Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Jo Labanyi

book review of

The End Again: Degeneration and Visual Culture in Modern Spain
by Oscar E. Vázquez

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021)

Citation: Jo Labanyi, book review of *The End Again: Degeneration and Visual Culture in Modern Spain* by Oscar E. Vázquez, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.3.13>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Oscar E. Vázquez,
The End Again: Degeneration and Visual Culture in Modern Spain.
University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.
251 pp.; 28 color and 47 b&w illus.; bibliography; notes; index.
\$84.95 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-0-271-07121-3

The topic of degeneration has been widely studied with reference to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spanish literature, but much less studied with regard to the visual arts of the period. Oscar Vázquez draws widely on these existing studies and on the European discourse of degeneration generally, as well as on an impressively varied range of primary texts (visual and verbal) that make this book a significant contribution to the cultural history of Spain. The book's original research earned it the 2018 Eleanor Tufts Award from the American Society for Hispanic Art Historical Studies. It demonstrates that a detailed knowledge of the discourse of degeneration and the visual production of the time adds to our understanding of both, for the two are shown to be inseparably entwined. Vázquez makes good use of Raymond Williams's understanding of the multi-temporality of culture to show how residual, dominant, and emergent forms coexist in a complicated and sometimes contradictory manner. *The End Again* is primarily concerned with the residual and the emergent for its topic is (feared) endings and (hoped for) beginnings.

This is not a conventional history of fin-de-siècle Spanish art providing the reader with an overview of representative tendencies; the patterns that emerge from Vázquez's study will look unfamiliar in at least some respects to many readers. As he notes, readers will not find detailed analysis of the vanguard currents for which Spanish (including Catalan) painting of the early twenty-first century is best known (10). But, at the same time, he insists that Spanish modernisms (in the plural, encompassing Catalan *modernisme*, Spanish *modernismo*, and modernism in its broader English-language meaning) cannot be understood without a knowledge of the specific preoccupation—in visual culture and in contemporaneous discourse (artistic, literary, medical, criminological, political)—with degeneration in all areas of Spanish life and cultural production. That preoccupation is traced from 1874 to 1923, focusing mainly on the 1890s and early 1900s, when it was at its most intense; the worry about endings is very much a fin-de-siècle matter. Vázquez separates this concern into two facets: worries about decadence (a falling away from previous preeminence) and worries about degeneration (evolutionary throwbacks to earlier stages of evolution). Although the

book's subtitle uses the term "degeneration," it discusses decadence as well since from the mid-nineteenth century, as Vázquez notes, the two terms tend to become conflated (6). Nonetheless, the distinction Vázquez establishes between the two terms (one pre-Darwinian, the other post-Darwinian) is important. Decadence allows Spaniards to be proud of their past, even if they are pessimistic about the present and future; decadence can also be overcome. Degeneration—and especially its medical and criminological offshoot "degeneracy"—suggests a biological flaw, increasingly viewed as inherited, against which social and environmental remedies seem ineffective—hence the turn, in the early twentieth century, to eugenics, which Vázquez sketches out in his epilogue. One of the book's major contributions is its analysis of how the biologically conceived concept of degeneration plays out in artistic depictions of the body.

While Vázquez pays due attention to the blow to national pride produced by Spain's humiliating naval defeat by the United States in the Spanish-American War of 1898, which resulted in the loss of Spain's last American and Asian colonies (and, especially galling, the US's takeover of Puerto Rico and the Philippines, with a theoretically independent Cuba subject to US supervision), he rightly does not let this event overshadow the whole debate on Spain's decline. There is a tendency to write the history of late nineteenth-century Spain as if it were overdetermined by the events of 1898, but, while Spaniards were keenly aware of the wars of independence in Cuba and (to a lesser extent) the more remote Philippines, they could not have predicted in advance that they would be replaced on the imperial stage by the United States in a major geopolitical shift. Vázquez shows that the concern with decadence dates back some three decades to the 1870s, and that degeneration became a central topic of debate in Spain from the 1880s, in the wake of discussions on Darwin's theory of evolution, which made biology the basis of historical progress and abolished the divide between the human and the animal, and on Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso's linking of criminality with evolutionary regression (atavism). Vázquez notes that these concerns were not unique to Spain but that they took on a particular urgency in that country given the Black Legend attached to its history and late nineteenth-century notions of the racial inferiority of Mediterranean peoples (3, 4).

