián). Section IV follows a similar domestic tour. Here, we enter Almodóvar's kitchens (chapter 12, Juan Deltell Pastor); the bathroom as a space of regeneration in Post-Franco cinema (chapter 13, Marta Peris); couches in the late Franco comedy (chapter 14, Jorge Pérez); bedroom fantasies in 1960s Spain (chapter 15, Juan F. Egea); and gendered comfort in Pedro Almodóvar's *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (epilogue, Sally Faulkner).

The volume reviewed here asks a fundamental question only 'simple' in appearance, namely, and as formulated by Susan Larson in the introduction, "Where do private, intimate spaces begin and end when we live and work in increasingly mediatized and multi-purpose rooms within our homes?" Or, "to put it succinctly: *what does it mean to be at home?*" The truth is, Larson goes a step further, for her question for the different contributors to her edited volume is, *what does it mean to be at home in (modern) Spain?* Certainly, the different chapters are highly successful at offering widely different and rich answers. Moreover, the book's 'double' structuring principle—it is organized around time, for it chronologically traverses Spanish culture from the turn of the century to the second half of the Twentieth century; but it is also organized around a spatial axis, since it centers on four paradigmatic domestic sites—has proven particularly skilled at revealing the multifarious complexity of Iberian domesticity, and also at keeping the curiosity of the reader alive. Let us face it: any volume that includes domestic spaces invites voyeurism, invites gossip, but gossipers and voyeurs this time will feast on nothing else but nuanced sophistication.

Comfort and Domestic Space in Modern Spain and its all-important questions about the pandemic-imposed blurring of boundaries between the private and the public could

not have existed before COVID19, as the introduction openly 'confesses,' and, I dare to say, could not have existed without Pedro Almodóvar's revolutionary cinematic portrayal of domestic interiors either. Suddenly, Almodóvar and the Pandemic join forces, and the Spanish 'home' – with emphasis on 'Spanish' – acquires protagonism on its own. Editor Susan Larson clearly tackles the issue of Iberian non-fitting stance ('Spain is different'), in the sense that the point of departure for her reasoning- visible in her excellent introduction, but also in the content and structure of the volume- is precisely to differentiate Spanish domesticity from other Western models. Even 'comfort,' the word and concept highlighted in the title, has a distinctively 'foreign' flair. Let me explain: 'Comfort' comes naturally in English, and one expects homes to be comfortable, and cozy. But...the emphasis on cozy intimacy, or what Germans would call 'gemütlich,' so intrinsically relevant to the 'essence' of Victorian England or Biedermeier Germany, for example, is not as essential or defining in Spanish culture. The austerity of the so-called 'mueble castellano' (Castilian furniture) does not speak of comfort, but of 'patriotic' subdued elegance, for example. In many ways, the 'typical' (and centralist) Spanish interior design caters to dignified restraint, where hard wood and rigid lines prevail. Often, the softer elements (padded chairs, curvy furniture, cushiony sofas, in sum, all that is 'comfortable') are imported goods, or are perceived, even decried, as such. But then, of course, Almodóvar changes everything, and his over-the-top interiors, which seem so 'anti-Spanish,' are now 'hyper-Spanish.'

Comfort and Domestic Space in Modern Spain acknowledges the historical evolution of Western (Spain not included) domesticity (as delineated by Witold Rybcynski in his book, *Home. A Short Story of an Idea*, extensively quoted in the introduction), in the same way it acknowledges the 'non-Spanish' cultural histories of the living room, the kitchen, the bathroom, and the bedroom in Section II of the volume. It uses 'foreign' cultural history and 'international' domesticity as 'historical groundwork' to propel us into Iberian territory. And it works: for it allows us to see the similar and the dissimilar, the Spanish *Wiederaufbau* hand in hand with the German one (perhaps), but also the (discomforting) idiosyncrasy of Franco's 'catholic home,' 'made in Spain' only. *Comfort and Domestic Space in Modern Spain* is an indispensable book, a foundational tour de force that is introducing new 'ways of seeing' and comprehending Iberian domesticity (and beyond).

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_zarch/zarch.20252411651