The structure of the book is ingenious. Each chapter hangs on one word (Fragmentation; Suture; Exhaustion; Parody; Containment; (Dis)inheritance; Decay; Displacements) and on one artwork (in one case, two) that is used as a trampoline from which the argument takes off into broader discussion in relation to a range of discourses and artistic production (largely but not exclusively Spanish). In selecting an individual artwork on which to hang each chapter, Vázquez has avoided the art-historical canon, opting for a less familiar work by a well-known artist, or a work by an artist who is little known. In keeping with the aim of showing the cultural significance of lesser known visual production, the works analyzed go beyond painting to include sculpture, monuments, drawings, and assorted mechanically reproduced illustrations; particularly good use is made of cartoons published in satirical magazines, which blossomed during the period. The large amount of material taken from the illustrated press not only bears witness to the meticulous archival research that underpins the book, but also allows Vázquez to base his arguments on images that were widely circulated at the time.

The introduction argues that the concepts of degeneration and regeneration go hand-in-hand, and that both suppose a linear view of history; by being regarded as an abnormality, evolutionary regression confirmed the norm of progress through its deviation from it. This marks another difference with regard to the earlier concept of decadence, aligned with the notion of the inevitable rise and fall of civilizations, which supposed that decline was part of a cyclical historical pattern whereby decay would, at some point, be followed by rebirth. While anxieties about degeneration were the other side of a desire for regeneration, there are moments in the book that imply that degeneration was seen as necessarily leading to regeneration, just as decay leads to rebirth. That such a view was present (if it was) could sometimes have been argued in more detail, for the pairings decay-rebirth and degeneration-regeneration do not operate in the same way; indeed, if degeneration caused so much anxiety it was because it was generally associated with terminal decline. Although the jacket blurb announces that the book is concerned with both “endings” and “beginnings,” it was sometimes not clear to me where the beginnings are; the worries about endings produced some very original art, but I wasn’t always sure whether some kind of social regeneration was also involved. (In some chapters it is made clear that the beginnings identified are purely artistic.) My only other quibble is over the book’s title, *The End Again* (also the subtitle of the epilogue). While the phrase is neat, I wasn’t sure what “again” refers to. The book does not draw parallels with earlier periods when similar anxieties about endings were current in Spain (as they were in the late seventeenth century, for example, as Spain’s empire led to inflation and bankruptcy); its strength is precisely that, thanks to rigorous archival research, it shows the specificity of the particular late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century moment that it explores.

Chapter 1 centers on Marià Fortuny’s little-known landscape painting, *Beach at Portisi* (1873–74), as the trigger for a discussion of contemporaneous anxieties about the supposed decadence of the arts in Spain. Here, the concept of (artistic) beginnings is clear, since the painting’s free brushwork marks it out as a break with Fortuny’s earlier work. Vázquez reads this artistic renewal (cut short by Fortuny’s premature death a few months later) as the expression, through the painting’s empty horizon and the sense of off-frame space created by the vertical canvas, of a melancholic sense of loss—a reading supported by art critics of the time. Vázquez ties this melancholy to contemporaneous debates about the loss of Spain’s great Golden Age artistic tradition, which he sees as underlying the enormous public attention given to Fortuny’s early death in Italy, resulting in his heart being returned to Spain and buried in his Catalan birthplace, Reus. Fortuny’s untimely death, he suggests, represented the loss of a Spanish artistic renewal that might have been.

Chapter 2 takes further the topic of Spain’s supposed artistic decadence by focusing on two little-known academic paintings that depict a temple-like space peopled with glorious cultural figures from the national past: José Garnelo y Alda’s *Spanish Culture* (1894) and Luis García Sampedro’s *Allegory of Spanish Culture* (1894), winners of the first and second prizes at the National Art Exhibition announced the previous year. These paintings—culturally fascinating although stylistically outdated—serve as the pretext for a wide-ranging discussion of contemporaneous architectural debates, which disagreed over whether a “Spanish school” should or should not incorporate regional styles or styles deriving from foreign influence or invasion (e.g. Roman, Visigothic, Romanesque, Arabic/Mudéjar). Vázquez intelligently links the concern with the construction of a “Spanish school” to

political debates over increasingly nationalist movements in Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia (the adjective “separatist” [47] seems anachronistic here). As Vázquez notes, the predilection for classical (Roman) monumental architecture ironically supposed that the “birth of Spanish civilization” took place “under Roman colonial rule” (50).

The third chapter moves from anxieties about the decadence of Spanish art to the artistic depiction of degenerate figures, represented here by the Catalan sculptor Carles Maní y Roig’s plaster statue *The Degenerates* (1891–1904), known today only through photographs. The statue depicts two abject, larger-than-life humanoid (or perhaps simian) figures with featureless faces. As Vázquez notes, the indeterminacy renders these figures sort-of but not-quite human. This leads Vázquez into a fascinating discussion of cartoons and prints depicting apes or the ascent from animal to human or vice versa. One King Kong-like sculpture of a gorilla abducting a naked woman leads into analysis of contemporaneous debates on the relationship between atavism and criminality, and of contrasting depictions of a brutish or effeminate masculinity (the former associated with the lower classes and non-white races; the latter with artists). Vázquez connects these debates to the contemporaneous vogue in France and Spain for Egyptian antiquity, which he sees as linking the fear of, and fascination with, the primitive to a nascent artistic primitivism—that is, the primitive as a marker of artistic modernity. The freewheeling argument in this chapter is hugely suggestive.

Chapter 4 brings in issues of class and gender. It centers on a virtually unknown painting, *Fin-de-siècle* (1899) by Segundo Cabello Izarra, which mocks Symbolist art by placing in front of the canvas in the artist’s studio not the artist but a laborer, with a bemused expression on his face. This triggers a discussion of the reception of artworks by critics who used the language of degeneration to slate modern works that were not to their taste, as well as to lambast audiences. This leads into a discussion of the limited exhibition spaces available to artists in Spain, particularly for women—though sixty-four female painters, out of a total of 497, were featured in the 1899 National Art Exhibition (93); I was left eager for more information on this.

The fifth chapter, which tackles colonialism, hinges on one of the spectacular history paintings encouraged by the National Art Exhibitions of the second half of the nineteenth century: Marceliano Santa María’s 15x21-foot *Triumph of the Holy Cross at the Battle of Navas de Tolosa* (1892). Although included in the Prado’s 1992 exhibition of nineteenth-century Spanish history painting,^[1] this work has been little discussed, probably—as Vázquez suggests—because of its explicit racism, expressed through the opposition between black and white created by its depiction of a Christian knight on a white horse leaping over a mass of naked sub-Saharan Africans (probably slaves) chained together to form a human barrier. As Vázquez rightly observes, this stark racism contrasts with the ambivalence of previous nineteenth-century Spanish history paintings’ portrayal of the Christian Reconquest. He attributes this change of attitude to the Reconquest to the fact that the painting coincides with the outbreak of hostilities in Melilla that would lead to Spain’s first Rif War of 1893; by alleging that the Muslim army used Black slaves as a human barrier (for which there is scant historical evidence), the painting justifies present-day colonial conquest by constructing Islam as barbaric. This is a brilliant insight. However, I felt that more could have been said about the fact that, while the painting celebrates an early thirteenth-century Christian

military victory over the peninsula's Islamic rulers, the Muslim troops are entirely absent. Is their replacement by sub-Saharan Africans, I wondered, in some way connected to Spain's contemporaneous colonization of Equatorial Guinea? What is certain is that the naked Black bodies, while contrasting with the whiteness of the Christian knight at the painting's center, are anything but degenerate; on the contrary they are perfect specimens of virile physique, individualized in their postures and facial expressions. Vázquez notes that the painting places viewers behind enemy lines, but does not take further the implication that we are invited to see the Christian military triumph through the eyes of the invisible Muslims off-frame in the foreground. The fact that the painting replaces the Muslim troops with sub-Saharan slaves undermines the lengthy discussion of this painting in the context of Spain's engagement with Orientalist scholarship, for there are no "Orientals" in the canvas—indeed, this is its most interesting feature.

Chapter 6, on "Rachitic Bodies and Medical Discourses," is perhaps the best in the book. It focuses on Joaquín Sorolla's early social painting *Sad Inheritance* (1899) of young, male, disabled bodies bathing on the beach in Valencia, overseen by a priest—contrasting with the later luminous paintings of bodies swimming or strolling on the beach for which Sorolla is famous. Vázquez gives us invaluable information about the "maritime sanitoriums" for disabled and diseased children set up at seaside resorts in eastern and north-west Spain (including Valencia's Malvarrosa beach) in the 1880s, and their relationship to the contemporaneous "pedagogic missions" overseen by Manuel Bartolomé Cossío (who would go on to preside over the more famous pedagogic missions of the Second Spanish Republic in the 1930s). As Vázquez notes, Cossío was not only a humanist educator but also a major art critic. The chapter also provides well-researched information about the increasing concern in fin-de-siècle Spanish medical discourse with the hereditary transmission of biological flaws (in many cases referred to by the catch-all term "cretinism") that were seen as linked to moral degeneracy—whether that of the parents who, as implied by the title of Sorolla's painting, bequeathed a "sad inheritance" to their offspring, or that of the offspring themselves. This leads into a discussion of the Catalan artist Isidre Nonell's 1896 visit to remote Pyrenean villages in Lérida (two wonderful paintings of "cretins" by Nonell are reproduced in color, one repeated as the frontispiece to the book), as well as of the history, from the twentieth century's start, of the visits to Las Hurdes that would culminate in Buñuel's 1933 documentary of that name.

Chapter 7 interprets the paintings of abandoned aristocratic gardens to which the painter-writer Santiago Rusiñol devoted himself almost exclusively after 1897 as a melancholic expression of decay. (Vázquez notes that Rusiñol never used the term "decadence.") The chapter focuses on Rusiñol's 1903 book of prose poems and paintings, *Gardens of Spain*, paying particular attention to the 1898 painting *Abandoned Garden*, which fuses temporal decline with spatial decay. Although Vázquez sees Rusiñol's paintings of abandoned gardens as images of a cyclical process of material decay followed by regeneration, it is not clear from the illustrations included what the pointers to regeneration are—though the paintings (which, as Vázquez notes, eschew impressionist technique) are gorgeous.

The last and final chapter 8 turns to Darío de Regoyos's illustrations to his translation of the Belgian poet's Émile Verhaeren's *Black Spain* (1899, published the year before in the Barcelona journal *Luz*). Verhaeren's text, originally published in French in 1888 in the

significantly titled Belgian journal *L'Art Moderne*, recounted the trip he took with Regoyos that year through north-west Spain. Regoyos' illustrations to the Spanish version include reproductions of lithographs, etchings, pastels, and grottage. Noting that Verhaeren and Regoyos insisted on traveling by stagecoach rather than modern forms of travel (train, automobile), Vázquez sees this publication as an example of modernist primitivism: "black Spain"—what Verhaeren called villages "glorious in their filth and abandonment" (175)—as a source of artistic renewal not only through the book's subject-matter but, particularly, through the "rough-hewn" look of Regoyos's illustrations (185). Vázquez pertinently asks "at what point did the construction of primitivism (as an integral desire of modernism) overlap with the anxiety over degeneration" (177). Noting that Verhaeren and Regoyos ignore the contemporaneous industrialization of Bilbao (steel) and Asturias (mining) and the conversion of San Sebastián and Santander into cosmopolitan seaside resorts, he concludes that what they are seeking is not the "primitive" poverty resulting from urbanization and industrialization denounced by Spanish writers concerned with social reform, but the subjective experience of something new. Two of the three illustrations included (I was left wanting more) depict the primitive mode of travel (the oxen and mules pulling the stagecoach) from the travelers' point of view, ignoring the scenery. The reformist concern with degeneration as the product of modernization has morphed into a modernist tourist vision; *Black Spain* is, after all, a travelogue.

The epilogue takes us back to the reformist concern with degeneration, summarizing the various causes of degeneration posited by fin-de-siècle Spanish intellectuals and fast-forwarding to the genetic research of the first two decades of the twentieth century that encouraged eugenicist, rather than social, approaches to the problem, in Spain and elsewhere. Vázquez notes that Nobel Prize-winning Spanish neuroscientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal—whose 1914 book was titled *Degeneration and Regeneration of the Nervous System*—wrote about art and artists and was a painter himself. Two of Ramón y Cajal's extraordinary drawings of neurons—exhibited at NYU's Grey Gallery in 2018^[2]—form the basis of the book's jacket design. Vázquez explains the biological meaning of these drawings; to analyze them in terms of their formal visual qualities is a challenge, for they look like abstract art but are representational renderings of what the human eye can see only through a microscope in the laboratory. Their use on the book's jacket is inspired for what they tell us is that understandings and representations of degeneration have—as Vázquez's well researched and wide-ranging book shows—traveled a long road over the decades studied.

Jo Labanyi
Professor Emerita
Department of Spanish and Portuguese
New York University
jo.labanyi[at]nyu.edu

Notes

[1] Díez, José Luis, ed., *La pintura de historia en el siglo XIX en España* (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1992).

[2] See Larry W. Swanson, Eric Newman, Alfonso Araque, and Janet M. Dubinsky, *The Beautiful Brain: The Drawings of Santiago Ramon y Cajal* (New York: Abrams Books, 2017).